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In-group Favouritism and Out-group Derogation towards National Groups:

Age-related differences among Italian school Children

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### Abstract

Recently many researchers investigated intergroup attitudes among children, but only few studies analyzed developmental pathways of in-group favouritism and out-group derogation in considerable samples across broad age ranges. The present study aims at examining age-related differences in in-group favouritism and out-group derogation towards national groups among Italian children. Six hundred-seven children (305 males, 302 females), aged 6 to 12 living in Italy, were asked to answer an individual interview, making various evaluations of the national in-group and of 2 salient national out-groups (German and English). For research purposes 3 measures were used: number of positive traits applied to own and other national groups; number of negative traits applied to own and other national groups; and affect towards own and other national groups. Data analysis indicated that: (a) the effects of in-group favouritism are noticeable from the age of 6 years and persist through time; (b) out-group derogation is a limited phenomenon that becomes slightly more evident at older ages with reference to the German group, in general negatively perceived among Italian children. These results are discussed in relation to the framework of Social Identity Development Theory.

*Keywords:* Intergroup attitudes' development, in-group favouritism, out-group derogation, SIDT, national groups.

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1 Literature review

In the last years there has been an increasing interest towards the study of social identity and intergroup attitudes among children and adolescents (Barrett, 2007; Ganeva, Inguglia, Lo Coco, Musso, & Pavlenko, 2009; Oppenheimer & Barrett, 2011; Rutland, Abrams, & Levy, 2007). In particular, many researchers have investigated children's attitudes and feelings towards people who belong to national in-group and out-groups (Barrett & Oppenheimer, 2011; Bennett et al., 2004; Bennett, Lyons, Sani, & Barrett, 1998; Rutland, Brown, et al., 2007; Rutland, Cameron, Milne, & McGeorge, 2005).

Taking inspiration from the Social Identity Theory (Tajfel, 1981), these studies have analyzed the development of two intergroup attitudes: in-group favouritism, namely persons' tendency to display a systematic preference for members of their own in-group, and out-group derogation, persons' tendency to show negative attitudes towards people who belong to other groups. Some age-related changes in the development of intergroup attitudes were found (Barrett, 2007; Bennett et al., 2004; Bennett et al., 1998; Bennett & Sani, 2004; Oppenheimer & Barrett, 2011; Rutland, Brown, et al., 2007; Rutland et al., 2005).

The systematic preference for members of the national in-group usually begins at 4-5 years of age and appears to persist until older ages (Barrett, 2007; Bennett et al., 2004; Bennett et al., 1998). This developmental trend has been found to occur among children from different countries such as, for example, in English children between 5 and 11 years (Barrett & Short, 1992; Barrett, Wilson, & Lyons 1999, 2003) and in 6-year-old children living in Britain, Georgia, Russia and Ukraine (Bennett et al., 2004). Instead, out-group denigration seems to emerge later in the development and to be a relatively rare phenomenon as shown by several studies which found that many national out-groups are appreciated and positively

evaluated by children, but just to a lesser extent than the national in-group (Barrett, 2007; Bennett et al., 2004; Nesdale, Durkin, Maass, & Griffiths, 2004).

A useful theory to explain these developmental trends is the Nesdale's (2004) Social Identity Development Theory (SIDT). According to SIDT, the attitudes towards national groups develop through a sequence of four phases. During the first phase, which occurs before the age of 2-3, national cues are not yet salient to children. In the second phase, which starts at approximately 3 years, children become aware of national cues and are gradually able to identify themselves as members of national groups. In the third phase, which generally begins at the age of 4-5 years, children begin to show a particular preference for the in-group over the other groups, which are not disliked. Finally, during the fourth phase, at around 7 years, children begin to show out-group derogation and disliking. Although not all children enter in this phase the likelihood of developing out-group derogation increases as a function of the following factors: children's identification with the in-group, the extent to which the negative attitudes towards a group are shared by the members of the in-group, and the extent to which the out-group is seen as a threat. As a consequence, children may hold negative attitudes just towards particular out-groups, which are perceived in a negative way and/or considered rivals of children's own country.

This developmental picture is substantiated by a limited number of studies and it needs further confirmations (a) conducting studies in countries which have not already been considered, and (b) involving a considerable group of children of different ages. Thus, more research in this field is required, especially in countries which are less experienced in dealing with these topics, such as Italy.

## 2 The present study

In the present study, the age-related differences in in-group favouritism and out-group derogation towards national groups (Italian as in-group and German and English as out-groups) among Italian children aged 6 to 12 were examined.

In particular, the study was aimed to analyze whether in-group favouritism and out-group derogation vary according to age groups. Based on the SIDT's predictions we expected that children of all ages would show a preference for the national in-group. Moreover, we assumed that out-group derogation was a less pronounced phenomenon, characterizing older children and mainly directed toward the German group, since previous studies have showed that it is negatively perceived in Italy.<sup>1</sup>

### 3 Method

#### 3.1 Participants

A total of 607 Italian school children (302 girls and 305 boys) participated in the study. They were randomly recruited from primary schools located in the western Sicily (Italy), serving a predominantly middle class catchment area. All participants were Italian-Caucasians and they were chosen from three age ranges. The younger group consisted of 181 children aged 6-7 year ( $M = 6.81$ ,  $SD = 0.41$ ), the middle group consisted of 232 children aged 8-10 year ( $M = 9.49$ ,  $SD = 0.42$ ), and the older group consisted of 194 children aged 11-12 year ( $M = 11.96$ ,  $SD = 0.21$ ). In each age group there were approximately equal numbers of boys and girls.

#### 3.2 Procedure

Children were interviewed individually in quiet rooms within their schools by Italian researchers. Interviews required the selection of words or expressions which were printed on cards. Interviewers provided children with assistance in reading the cards whenever necessary.

Each child was asked to provide his/her answer after a preliminary introduction which explicitly instantiated an intergroup comparative context for the child by naming the three national groups which he/she was going to consider: Italians, English, and Germans.

### 3.3 Measures

A trait attribution task and affect questions (see Barrett & Oppenheimer, 2011; Bennett et al., 2004; Castelli, Cadinu, & Barrett, 2002; Inguglia et al., 2008) were used in the study in order to obtain three measures.

*3.3.1 The trait attribution task.* This task used a set of 12 cards measuring 10 x 7 centimetres. Each card described one of the following traits : dirty, clean, friendly, unfriendly, clever, stupid, lazy, hardworking, happy, sad, honest, dishonest (six pairs of bipolar adjectives). The cards were randomly ordered for each child. The pile of cards was shown to the child so that he/she could see the word on the first card. Then, the child was asked to select the traits which applied to Italian, German and English people with the following verbatim instructions: “Here are some cards with words on them that describe people. So, we can say that some people are (word on first card). And some people are (word on second card). And some people are (word on third card). Right? Now, what I want you to do is to go through all these words one by one, and I want you to sort out those words which you think can be used to describe X people (where X represented the name of the target national group). Can you do that for me, please? Sort out the words which you think describe X people”. If the child thought that any of the traits were not applicable, he/she was told to put them to one side. Thus, the participant was not forced to use all of the cards, and was free to discard any cards that he or she felt were not appropriate in describing either the in-group or the out-groups. When the child had finished the task, the cards were assembled in a randomly ordered pile, ready for testing the next target national group. The order in which the three national groups were tested was randomized for each child. Two scores were obtained:

one point was assigned to each positive and negative trait chosen, and they were independently summed to provide the total number of positive traits (PT) and the total number of negative traits (NT) attributed to each individual target group. Both the positive and the negative measures ranged from 0 to 6.

*3.3.2 Affect questions.* After completing the trait attribution task for a national group, the child was asked two further questions about the same target group. Participants were given the following verbatim instructions: “Now, I just want to ask you one more thing about X people. Do you like or dislike X people? (If the child said that he/she liked or disliked them, the second question was then given.) How much? Do you like/dislike them a lot or a little?”. A single affect score (AFF) was obtained running from 1 (dislike a lot) to 5 (like a lot), with neutral responses (neither like nor dislike) being scored at the mid-point (3).

### *3.4 Data analysis*

The scores obtained from the preceding tasks were examined by two principal sets of analyses. First, we considered the numbers of positive and negative traits applied to the various target groups, reporting the outcomes of two separate 2 (Age Group) x 2 (Gender) x 3 (Target Group: Italian, German and English) mixed ANOVAs on PT and NT scores. Secondly, we reported (a) the outcomes of a 2 (Age Group) x 2 (Gender) x 3 (Target Group: Italian, German and English) mixed ANOVA on the emotional impact towards the three national groups, and (b) one-sample *t* tests, within each of age groups, on children’s affect towards target groups in order to verify whether affect differs from the measure’s mid-point (3).

## 4 Results

### *4.1 In-group/out-group trait attributions*

The PT scores were analysed using a 2 (Age Group) x 2 (Gender) x 3 (Target Group: Italian, German and English) mixed ANOVA, with independent groups on the first two factors and



repeated measures on the last factor. This only revealed a significant main effect of Target Group,  $F(2, 1202) = 145.80, p < .001, \eta^2 = .19$ . Post hoc paired-samples  $t$ -tests revealed that significantly more positive traits were assigned to Italian group than German,  $t(606) = 14.69, p < .001$ , and English,  $t(606) = 2.73, p = .006$ , groups, and that significantly more positive traits were assigned to English group than German group,  $t(606) = 12.68, p < .001$ . The relevant means are shown in Table 1. The positive attribution ascribed to the target groups did not differ as a function of age or gender.

Next, the NT scores were analysed using a 2 (Age Group) x 2 (Gender) x 3 (Target Group: Italian, German and English) mixed ANOVA, with independent groups on the first two factors and repeated measures on the last factor. This revealed a significant main effect of Target Group,  $F(2, 1202) = 25.85, p < .001, \eta^2 = .04$ , a significant main effect of Age Group,  $F(2, 601) = 5.35, p = .005, \eta^2 = .02$ , and a significant two-way interaction between Target Group and Age Group,  $F(4, 1202) = 3.33, p = .011, \eta^2 = .01$ . As regards the main effect of Target Group, post hoc paired-samples  $t$ -tests revealed that significantly more negative traits were assigned to German group than Italian,  $t(606) = 4.08, p < .001$ , and English,  $t(606) = 7.31, p < .001$ , groups, and that significantly more negative traits were assigned to Italian group than English group,  $t(606) = 2.85, p = .005$ . Post hoc Scheffé's multiple comparison  $t$ -test, with alpha = .05, revealed that the main effect of Age Group was due to the middle and older groups of children assigning more negative traits than the younger group of children (respectively,  $p = .009$  and  $p = .028$ ). The preceding main effects were qualified by the two-way interaction between Target Group and Age Group. The relevant means are shown in Table 2. Post hoc one-way ANOVA and Scheffé's multiple comparison  $t$ -test, with alpha = .05, revealed that significantly,  $F(2, 604) = 9.36, p < .001$ , the Italian NT score was lower in the younger group of children than in the middle ( $p = .001$ ) and older ( $p < .001$ ) groups of children, while the German and English NT scores did not differ as a function of age. Further

paired-samples *t*-tests revealed that, in the younger group of children, the Italian and English NT scores did not differ significantly from each other but both were significantly lower from the German NT score, respectively  $t(180) = -4.80, p < .001$ , and  $t(180) = -4.01, p < .001$ . By contrast, in the middle and older groups of children, English NT score was significantly lower than the Italian, respectively  $t(231) = -2.06, p = .041$ , and  $t(193) = -3.76, p < .001$ , and German, respectively  $t(231) = -3.65, p < .001$ , and  $t(193) = -5.07, p < .001$ , NT scores, which did not differ significantly from each other. No gender differences emerged in the number of negative traits assigned to the target groups. Interestingly, as the entries in Tables 1 and 2 clearly show, more positive traits than negative traits were constantly assigned to all three target groups.

#### *4.2 In-group/out-group affect*

The AFF scores were analysed using a 2 (Age Group) x 2 (Gender) x 3 (Target Group: Italian, German and English) mixed ANOVA, with independent groups on the first two factors and repeated measures on the last factor. This revealed a significant main effect of Target Group,  $F(2, 1202) = 397.29, p < .001, \eta^2 = .40$ , a significant main effect of Age Group,  $F(2, 601) = 7.41, p = .001, \eta^2 = .02$ , and a significant two-way interaction between Target Group and Age Group,  $F(4, 1202) = 10.81, p < .001, \eta^2 = .04$ . As regards the main effect of Target Group, post hoc paired-samples *t*-tests revealed that affect was significantly higher towards Italian group than German,  $t(606) = 26.73, p < .001$ , and English,  $t(606) = 14.13, p < .001$ , groups, and that affect was also significantly higher towards English group than German group,  $t(606) = 14.05, p < .001$ . These differences were the same within each of age groups. Post hoc Scheffé's multiple comparison *t*-test, revealed that the main effect of Age Group was due to the younger group of children showing higher affect than the middle ( $p = .006$ ) and older ( $p = .002$ ) groups of children. The preceding main effects were qualified by the two-way interaction between Target Group and Age Group. The relevant means are

shown in Table 3. Post hoc one-way ANOVAs and Scheffé's multiple comparison *t*-tests, with  $\alpha = .05$ , revealed that significantly,  $F(2, 604) = 13.36, p < .001$ , affect towards the Italian group was higher in the younger group of children than in the middle ( $p = .011$ ) and older ( $p < .001$ ) groups of children; significantly,  $F(2, 604) = 4.70, p = .009$ , affect towards the German group was higher in the middle group of children than in the older group of children ( $p = .013$ ); significantly,  $F(2, 604) = 14.42, p < .001$ , affect towards the English group was higher in the younger and older groups of children than in the middle group of children (in both cases,  $p < .001$ ). One-sample *t*-tests further revealed that while affect towards both Italian and English groups was significantly higher than the neutral mid-point of the affect measure (3) in the younger, respectively  $t(180) = 29.24, p < .001$ , and  $t(180) = 10.66, p < .001$ , middle, respectively  $t(231) = 22.82, p < .001$ , and  $t(231) = 4.92, p < .001$ , and older, respectively  $t(193) = 17.25, p < .001$ , and  $t(193) = 12.21, p < .001$ , groups of children, affect towards German group was significantly lower than the neutral mid-point in the younger,  $t(180) = -2.17, p < .001$ , and older,  $t(180) = -4.74, p < .001$ , groups of children as well as it was not significantly lower than the neutral mid-point in the middle group of children. No gender differences emerged in relation to affect towards the target groups.

## 5 Discussion

The study was aimed at analyzing age-related differences in children's in-group favouritism and out-group derogation towards national groups. As seen in the method section, they were assessed through the attribution of positive and negative traits as well as through affective reactions towards the national in-group (Italian) and out-groups (Germans and English).

In line with our expectations, in-group favouritism is evident among children of all ages: generally, participants tended to attribute a greater number of positive traits and a lower number of negative traits to the national in-group than to the out-groups. Moreover, they

showed remarkable positive affective reactions towards their own national group compared to the other groups, especially to the Germans. In particular, the number of positive adjectives attributed to the Italian group was next to the maximum positive point of the measure, whereas the number of negative adjectives attributed to the in-group was next to the maximum negative point. Also, the means of emotional evaluation of the in-group were noticeably more positive than the measure's mid-point. These tendencies were particularly evident within the younger group of children and less marked within the older group. However, this in-group favouritism did not seem to hinder, on the whole, positive attitudes towards out-groups. Consistent with our expectation, out-group derogation was found to be a relatively rare phenomenon; instead, children tended to show positive attitudes towards the national out-groups at all ages with few exceptions related to the specific out-group. English group was positively considered at all ages as showed by the high scores of positive trait attributions, the low scores of negative trait attributions, and the relatively high affect scores. On the other hand, the German group was described with comparatively less positive and more negative traits than the English group with regard to the attribution task; moreover, the participants showed affect scores towards Germans which were under measure's mid-point or, at most, not different from the same point. This pattern was predominant within 11-12 year-old group of children, giving partial support for our expectation about the likelihood of noticing a negative attitude towards the German group in older children.

Taken together, the findings confirm SIDT's predictions (Nesdale, 2004) that, as far as attitudes towards national groups are concerned, children usually exhibit in-group favouritism from 4-5 years of age onwards, even though it seems less apparent in older ages. Moreover, out-group denigration is not a common phenomenon since many out-groups are positively liked, just to a lesser degree than the in-group. Nevertheless, children can also express negative affect towards out-groups which are negatively considered in their own

country since they are current or historical enemies and/or they were involved in negative actions during the past (Clay & Barrett, 2011). This is the case of German group who is probably disliked for its past involvement in deplorable actions such as the Holocaust during the Second World War. When children grow up it is likely that they pick up negative messages about the Germans from their surroundings as well as from the teaching of history at school, so they report an increase in derogation towards this out-group. That said, it is useful to note that children's general evaluations towards German group actually reveal a form of disregard rather than a real pattern of prejudice and/or discrimination.

In conclusion, important support for our assumptions was obtained in this study. However, further longitudinal and cross-cultural studies are needed to investigate the developmental pathways of intergroup attitudes and to understand what are the factors affecting the expression of out-group derogation. In particular, there is the need of more studies employing longitudinal designs and extending the age-range of the participants and the number of national out-groups. Moreover, it would be suitable that subsequent studies use a methodology including multiple measures of the attitudes in order to overcome the limit of the present study that uses single scores. Thus, the developmental framework of national attitudes can be improved, providing also practitioners with useful guidelines to set up educational programs.

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## Footnotes

<sup>1</sup> The out-groups and the expectations of this study were selected on the basis of a pilot research (Inguglia, Lo Coco, & Musso, 2008) involving 144 children aged between 6 and 12 years, equally distributed for age and gender. Within these constraints, children were selected randomly. Each child was interviewed individually in order to analyse his/her knowledge and feelings about national groups. The results showed that: (a) the most known foreign national groups were English, German, French, and Spanish; (b) English and French were the most liked foreign national groups, whereas the German was the least liked national group.

These data supported the decision to select English, French, German and Spanish groups as valid out-groups for Italian children. However, in order to maintain children's concentration it was decided to select just two groups, considering English and German groups as the most appropriate, since they are the most liked and disliked out-group, respectively.

Table 1

*Mean number of positive traits (PT) assigned to each of the three target groups, broken down by age (with standard deviations in parentheses)*

<i>Target group</i>	<i>Younger</i>	<i>Middle</i>	<i>Older</i>	<i>Overall</i>
Italian	5.34 <sub>a,1</sub> (1.17)	5.31 <sub>a,1</sub> (1.04)	5.21 <sub>a,1</sub> (1.12)	5.29 <sub>a</sub> (1.11)
German	4.21 <sub>b,1</sub> (1.52)	4.45 <sub>b,1</sub> (1.58)	4.18 <sub>b,1</sub> (1.59)	4.30 <sub>b</sub> (1.57)
English	5.08 <sub>c,1</sub> (1.04)	5.16 <sub>a,1</sub> (0.94)	5.18 <sub>a,1</sub> (0.86)	5.14 <sub>c</sub> (0.95)

*Note.* Mean scores in the same column which do not share subscript letters, and in the same row which do not share subscript numbers, differ significantly from one another.

Table 2

*Mean number of negative traits (NT) assigned to each of the three target groups, broken down by age (with standard deviations in parentheses)*

<i>Target group</i>	<i>Younger</i>	<i>Middle</i>	<i>Older</i>	<i>Overall</i>
Italian	1.06 <sub>a,1</sub> (1.43)	1.65 <sub>a,2</sub> (1.69)	1.70 <sub>a,2</sub> (1.64)	1.49 <sub>a</sub> (1.62)
German	1.67 <sub>b,1</sub> (1.40)	1.84 <sub>a,1</sub> (1.63)	1.88 <sub>a,1</sub> (1.67)	1.80 <sub>b</sub> (1.58)
English	1.19 <sub>a,1</sub> (1.13)	1.43 <sub>b,1</sub> (1.30)	1.25 <sub>b,1</sub> (1.19)	1.30 <sub>c</sub> (1.22)

*Note.* Mean scores in the same column which do not share subscript letters, and in the same row which do not share subscript numbers, differ significantly from one another.

Table 3

*Mean affect scores towards each of the three target groups, broken down by age (with standard deviations in parentheses)*

<i>Target group</i>	<i>Younger</i>	<i>Middle</i>	<i>Older</i>	<i>Overall</i>
Italian	4.72 <sub>a,1</sub> (0.79)	4.44 <sub>a,2</sub> (0.96)	4.23 <sub>a,2</sub> (0.99)	4.45 <sub>a</sub> (0.94)
German	2.84 <sub>b,1,2</sub> (1.02)	2.91 <sub>b,1</sub> (1.38)	2.54 <sub>b,2</sub> (1.34)	2.77 <sub>b</sub> (1.28)
English	3.82 <sub>c,1</sub> (1.03)	3.36 <sub>c,2</sub> (1.12)	3.85 <sub>c,1</sub> (0.97)	3.65 <sub>c</sub> (1.07)

*Note.* Mean scores in the same column which do not share subscript letters, and in the same row which do not share subscript numbers, differ significantly from one another.