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## **The relation between the ethnic attitudes of Romanian children and their parents towards the Roma minority group**

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### **Abstract**

*An impressive body of literature has addressed the topic of children's ethnic prejudice, our research has as its starting point the problem of intergenerational transmission. In the first study, a sample of Romanian elementary school students (N=90), aged 7 or 8 years, completed a set of measures (interviews and attitude scales) designed to evaluate the prejudice and stereotypes toward Roma population. Consistent to our prediction, results revealed a positive correlation between children and parents in terms of their ethnic attitudes. The second study investigated the problem of subtle forms of discrimination in children, based on an experimental design. The participants (N=90) listened to a short story about a boy who finds himself in a difficult situation and needs help. In the story the boy's ethnic membership (Roma vs. Romanian) was manipulated, together with the cause which led to the problematic situation (the boy's misconduct/ internal attribution vs. the mistake of the others/ external attribution). In the case of external causal attribution, the intention to help was expressed by a large number of participants, regardless of the ethnic membership of the character, but when it was the boy's fault (internal attribution), the children's declared intention to help or not varies according to the ethnic group of the boy: a statistically significant higher number of children expressed the intention to help the in-group member (the boys presented as being Romanian) as compared to the situation of out-group member (the boy presented as Roma minority).*

*The present article emphasizes the importance of investigating the influence that parents have on the development of ethnic prejudice and of studying the subtle and covert forms of discrimination in middle childhood.*

**Key words:** *ethnic prejudice, middle childhood, discrimination*

The issue of both children's and adults' ethnic attitudes is highly challenging for many specialists. In the context of the general recognition of societies' cultural diversity, it becomes more evident that the nature and quality of the relationships among the persons and their performance in both individual and collective activities are in part determined by the image they have of the others. Unfortunately the negative stereotypes about certain social groups and the in-group bias lead to prejudice, negative attitudes and the propensity to act in a discriminative manner against the members of these groups, prior to interaction and knowledge of their individual characteristics. Stereotypes, prejudice, and discrimination are considered interrelated aspects: negative characteristics attributed to a person just because of his/her belonging to an out-group will determine feelings of dislike, fear, hatred toward her/him and selection and interpretation of information in accordance with existing beliefs (Wigboldus, Dijksterhuis & van Knippenberg, 2003); in

addition, behavioural reaction will tend to be in agreement with what the person thinks and feels, the manifestations being of rejection, denigration and differential treatment of the one perceived as a member of a marginalized group (Yzerbyt & Schadron, 1997). Thus, prejudice and discrimination can negatively affect the children's self image, their academic performances, their wellbeing, by processes like stereotype threat, causal attribution and self-fulfilling prophecy (see McKown, 2004), and at social level they influence intergroup relations and public discourse (Duriez et al., 2007).

When investigating how ethnic prejudice develops, the authors combined the study focused on cognitive perspective with the one that emphasizes the role of social factors. Nesdale et al. (2005) and Kiesner et al. (2003) provide overviews of the most important studies on the development of children's ethnic prejudice. These authors cite a factor based on the influence of socialization agents, an important role being that of the parents. Children are assumed to acquire their ethnic attitudes based on the reinforcements they get, through verbal instruction and by observing the behaviour of others. Yet the studies that have examined both children's and their parents' ethnic attitudes offer an ambiguous view on this relationship: some authors reported positive correlations between the ethnic attitudes of the children and of the parents, but the results obtained by other specialists have sustained either low or non significant correlations of those two variables. So this problem is still a challenge for the future studies.

In terms of the development of ethnic attitudes, the authors of cross-sectional and longitudinal studies highlight an increase in the intensity of prejudice until around the age of 5-6 years, followed by a decrease that can be put in relation to the attainment of concrete operations stage, and after the age of 7-9 years, a new increase. The specialists draw attention to the diversity of factors that may exert influence on the evolution of ethnic prejudices, one of them being the children's tendency to prefer and favour members of their own ethnic group (see Social identity development theory suggested by D. Nesdale, 1999 - apud Nesdale et al., 2004).

Another interesting idea appears in studies of ethnic prejudice, racism and sexism: the authors pinpoint the existence of a more subtle and covert form of expressing negative attitudes (Bourhis, Gagnon & Moïse, 1997; Swim et al., 1995; Frey & Gaertner, 1986). Thus, people can refrain from negative behaviours and stereotypical attributions against members of marginalized out-groups when social context emphasizes the need to be impartial, to obey the rule which prohibits discrimination. But negative feelings occur when their discriminatory behaviour could be rationalized, justified by reasons other than a tendency to prejudice the member of another ethnic group.

Starting from these ideas and issues that still raise controversies, we decided to study the Romanian children's ethnic prejudice towards people of Roma minority. This group repeatedly proved, both in Romanian and European contexts, that they have a marginalized minority status, being the target of stereotypes, prejudice, even discrimination, amid a constellation of explanatory factors put forward for this phenomenon (Zamfir & Zamfir, 1993). The present study examines the relationship between parents' levels of prejudice and children's levels of prejudice against Roma population, and the presence of a subtle discrimination in case of the children. The first part of the research was initiated by the supposition whether there is a direct relationship

between the parents' level of prejudice against Roma population and the children's level of prejudice against this minority. The second part was based on an experimental design, assuming that there will be significant differences in the declared intention of the children to help / intervene in favour of a colleague according to his ethnicity (in-group versus out-group) and to the assigned cause of the problem in which the colleague is (internal versus external). When the child is presented as belonging to the Roma ethnic group and as being to blame for the problematic situation in which the child is, the intention to help will be less present than in the case when the targeted character of the scenario is Romanian.

## **Method**

### ***Participants***

To conduct this research there were involved 270 subjects: 90 children with both their parents, all of them being Romanians. Children are first grade students in a school in *Oradea*, aged between 7 and 8.

### ***Instruments and procedure***

For measuring ethnic attitudes of both children and parents we used the Social Distance Scale developed by E.S. Bogardus and adapted by S. Chelcea (1994). This is a frequently used instrument focusing on emotional aspects and rejection behaviour as components of attitude. Indices calculated based on the responses given by subjects were as follows: social contact index and social contact quality index. Adults' scale was applied in writing, as part of a questionnaire. For children we used a version with items adapted to everyday situations of interaction among children in formal and informal groups being included in the conducted interview, along with other questions profiling on the characteristics of Roma people and identifying aspects of the stereotype to this group.

The experiment was designed starting from the method used within the study conducted by Frey & Gaertner (1986). Subjects have been presented a possibly encountered situation in the classroom in the form of a story (scenario) in which the main character has a problem and needs the help of a classmate, namely, he has failed to finish a drawing that was asked by the teacher as an activity within the hour. The task of the subject is to decide whether to help him or not. A 2x2 experimental design was used, two variables being manipulated: the ethnicity of the target character (different from that of the subject - Roma person versus the same ethnicity with that of the subject - Romanian), and why he got into difficulties (their own negative action - indiscipline and carrying out other activities within the hour versus someone else's fault, i.e. a careless classmate ruined the targeted character's drawing). In the first case the attribution of the cause of the problem is of internal type, whereas in the second case, the attribution is of external type. We worked with four groups of subjects, each listening to one of the four versions of the story.

## **Results and discussions**

We will first present the analysis made starting from the features raised by the Romanian children regarding the ethnic Roma group.

**Table 1 Features attributed by the children to Roma people**

Positive features – 8.40%								
<i>Feature</i>	<i>f</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>Feature</i>	<i>f</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>Feature</i>	<i>f</i>	<i>%</i>
Good	7	1.96	Rich	4	1.12	Polite	1	0.28
Handsome	6	1.68	Clean	3	0.84	Neat	1	0.28
Quiet	4	1.12	Diligent	3	0.84	Obedient	1	0.28

  

Negative features – 91.60%								
<i>Feature</i>	<i>f</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>Feature</i>	<i>f</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>Feature</i>	<i>f</i>	<i>%</i>
Poor	51	14.29	Foul language	16	4.48	Living on the streets	3	0.84
Evil, bad	45	12.61	Beggars	12	3.36	Lazy/not working	4	1.12
Unwashed	37	10.36	Homeless	7	1.96	Spitting	2	0.56
Thieves/stealing	36	10.08	Bully/hit children	7	1.96	Disobedient/quarrelsome	2	0.56
Ill-looking	31	8.68	Naughty	5	1.40	Wearing torn clothes	1	0.28
Searching through garbage	19	5.32	Being nonsense	4	1.12	Playing foul	1	0.28
Not attending school	17	4.76	Ragged	4	1.12	Mischievous	1	0.28
Dark skinned	17	4.76	Untidy	4	1.12	Abnormal	1	0.28

The issues presented by children display a high level of negative characteristics and descriptions in terms of physical traits and behaviour, in accordance with the peculiarities of age noticed by the experts (Schaffer, 2005). Some of the features invoked as part of specific traits of Roma people are related to the lower socio-economic level of most of the members of this ethnic group, compared with the general population: poor, homeless, living in the streets, having torn/ragged clothes, searching in garbage, begging. Compared with the findings on adults' stereotyping, these aspects constitute a novelty. Adults do not mention these indications of a disadvantaged economic situation (Neculau, 1996; Chelcea, 1994) whereas children do it. This situation is likely to derive from explanations offered by parents as a response to the children's questions on the noticeable difference in the appearance / clothes, but this assumption should be investigated in the future.

Another category of children's responses is about negative traits and behaviours, involved in relationships with others, pointing to the idea of danger associated with the Roma people: they are evil, mean, naughty, disobedient, thieves, abnormal, they fight, swear, spit, and play foul. We also notice a number of attributes related to their appearance likely to cause rejection: they are seen as ugly, dirty, ragged. These categories are well represented in the descriptions of the adults where the features most frequently associated to Roma people are: aggressive/ violent, brawlers, thieves, dishonest, dirty (Neculau, 1996; Chelcea, 1994). Laziness is rarely mentioned by children but it is often present in the adults' representations as a possible explanation for

the poor economic condition of many Roma people. Children more frequently mentioned the fact that Roma children do not attend school, this issue being closer to their daily practices.

Data processing in order to verify whether the stated hypotheses are sustained and to reveal the psychological meaning of the results obtained was completed through the SPSS programme. For the first hypothesis we used the Spearman correlation coefficient that can reflect the level of both children's and their parents' prejudice (Table 2).

**Table 2. Correlations between the level of the child's and his parents' prejudices (mother/father), operationalized through social contact index (SCI) and the social contact quality index (SCQI)**

Related variables			Child ethnic prejudice	
			SCI	SCQI
<b>Mother's ethnic prejudice</b>	Social contact index (SCI)	Spearman	.470**	.476**
		Sig.	.000	.000
		N	90	90
	Social contact quality index (SCQI)	Spearman	.463**	.464**
		Sig.	.000	.000
		N	90	90
<b>Father's ethnic prejudice</b>	Social contact index (SCI)	Spearman	.415**	.422**
		Sig.	.000	.000
		N	90	90
	Social contact quality index (SCQI)	Coef. Spearman r	.388**	.398**
		Sig.	.000	.000
		N	90	90

The results show that there is a statistically significant positive association between the values of indices reflecting the prejudice level of the children and their parents: the greater the parents' stated openness towards initiating social contacts with Roma people, the higher is the children's acceptance level demonstrated against their Roma peers by how they responded to the social distance scale items. Our results are consistent with specialists' ideas that parents represent an important source of influence that shape children's beliefs related to the traits and status of societal out-groups. A number of studies advocate the theory of intergenerational transmission of prejudices. Thus Mosher and Scodel (1960) have highlighted a significant relationship between ethnocentrism in children and their mothers; O'Brian, Fishbein and Ritchey (2004) conducted a larger study focused on six domains of prejudice and sex-role stereotyping, examining how both mothers and fathers influence the beliefs in these domains held by their adolescent children. Through analysis based on multiple regressions it was determined the relative strengths of each parent's influence. The results have revealed differences depending on the area analyzed: for racial bias, the effect exerted by the mother is significant and the father's is not significant. Our findings highlight the fact that in case of children, there are significant direct relationships for both parents, even though the correlations between the mother's and the child's level of prejudice are higher than those between the child's and the father's ethnic attitude. It is possible that the subjects' age and the particularity of the inter-group relationships to lead to higher impact of the father in this area in our culture, compared with U.S. Other factors may also occur related to the quality of relationships between parent and child, factors that deserve to be included in future researches on this topic. Sinclair, Dunn and Lowery (2005) analyzed the relationship between parental racial attitudes and children's implicit prejudice and they found out that

parental racial attitudes were not significantly correlated with children prejudice, but when it was taken into account the level of child-parent identification, this perspective changed. The correspondence between parents' racial attitude and children's prejudice - implicit and explicit - was greater for the children who had high as opposed to low levels of identification towards parents.

The findings presented here point to the parents' important role in the process of their children's ethnic-racial socialization. This process through which the parents transmit information about ethnicity and race encompasses verbal instruction, shaping of the social milieu of the child, differential reinforcement of the child's reactions towards in-group and out-group members, and observational learning. The empirical knowledge regarding this process is important in order to design further investigations and interventions in the field of the development of ethnic attitudes.

Regarding the second hypothesis, we started from the idea of differences existing at the level of the intention to help provided by the interaction between the type of induced causal attribution and the character's ethnicity. The results thus foreground the fact that if the reason for the target character's difficulty is an external one, the children's intention to help does not vary according to the former's ethnic affiliation; whereas when the reason proves to be of internal type - it is the boy's fault that he got to have a problem - the children will show significantly less solicitude towards the Roma character (chi square =6.07,  $p < .05$ ; Table 3).

**Table 3 Comparing the frequency with which participants state that they would help a Roma or a Romanian colleague in need**

Ground problem The child's ethnicity	No child's will/ intention (external attribution)	The child's negative behaviour (internal attribution)
Roma	20	2
Romanian	22	14

These results are in accordance with the idea of subtle forms of prejudice, manifested at the behavioural level when they may be socially acceptable reasons and are easy to rationalize (Brehm and Kasson, 1989). In the study by Frey and Gaertner (1986), which offer the starting idea for our experiment, the participants - white females - were divided into work groups either with an African-American person or with a person of the same race. At some point, this person needed help in order to carry out her task. When the subjects were informed that the confederate has made sufficient effort, then the help frequency was similar for confederates of both the same race and different. But when the subjects were led to believe that the confederates have not tried enough, their helping behaviour discriminated against black confederate. Similarly, our results show that when children were told that the boy got in trouble because of another classmate, they were uniformly willing to help. When the circumstances - the boy had been playing instead of working - permitted to justify a negative response and to consider it not necessarily inappropriate, the children discriminated on the basis of ethnicity, declaring a much more lower willingness to help in the case of the Roma boy. We believe that the

existence of any subtle forms of discrimination at this age should be further examined, as our data, having been obtained for a relatively small number of subjects, can be considered representative only for the studied groups. The study by Rutland et al. (2005) on children's ability to control their racial in-group bias and out-group prejudice shows that even children 6-8 years old, when engaged in self-presentation, are capable to decrease their out-group prejudice under high public scrutiny. So it is possible for children to show from an early age an internalization of the racial/ ethnic prejudice social norm (the norm according to which racial/ ethnic discrimination is negative and considered inappropriate), and to become internally motivated for the bias suppression.

### Conclusions

The present paper has founded support for the idea that the parents' attitudes towards Roma minority play a role in how the ethnic prejudice of the children are formed. The sample size and the characteristics of the participants – they were from two-parent homes, we did not take into account their religion – foreground some limitations of our study, so the results may apply only for this sample. Future studies should use larger samples and variables which can moderate the relationship between parents' and children's ethnic attitudes, as composition of the family and the level of child-parent identification. Another interesting aspect for further examinations would be the existence of some subtle forms of discrimination. Also in this case we believe that results should be interpreted with caution and that future studies must consider other variables, such as the subjects' age, the existence of an in-group bias, the difference in status between in-group and out-group, the degree to which they are aware of the racial/ ethnic prejudice social norm and the concern of the children for self-presentation.

A problem with significant impact on intergroup relations is the content of stereotypes against Roma minority. The characteristics that children attributed are mostly negative, drawing our attention to possible negative effects of this perception. The specialists suggest that interventions to reduce prejudice and promote positive attitudes other ethnic groups need to begin early in one's life, the role of the teachers being crucial (Cristol & Gimbert, 2008). Hello, Scheepers & Gijsberts (2002) concluded that the differences between nations examined in terms of education effect on ethnic prejudice are determined by the variances in the transmission of tolerant values, and emphasised the importance of the educational system in exposing children to curricula and programmes designed to develop a positive attitude toward different racial and ethnic groups.

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