

World Conference on Psychology and Sociology 2012

## White Bully vs. Black Victim or Black Bully vs. White Victim? Ethnicity and Severity of Behaviour in Italian Children

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### Abstract

The impact of ethnicity on the evaluation of severity of behaviour (physical and verbal bullying, isolation, and name-calling) was investigated among Italian children aged 6-9. Measures: 4 vignettes reproducing typical bullying actions and 4 photos of target children (White/Black boys; White/Black girls) for the choice of preferred and rejected photos were used. Children were divided in three sub-groups each exposed to one out of three different conditions with varying ethnic belonging of bully and victim: Gr-I (White bully-White victim); Gr-II (Black bully-White victim); Gr-III (White bully-Black victim). As a result, Gr-III considered the actions bullying, both physical and verbal, and name-calling more serious than Gr-I and Gr-II.

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Selection and peer review under the responsibility of Prof. Dr. Kobus Maree, University of Pretoria, South Africa.

*Keywords:* Bullying, Ethnic Prejudice, Victimization, Children;

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### 1. Introduction

According to Olweus (1993), bullying occurs when a child is exposed, repeatedly, intentionally, and over time, to negative behaviours by other peers. These interactions include actions such as physical harm, teasing, gestures, and social exclusion, and generally these are characterized by an imbalance of supremacy and dominance between the bully and the victim. Two main forms of bullying are identified by scholars: direct (physical and verbal bullying: e.g., hitting, kicking, name-calling, teasing) and indirect forms (e.g., social exclusion and discrimination by the others) (Boulton & Underwood, 1992; O'Connell, Pepler, & Craig, 1999; Baldry & Farrington, 2000; Pateraki & Houndoumadi, 2001; Solberg & Olweus, 2003). Generally, the victim is perceived as weaker, insecure, sensitive, unpopular, and less self-efficient than the bully and is unable to defend him/herself, while the bully usually has a physical and social advantage over the victim, such as strength, reputation, and popularity among peers of his/her own group (Salmivalli, 1999; Craig & Pepler, 2007).

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Among the main elements that contribute to worsen the victim's social condition such as disability and obesity (Mishna, 2003; Griffiths, Wolke, Page, & Horwood, 2005; Wainscot, Naylor, Sutcliffe, Tantam, & Williams, 2008; Sagone & De Caroli, 2012), one of the most recently analyzed issue is constituted by the belongingness to an ethnic outgroup, always perceived as minority group and target of negative racial prejudice. In fact, it has been possible to deepen the racial/ethnic bullying (Rigby, 1998; Lee & Koro-Ljungberg, 2007; Liang, Grossman, & DeGuchi, 2007; Monks, Ortega-Ruiz, & Rodríguez-Hidalgo, 2008) according to which victim becomes the target of damaging and deleterious actions by bully in terms of attack against the subject explicitly because of his/her own ethnicity (McKenney, Pepler, Craig & Connolly, 2006; Bosacki, Marini, & Dane, 2006). This last aspect regards the matter of prejudice development toward ethnic outgroup in line with the Social Identity Developmental Theory (Nesdale, 2004). As found, children aged 4-7 express a strong need for ethnic identity belonging to their own group and show marked preferences especially for members of ingroup, while, beyond 7-8 years, they evaluate members of ethnic outgroup in relation to the presence of "ethnic self-identification with ingroup", "stereotype threat effect", and "ethnic ingroup norms". Consistently with empirical evidences from previous investigations about ethnic prejudice in Italian school context (De Caroli, 2005; De Caroli & Sagone, 2012), children from 3 to 12 years of age, both in ethnically homogeneous and heterogeneous schools, expressed ingroup favouritism and outgroup rejection with a decreasing trend and modified their social attitudes in relation to interethnic contact with members of other ethnic groups (Sagone, 2003; De Caroli, Falanga, & Sagone, 2012). For example, De Caroli and Sagone (2012) found that above 50% of the pupils aged 4-12 chose White target children as best friends, White and Black target children as playmates, and Black target children as authors of a pen theft. Children mainly attributed positive traits to White target children, such as intelligent, sweet, dominant, and strong; on the contrary, they assigned negative traits to Black target children, such as ignorant, submissive, lonely, and shy.

The evaluation of severity of behaviours linked to the different forms of direct and indirect bullying in relation to the ethnicity of bully and victim constitutes a scarcely investigated exploration area in childhood. For this reason, the current study analyzed the relationship between ethnic prejudice and severity attributed to different forms of bullying, manipulating the ethnic belonging of both bully and victim.

## 2. Methodology

The main purpose of this investigation was to verify the impact of ethnicity on severity evaluation of behaviour related to physical and verbal bullying, isolation, and name-calling. Particularly, it was interesting to analyze if the severity of behaviour related to the specific actions of physical and verbal bullying, isolation, and name-calling was affected by the ethnic belonging of an hypothetical bully and victim. So, we expected to find out significant differences in severity evaluation of protagonist's behaviour in three conditions with varying ethnic belonging of bully and victim: *White bully vs. White victim*, *Black bully vs. White victim*, or *White bully vs. Black victim*. On the basis of our previous findings about the stereotypical profile attributed to Black target children mainly characterized by loneliness, submissiveness, ignorance and poverty (De Caroli & Sagone, 2012), we hypothesized that the severity evaluation of behaviour will be higher in the *White bully vs. Black victim* condition compared to the other two conditions (H1). In addition, consistently with empirical evidences from previous investigations about the ethnic prejudice in developmental age (De Caroli, 2005; De Caroli & Sagone, 2012), we expected to replicate the evidence of ingroup favouritism and outgroup rejection in this sample. We hypothesized that White Italian children aged 6-9 would prefer the photos of White target children and would refuse the photos of Black target ones (H2).

## 2.1. Participants

The sample consisted of 270 White Italian children aged between 6 and 9 years ( $M=7,5$ ,  $sd=1,07$ ) and balanced for sex. All children were randomly recruited from three ethnically homogeneous Primary Public Schools in Catania and were tested individually at school by an expert researcher after parental consent for research participation.

### 2.2. Measure

2.2.1. *Vignettes about bullying and victimization.* To explore the severity evaluation of behaviour we created 4 vignettes reproducing typical bullying actions (physical and verbal bullying, isolation, and name-calling) proposed in a child-friendly language and with protagonists of the same age and sex of sample (male target for boys and female target for girls): Vignette 1 (physical bullying); e.g., *a boy is pushing another boy, causing him to fall and a wound*; Vignette 2 (verbal bullying); e.g., *a boy is screaming against another boy who starts to cry*; Vignette 3 (isolation); e.g., *a group of children is playing with the ball leaving aside a boy who starts to cry*; Vignette 4 (name-calling): e.g., *a boy tells to another one a lie about a third boy, without him knowing*. Each vignette was valuable on a rating scale at 3-points, from 1 (equal to low level of severity) to 3 (high level of severity), and it was modified in relation to the ethnic belonging of bully and victim in three different conditions: *White bully vs. White victim* (I), *Black bully vs. White victim* (II), and *White bully vs. Black victim* (III). Children of sample were randomly divided in three sub-groups (90 children for group) each exposed to one out of the three different conditions: Gr-I for the *White bully vs. White victim* condition, Gr-II for the *Black bully vs. White victim* condition, and Gr-III for the *White bully vs. Black victim* condition.

2.2.2. *Choice of preferred and rejected photo* (De Caroli, 2005). A set of 4 photos of target children (White and Black boys; White and Black girls) were used; in detail, each child was asked to choose one out of the four photos as he/she preferred and to indicate one out of the four photos which he/she refused.

## 2.3. Data analysis

Statistical analyses were carried out applying Chi-Square Test and One-Way ANOVA with SPSS-15. Age and sex of participants were used as independent variables, with frequencies of choices and mean scores of severity rating scale as dependent variables.

## 3. Results

### 3.1. Severity of behaviour

The behaviours considered by children more seriously than the others were related to *name-calling* ( $M=2.49$ ,  $sd=.71$ ), that is, an attempt to discredit an antagonist by labelling or describing him/her with words that have unfavourable connotations, and to *isolation* ( $M=2.43$ ,  $sd=.67$ ), that is, actions consisting of exclusion from peer group ( $F_{(3,267)}=9.80$ ,  $p<.001$ ). The less serious behaviour of all was referred to *verbal bullying* ( $M=2.19$ ,  $sd=.75$ ). By analyzing the distribution of frequencies of responses expressed by all children into each form of behaviour (fig.1), it was possible to note that:

- for the *physical bullying*, 54,8% of sample expressed an high level of severity, 26,7% a medium level of severity, and 18,5% a low level of severity ( $\chi^2=58.76$ ,  $p<.001$ );
- for the *verbal bullying*, 39,6% of sample expressed an high and medium level of severity, and 20,8% reported a low level of severity of this behaviour ( $\chi^2=19.27$ ,  $p<.001$ );
- for the *isolation*, 53,7% of sample attributed an high level of severity, 35,9% a medium level, and 10,4% expressed a low level of severity ( $\chi^2=76.87$ ,  $p<.001$ );
- at last, for the *name-calling*, 61,9% indicated an high level of severity, 25,2% and 13%, respectively, a medium and low level of severity of this behaviour ( $\chi^2=104.87$ ,  $p<.001$ ).

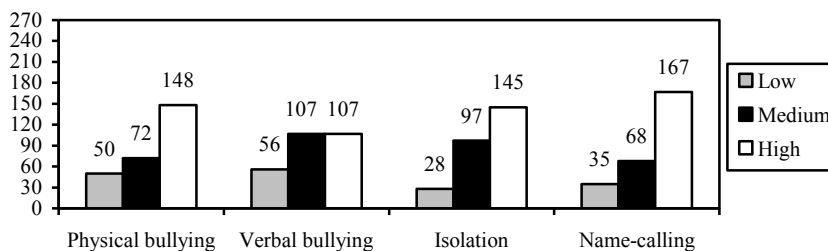


Figure 1. Distribution of sample in relation to levels severity of behaviours

In relation to H1, statistically significant differences for type of condition were obtained, except for the case of *isolation*: in fact, children judged more seriously the behaviours of *physical and verbal bullying*, and *name-calling* in the *White bully vs. Black victim* condition (Gr-III) compared to the other conditions (Table 1).

Table 1. Differences in severity judgement for type of condition (N=270)

Vignettes	Type of condition	Means	sd	One-Way Anova	Sig.
Physical bullying	Gr-I	2.23	.87	<b>15.31</b>	<b>&lt;.001</b>
	Gr-II	2.14	.76		
	Gr-III	<b>2.71</b>	.55		
Verbal bullying	Gr-I	2.10	.82	<b>13.27</b>	<b>&lt;.001</b>
	Gr-II	1.97	.76		
	Gr-III	<b>2.50</b>	.57		
Name-calling	Gr-I	2.34	.88	<b>7.69</b>	<b>.001</b>
	Gr-II	2.40	.68		
	Gr-III	<b>2.72</b>	.47		

### 3.2. Preferred and rejected photos

The analysis of choice of preferred and rejected photos of target children showed that participants expressed high preferences for children belonging to ethnic ingroup, that is, for White boy (41,9%) and for White girl (35,5%); on the contrary (Table 2), they rejected the photos of target children belonging to ethnic outgroup, that is, Black boy (46,3%) and Black girls (28,2%). This result constituted a confirmation of H2, as found in previous researches carried out in Italian school context (De Caroli, 2005).

Table 2. Distribution for preferred and rejected photos (N=270)

Target children	Preferred photo		Rejected photo	
	f	%	f	%
White boy	<b>113</b>	<b>41.9</b>	30	11.1
White girl	<b>96</b>	<b>35.5</b>	39	14.4
Black boy	23	8.5	<b>125</b>	<b>46.3</b>
Black girl	38	14.1	<b>76</b>	<b>28.2</b>
Chi Square Test	$\chi^2=84.93, fd 3, p<.001$		$\chi^2=82.92, fd 3, p<.001$	

Significant differences for sex were found for the choice of preferred photo (Table 3); in fact, boys mainly preferred White target boy belonging to ethnic ingroup (35,2%) and girls mainly preferred White target girl belonging to ethnic ingroup (30,7%). In relation to the rejected photo (Table 3), boys chose similarly the photos of Black boy (18,5%) and Black girl (18,9%), while girls mainly chose the photo of Black boy (27,8%). This last

evidence represented a further confirmation of H2 and, also in this case, a replication of previous results obtained in Italian school context (De Caroli et al., 2005).

Table 3. Distribution for sex in relation to preferred and rejected photos (N=270)

Target children	Preferred photo		Rejected photo	
	Sex of participants			
	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls
Photos	<i>f</i> (%)	<i>f</i> (%)	<i>f</i> (%)	<i>f</i> (%)
White boy	<b>95 (35.2)</b>	18 (6.7)	5 (1.9)	25 (9.3)
White girl	13 (4.8)	<b>83 (30.7)</b>	29 (10.7)	10 (3.6)
Black boy	22 (8.1)	1 (0.4)	<b>50 (18.5)</b>	<b>75 (27.8)</b>
Black girl	5 (1.9)	33 (12.2)	<b>51 (18.9)</b>	25 (9.3)
Chi Square Test	$\chi^2=143.32, fd 3, p<.001$		$\chi^2=36.48, fd 3, p<.001$	

### 3.3. Relations of severity of behaviour white choice of photos

Independently by the ingroup favouritism and outgroup rejection expressed by all children (Table 4), results showed that the forms of physical and verbal bullying and name-calling were judged more seriously in *White bully vs. Black victim* condition (Gr-III) compared to the other conditions. No significant differences in type of condition were found for “isolation”.

Table 4. Severity judgement for type of condition in relation to choice of photos (N=270)

Vignettes	Type of condition	Preference for White	Preference for Black	Rejection for White	Rejection for Black
		<i>M</i> ( <i>sd</i> )	<i>M</i> ( <i>sd</i> )	<i>M</i> ( <i>sd</i> )	<i>M</i> ( <i>sd</i> )
Physical bullying	Gr-I	2.19 (.90)	2.44 (.72)	2.32 (.80)	2.20 (.90)
	Gr-II	2.13 (.81)	2.19 (.62)	2.17 (.58)	2.13 (.82)
	Gr-III	<b>2.65 (.59)<sup>a*</sup></b>	<b>2.94 (.24)<sup>a**</sup></b>	<b>2.86 (.36)<sup>a***</sup></b>	<b>2.67 (.59)<sup>a****</sup></b>
Verbal bullying	Gr-I	2.09 (.85)	2.13 (.72)	2.00 (.82)	2.14 (.83)
	Gr-II	1.87 (.77)	2.19 (.68)	2.17 (.72)	1.90 (.76)
	Gr-III	<b>2.51 (.56)<sup>b*</sup></b>	2.44 (.62)	2.19 (.68)	<b>2.59 (.50)<sup>b**</sup></b>
Name-calling	Gr-I	2.34 (.87)	2.38 (.96)	2.20 (.95)	2.40 (.84)
	Gr-II	2.35 (.72)	2.52 (.58)	2.57 (.59)	2.34 (.71)
	Gr-III	<b>2.75 (.47)<sup>c*</sup></b>	2.61 (.50)	2.52 (.60)	<b>2.78 (.42)<sup>c**</sup></b>
One-Way Anova	<sup>a*</sup> $F(2,206)=9,55, p<.001$ ; <sup>a**</sup> $F(2,206)=9,57, p<.001$ ; <sup>a***</sup> $F(2,206)=7,35, p=.001$ ; <sup>a****</sup> $F(2,206)=9,50, p<.001$ ; <sup>b*</sup> $F(2,206)=13,41, p<.001$ ; <sup>b**</sup> $F(2,206)=17,20, p<.001$ ; <sup>c*</sup> $F(2,206)=7,87, p=.001$ ; <sup>c**</sup> $F(2,206)=8,51, p<.001$ ;				

## 4. Conclusion

The aim of this study was to verify the effect of ethnicity on severity judgement of behaviour associated to physical and verbal bullying, isolation, and name-calling. Particularly, we expected to find out differences in severity evaluation of protagonist's behaviour with varying ethnic belonging of bully and victim. Results confirmed H1, according to which children would judge more seriously the physical and verbal bullying, and the name-calling in the *White bully vs. Black victim* condition compared to the other conditions. As proposed in H2, White Italian children preferred the photos of White target children and refused the photos of Black target ones; this result is consistent with empirical evidences from previous analyses about ethnic prejudice in developmental age (De Caroli, 2005; De Caroli & Sagone, 2012). About the relationship between the severity of judgement of

behaviour and the choice of preferred and rejected photos, independently by the favoritism toward ingroup members and rejection toward outgroup members expressed by children in the current study, the *White bully vs. Black victim* condition is related to a more serious evaluation regarding physical and verbal bullying, and name-calling compared to the other conditions. These findings could be explained with reference to the stereotypical profile attributed to Black people mainly characterized in Italian context by loneliness, submissiveness, ignorance, and poverty (see De Caroli & Sagone, 2012); so, the injury inflicted to a victim in condition of need (e.g., disability, disadvantage social status, belonging to minority ethnic group, and so on) has been considered a serious situation by our children. In fact, a further confirmation of this possible explanation derived by the results of a previous study (Sagone, De Caroli, & Falanga, 2008) with preadolescents (aged 11-13) according to which they judged more seriously direct and indirect forms of bullying (using self-report questionnaire derived by Salmivalli, 1999) if addressed to disabled and ethnic outgroup peers compared to those directed to their own classmates; in addition, the more they applied the strategies of *moral disengagement* (see Bandura, 2002), the less seriously they judged direct and indirect forms of bullying against disabled and ethnic outgroup peers.

Future researches will help the scholars to deepen the role of moral judgment on psycho-social mechanisms associated to ethnic prejudice.

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