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Adolescents' attitudes towards otherness: the development of an assessment instrument

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ABSTRACT

Former literature found that various 'different' students experience exclusion and rejection by their peers in schools. This may be linked with the attitudes that their school and classmates hold towards them. Identifying someone as 'Other' may indeed result in prejudicial attitudes which, in turn, can lead to his/her marginalisation and exclusion. From an inclusive perspective, it is thus pivotal to explore student attitudes towards the conceived different ones and how they are linked with exclusionary patterns among peers in schools. To contribute to the understanding of the link between peer attitudes, diversity and exclusion, the present paper reports on the stages of development of an instrument aimed to measure adolescents' attitudes towards otherness which combines a qualitative and a quantitative approach. Beside measuring their attitudes, the instrument also investigates students' representations and definitions of otherness. Such representations – as emerged from the pilot study of the instrument – will be presented here. The findings confirmed the importance of adopting a wider and non-categorical approach to otherness in the study of peer attitudes and exclusionary processes in schools.

KEYWORDS

Attitudes; inclusion; otherness; diversity; adolescents; instrument

Introduction

All in all, inclusive education can be understood as a process that seeks to identify and remove the barriers that may hinder the presence, participation, and achievement of all students – especially those ones at risk of marginalisation and exclusion in school (Slee 2018). According to previous literature, one of the major obstacles for students' social participation is constituted by peer attitudes (Bossart et al. 2011; Vignes et al. 2009). From an inclusive perspective, it is thus pivotal to explore student attitudes towards the conceived different ones and how they are linked with exclusionary patterns among peers in schools. As we will see in the following section, identifying someone as 'Other' may indeed give place to prejudicial attitudes and, in turn, to discrimination and social exclusion.

Theoretical background

Drawing on the social identity approach, the current study sees diversity as socially constructed. Understanding diversity/otherness as a product emerging from social interactions implies acknowledging that they have nothing to do with individuals' characteristics, but that they are instead the result of a collective process of signification which identifies some differences as salient in a specific social context (Burbules 1996).

According to the social identity theory (Tajfel 1972), individuals are likely, in any specific context, to classify themselves and others into different social groups/categories based on perceived similarities and differences between them on relevant dimensions. In this way, they distinguish between members of the ingroup (i.e. one's own group) and the outgroup (i.e. the social groups/categories where the perceived 'different others' are placed). This distinction is crucial to understand how stereotypes emerge and how distance is put among groups determining prejudice and discrimination (Mulvey, Hitti, and Killen 2010). In turn, stereotypes play a crucial role when it comes to study attitudes towards otherness, given the assumption that it is what people think and feel about a person (i.e. their representation thereof) that determines their attitudes towards that person (Harma, Gombert, and Roussey, 2013). In this sense, stereotyped representations may give place to biased attitudes towards the outgroup(s), leading consequently to intergroup exclusion.

Attitudes are defined as 'a psychological tendency by evaluating a particular entity with some degree of favour or disfavour' (Eagly and Chaiken 1993, 1). They are thought to be a multidimensional construct composed of affective, behavioural, and cognitive components (Triandis 1971). Specifically, the affective component refers to people's feelings about an object, the behavioural component is linked to individuals' intentions to behave in a certain way, and the cognitive component concerns beliefs/knowledge about the object. In the present paper, the object are the students perceived as different and therefore excluded by their peers in secondary schools.

Given that former literature found biased peer attitudes towards and experiences of exclusion of various groups of students conceived as different – like, for example, students with minority backgrounds, students with different religious beliefs, LGBTQ students, etc. (Burford, Lucassen, and Hamilton 2017; Priest et al. 2014; Santos, da Silva, and Menezes 2018) – the current study assumes that there could be a direct link between diversity/otherness and peer exclusion. Evidence supporting the role played by attitudes in shaping students' behaviour can be found in previous research: studies that sought to investigate the relationship between attitudes towards peers with disabilities and their social participation revealed indeed a significant positive relationship, suggesting that negative attitudes are likely to give place to exclusionary and avoiding behaviours (de Boer and Pijl 2016; Godeau et al. 2010; Petry 2018). Therefore, the current study assumes that the same positive relationship holds also for other targets, leading to similar consequences, especially when they are recognised as relevant others.

So far, many studies have been conducted on peer attitudes towards various groups of students. Yet, to our knowledge, none of them was focused on peer attitudes towards otherness in all its broadest meaning. Therefore, the current study seeks to fill this gap developing a self-reported instrument aimed to evaluate adolescents' attitudes towards their perceived 'different' peers which combines a qualitative and a quantitative

approach. Beside measuring their attitudes, the *Adolescents' Attitudes Towards Otherness Survey* (AATOS) also investigates students' representations of otherness. Such representations – as well as the stages of construction of the AATOS – constitute the focus of the present paper.

Stages of development of the instrument

Defining the target: the vignette

To develop an instrument coherent with the definition of otherness embraced in this study, we decided to adopt a non-categorical approach, thus trying to avoid any a priori defined category of difference. To do that, an 'open vignette' for the definition of the target was created.

Vignettes are short scenarios that can be developed in various forms (e.g. texts, images, etc.) whose purpose is to stimulate research participants' responses (Hughes and Huby 2004). For the current instrument the respondents themselves are asked to write the vignette after being prompted to describe a hypothetical boy or girl (Noah¹) who, in their opinions, is excluded from his/her peers because conceived as 'different' (see Figure 1). All subsequent items/questions are then referred to the boy/girl that the participants described in the vignette (i.e. the person they designated as the target).

Now think about a guy or a girl closer to your own age who, in your opinion, is excluded by others because of his/her diversity.

S/he can be a fictional person, someone you actually know or someone you have only heard about. You can choose who you want to describe, as long as s/he is excluded in school because perceived as different.

Please describe this girl or guy (whose name will be Noah in either case) in the following box. You may describe his/her appearance, habits and/or behaviors, special characteristics, etc. The important thing is that you make clear how you imagine this person and in what s/he differentiate from others.

Please, explain also in your own words, why you think Noah is excluded.

Noah is...

_____.

In my opinion, Noah is excluded because/for...

_____.

Figure 1. The initial open vignette.

Attitude scale: item selection and formulation

A literature review of existing instruments was conducted in order to select items for the attitude scale through a snow-ball procedure. We searched for instruments based on the three-component model of attitudes (Triandis 1971). Moreover, items should have demonstrated high reliabilities in previous studies ($\alpha > 0.70$ – 0.80) and should have been used in different cultural contexts with adolescents (age range 10–19).

Two instruments met the criteria abovementioned: the *Chedoke-McMaster Attitudes Towards Children with Handicaps Scale* (CATCH; Rosenbaum, Armstrong, and King 1986) and the *Multidimensional Attitude Scale Towards Persons with Disabilities* (MAS; Findler, Vilchinsky, and Werner 2007). Specifically, the affective and the behavioural subscales of the CATCH and the cognitive subscale of the MAS were used to form our attitude scale.

Once the items were selected, a double-blind back translation procedure with two independent translators for both languages was conducted to translate the original items from English into Italian and vice versa. Afterwards, some further adaptations in the form and content of the items were made to make them coherent with the vignette and the specific target population (adolescents) of the AATOS. Finally, the attitude scale included 33 items with a 5-point Likert scale response format ranging from ‘strongly disagree’ to ‘strongly agree’.

Overall structure and content of the AATOS

Beside the open vignette and the 33-item-scale, the instrument contains also a self-constructed questionnaire tapping various variables like participants’ background information, previous/current contact with people similar to the target, etc. Moreover, the AATOS includes a section with some open-ended questions concerning: (a) the difficulties perceived in interacting with others; (b) the presence of assimilative attitudes (i.e. thinking that the target should become more ‘normal’/‘like us’, to be more accepted/included); and (c) the motivations used by students to explain their own experiences of exclusion in school. See Appendix A for the overall structure of the AATOS.

Pre-test

After the instrument was designed, a pre-test with a small convenience sample of the target population was conducted ($N = 10$; age range 10–16). The purpose of the pre-test was to ensure comprehensibility and validity of the instrument before proceeding with the pilot study. It turned out that the questions were overall clear and that no one had difficulty in answering to them.

Pilot study

Study participants and administration procedure

One hundred and six students ($N_{\text{tot}} = 106$; $N_{\text{middle school}} = 52$; $N_{\text{high school}} = 54$; $M_{\text{age}} = 14.13$; $SD = 2.46$) from a higher and a lower secondary school of two small cities in the North-East of Italy constituted the convenience sample of the pilot study. One class per grade of the lower (1st, 2nd, and 3rd grade; age range: 11–13) and three classes of the higher secondary

school (1st, 3rd, and 5th grade; age range: 14–19) participated in the study. Of these students, 39,6% were males and 58,5% females. All the participants were born in Italy, and 16% of them have at least one parent born in a foreign country.

The survey was computer-based and was administered during the school hours of the teachers involved. The three classes of the lower secondary school completed the questionnaire at school, whereas the higher secondary school students did it at home during distance-learning hours (at the time of the pilot study higher secondary schools in Italy were closed due to the Covid-19 pandemic).

Method

The vignettes and the responses to the open-ended questions of the AATOS were analysed both with data- and concept-driven categories obtained through the method of Qualitative Content Analysis (Schreier 2012). The coding categories developed for the current study were then used to design the *Guide for the qualitative analysis of the AATOS*, a brief booklet providing the instructions and the categories for the analysis of the qualitative part of the instrument.

In order to improve the consistency of the coding categories and the instructions included in the *Guide*, an external researcher was involved in the coding process. She was asked to independently code about 35% of the responses following our *Guide*. Inter-coder agreement was then estimated at the document level (i.e. if both coders assigned the same code(s) to a given response; Kuckartz and Rädiker 2019). Once the codebook was deemed valid, the first author coded the rest of the data.

Results: students' representations of otherness

An overall agreement of 69,35% was reached for the vignette responses. Discussing the disagreements, it emerged that, overall, the codes needed to be described in more detail in the *Guide*. Accordingly, we modified the booklet and provided additional information about the content of each (sub)category.

What concerns the content of the vignettes, four main categories emerged from the data: 'Individual characteristics', 'Group characteristics/affiliations', 'External factors' and 'Diversity/otherness'. For the first two main categories, some subcategories were also specified; Table 1 displays the comprehensive category system and the frequencies for each (sub)category used to portray the target in the vignette.

Results also revealed that students' definitions of otherness were mostly *multi-dimensional*, that is, they were composed of multiple combinations of characteristics. The vignette responses coded with a single (sub)category were indeed only 17 out of 106, whereas the others ranged from a minimum of 2 to a maximum of 7.

In the following, we will illustrate in more detail the four main categories and the most frequently used subcategories.

Table 1. Coding categories for the vignette responses and their frequencies.

| Main Categories | Subcategories | Definition | N |
|------------------------------------|------------------------------------|---|----|
| Individual characteristics | Personality traits | All the characteristics referring to the personality of the target. | 67 |
| | Habits/behaviours | All what the target <i>does</i> that is considered different/uncommon by others. | 47 |
| | Relationships with others | All what concerns the target's interactions and relationships with others. | 45 |
| | Physical appearance | All the characteristics that refer to the target's physical appearance. | 36 |
| | Learning achievement | All what concerns the learning achievement and school life of the target. | 12 |
| | Opinions/ideas | All what concerns the target and his/her different ideas/opinions/ways of thinking. | 11 |
| Group characteristics/affiliations | Ethnicity/culture | Characteristics/customs related to the target's cultural/ethnic background. | 35 |
| | Disability | Characteristics related to the target's disability. | 6 |
| | SES | Characteristics related to the target and/or his/her family SES. | 6 |
| | Religion | Characteristics/customs related to the target's religion. | 4 |
| | Gender identity/sexual orientation | Characteristics related to the target's gender identity and/or sexual orientation. | 2 |
| External factors | | All the factors that motivate the target's exclusion and perception as 'Other' that have nothing to do with and don't depend on him/her – but on others and/or the context. | 26 |
| Otherness/Diversity | | All the statements explicitly describing the target as 'different' and attributing exclusively to his/her diversity the reasons for his/her exclusion. | 19 |

Individual characteristics

Under the first main category, the subcategory *personality traits* is overall the most used by participants ($N = 67$) to describe the target. Even if this subcategory was used to code all the different characteristics referring to Noah's personality mentioned by the respondents, the majority of them (50/67) portrayed him/her as someone who is very shy, withdrawn, who does not talk a lot, etc.

She is very shy [. . .], is afraid of others' opinion, she doesn't 'come forward'. (F, 16)

Moreover, participants frequently ($N = 47$) referred to Noah's habits/behaviours to motivate his/her exclusion. Among them we found, for example, having strange habits in general – that is, not related to any group affiliations – but also non-conforming and annoying behaviours.

[Noah] has a childish attitude, in the sense that she still thinks as a child, although she is in her teens, and sometimes she behaves in a very vulgar way. (F, 14)

Beside this, 45 respondents mentioned the difficulties encountered by Noah in interacting with others, which, in their opinion, contribute to his/her perception as Other. Among them, several respondents stated that Noah is excluded because, due to his/her shy and withdrawn personality, s/he has great difficulties in interacting and building relationships with others.

[Noah] might be excluded because he never talks, and by doing so he builds no relationships with others and thus doesn't get involved. (F, 14)

Group characteristics/affiliation

Under this main dimension, the most used subcategory was the one related to ethnic and cultural differences ($N = 35$). In their descriptions, participants referred indeed to a variety of characteristics linked with Noah's different cultural background like different nationalities, physical characteristics (e.g. different skin colour), particular customs (e.g. food, clothes, etc.), language difficulties, etc.

[Noah may be excluded] firstly for her different nationality, for her dark skin. (F, 13)

External factors

Several respondents ($N = 28$) also referred to some external factors determining Noah's perception as Other. We called them 'external' because they have nothing to do with the characteristics of the target and do not depend directly on him/her, but on others and/or the wider context. Under this main category, the most cited argument ($N = 20$) was related to the peers and the way they behave and react towards the target.

He might be excluded because [...] of the prejudices held by his classmates. (F, 12)

[Noah may be excluded] because his peers don't want to understand him, it is easier to push him away. (F, 18)

Otherness/diversity

Finally, the findings brought out that Noah's exclusion was sometimes justified by participants ($N = 19$) merely on the basis of his/her otherness. In such cases, no specific characteristics beside 'being different' were mentioned.

In my opinion Noah is excluded just because of his diversity (which can be diversity of interests, behaviours, physical appearance). (F, 18)

In his peers' eyes he is different, and the 'Other' scares in our society, it strikes fear, also because of the stereotypes that have established over time. (F, 18)

Discussion and conclusions

The present paper described the stages of development of the AATOS, an instrument aimed to measure secondary school students' attitudes towards their perceived different – and therefore excluded – peers. In sum, the results showed that the way in which we operationalised the construct of otherness and structured the AATOS (open vignette to define the target + attitude scale to measure the attitudes towards the target chosen by participants) can be an effective solution to measure student attitudes towards otherness in all its broadest meaning. In this way, we could avoid the use of predefined categories of difference, which are increasingly seen as problematic in research (Gillespie, Howarth, and Cornish 2012) insofar as, when unchallenged, they tend to re-produce the differences

under study strengthening existing status hierarchies and social inequalities (Baez 2004). Moreover, we were able to gain insight about who is actually at risk of being excluded in schools because conceived as different by peers.

Participants' answers to the vignette revealed that the excluded Other in school can be represented by a wide range of characteristics. These related both to the individual and the group dimension of the target, suggesting that otherness is not only associated with different social groups/categories (e.g. immigrants, students with disabilities, etc.), but also with a variety of attributes concerning the single individual. Actually, in the present study, such individual characteristics (like personality traits, behaviours, etc.), were the most cited by participants to represent the target. Instead, the personal dimension is typically neglected in attitude research, which focuses mainly on inter-group attitudes and relations. Nevertheless, from an inclusive perspective, such traits are equally relevant as more studied group characteristics, insofar as they determine the perception of certain students as 'Others' resulting potentially in their exclusion by peers.

Finally, the outcomes of the present study support the idea that otherness is a multidimensional construct, thus made up of different combinations of characteristics and belongings. In the vignette, respondents indeed used mostly several attributes to describe the target, demonstrating a far more complex representation of otherness than the one conveyed by a simple label/category traditionally employed in instruments measuring attitudes. All these outcomes highlight the importance of adopting a wider approach to otherness and diversity and of having instruments that, beside measuring their attitudes, also explore participants' representations and definitions of otherness.

Nevertheless, the results of the pilot study also brought out some critical aspects of our vignette. For example, the disproportion of participants using the category cultural and ethnic differences ($n = 35$) to describe the target made us question the choice of the name Noah as a potential bias of the instrument. Accordingly, we decided to slightly modify the vignette in view of the subsequent validation of the AATOS.

Despite such limitations, it can be concluded that the AATOS is a promising tool for measuring adolescents' attitudes towards otherness. To our knowledge, it is the first non-categorical instrument assessing peer attitudes towards their conceived different peers from an inclusive perspective. As such, it may constitute an important asset both for researchers and school practitioners who are interested in the relation between otherness/diversity and exclusionary patterns among peers in schools.

Note

1. In line with the non-categorical approach adopted, we chose a name for the target that can be attributed both to females and males and that does not restrict the respondents' choice in terms of cultural/ethnic backgrounds.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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Appendix A. Overall structure and variables included in the AATOS

| Section | Variable(s) | Response format |
|------------------------|--|---|
| Background information | Gender | Free text |
| | Age | Free text |
| | School | Multiple-choice |
| | Minority/migratory background | Free text (3 questions) |
| Vignette | Representation of the Other and reasons for his/her exclusion | Free text |
| | Target's perceived similarity/difference from oneself | Likert-scale ranging from 0 ('very similar to me') to 10 ('very different from me') |
| Attitude scale | 33-item scale tapping the affective (12), behavioural (12) and cognitive (9) components of attitudes | Likert-scale ranging from 1 ('strongly disagree') to 5 ('strongly agree') |
| Contact Index | Previous contact | Yes/No |
| | Contact quantity | Multiple-choice |
| | Contact frequency | Multiple-choice (2 questions) |
| Open-ended questions | Contact quality | Multiple-choice (3 questions) |
| | Difficulties perceived in interacting with others | Free text |
| | Presence of assimilative attitudes | Free text (2 questions) |
| | Participants' perception of self-inclusion by peers | Likert-scale from 0 ('not included at all') to 10 ('very included') |
| | Motivations used by participants to explain their own exclusion by peers | Free text |