

Researcher studies the development of race

Study shows that discriminatory practices are internalized in young children

Author: Amanda Hamermüller

Maybe you've never noticed, but fictional characters in children's universe are mostly white. It may seem irrelevant, but it is definitely not. Discriminatory practices start to appear increasingly sooner. Many studies have indicated that young children already display the same levels of racial prejudice shown by adults.

"The child can feel the society around him/her. It is not a slow process, actually it is quite fast and it doesn't depend only on family influence," says professor Airi Sacco. On her doctoral thesis, defended at the Psychology Graduation Program at UFRGS, she created a chart which shows the development of children's race attitudes. Since a national study would be impracticable to conduct, the researcher made a comparison between children from Porto Alegre and Salvador. 542 children between the age of 6 and 14 have participated in the study – 399 from Porto Alegre and 143 from Salvador.



The attitudes of children from Porto Alegre and Salvador were analyzed – Picture: Ramon Moser/UFRGS-Archive

Her interest on studying this subject was born from the myths of a Brazilian racial democracy. "In Angola, during a conversation, another Brazilian researcher told me that, in Brazil, poverty has a color. It moved me a lot," Airi remembers. According to a survey carried out by sociologist Julio Jacobo Waiselfisz, in 2014, the family income of black people (black and mixed included) is 75% lower than that of white people. Besides, the rate of young victims of homicide is 146% higher among that part of the population. The same happens with educational and unemployment rates. The Censo of IBGE in 2010 showed that illiteracy among black (14,4%) and brown (13%) of all ages is almost three times higher than among white (5,9%). Between 2013 and 2014, black people represented 60,3% of all unemployment increase, according to Ipea (Institute of Applied Economic Research).

According to Airi, in Brazil, no one thinks of themselves as racists, although most people admit racial prejudice exists. In order to study this question, she dove in research, trying to understand the path of the development of children's implicit and explicit race attitudes. "If racial preferences are formed during the early years of development, it does not seem productive to ignore child social development when designing studies about this theme," Airi emphasized.

In spite of the lack of studies related to this subject, as reported by the professor, the fact that race attitudes are developed through childhood has been known for a while. In his autobiography "Long Walk to Freedom" (1995), Nelson Mandela says racism is taught. To French Pap Ndiaye, who has a doctorate in History and is a specialist in Racial Relations, "the problem is the result of social configurations, and this kind of learning can happen very quickly, and as early as in childhood."

To conduct this research, Airi concluded that including children only from Rio Grande do Sul would be easier, but less expressive, since the racial composition of the state contrasts with the rest of the country. While in Bahia 59% of the people declared themselves to be brown and 17% black, 84% of "gaúchos" declared themselves to be white in the last Censo (IBGE/2010). Since both states have historical and cultural divergences, the researcher asked herself if those differences are expressed as well in the development of racial prejudice in the early years.

Of the children who have participated in the research, in Rio Grande do Sul, a few less than 46% were white, 39% were brown and almost 15% were black. Among the "baianas", 23% were white, 54% were brown and about 20% were black. The children were evaluated in their schools with their parents' consent. "Here in Porto

Alegre, the UFRGS' team and I have conducted the research at the schools. In Salvador, the ones who conducted it were researchers from the Federal University of Bahia. I went there to train them and they went to the schools."

In this study, two implicit methods of attitude were used: the Implicit Association Test and the task of Evaluative Priming. Besides that, the researcher also used five explicit methods: group identification, explicit race attitude, color and social status association, color preference and social status preference. Some children were not able to complete the tests, mainly due to poor comprehension, but also to exhaustion and distraction. "The collect was done individually. Each child would take about 40 minutes to answer, so it was a quite time-consuming process," says Airi. The pictures used through the tests were part of the database gathered by the research team.

Implicit Association Test

Implicit Association Test is a reaction time task that measures the relative force of association implied between pairs of concepts. The idea is to respond quickly to pre-defined associations that are already in our minds. In the research, images of black and white children, with friendly faces, were used. The participants had to associate those images to positive and negative attributes. Therefore, the quicker an the image of a white child was associated to a positive aspect, and the image of a black child to a negative aspect, for instance, the greater was his/her implied preference for white people and vice-versa.

531 out of 542 participants completed the test. 153 were excluded of the analysis due to a great number of errors, such as indicating the wrong answer because of the eagerness to give a quick answer. The final analysis had the results of 378 participants. In the mean of the test's results, there was a positive inclination towards white children. In general, white and brown children presented greater inclination towards associating positive aspects with white children. Considering the race and city of the participants, the results vary, still indicating a white over black preference. In Bahia, a state composed mainly of brown and black people, white people had an inclination towards white, while brown and black's preferences were towards their own group. In Rio Grande do Sul, a state composed mainly of white people, white and brown participants showed preference towards white people.

Evaluative Priming

Evaluative Priming task is also based in time of reaction. The participants had to quickly evaluate positive and negative targets. Each target was preceded by a reward – an incentive to influence evaluations. For the participant to respond faster, the proposal was to give the reward and the target the same weight/worth.

30 images were used to represent white, brown and black children. The participants classified them according to ethnicity, facial expression and friendliness. For the ethnicity categorization, children needed to answer a question with three options (black, brown and black). To facial expression and friendliness, they classified the images in a scale of seven points.

From the 542 participants of the study, 506 completed the task. 30 among those were excluded due to the same error of the previous test, what leaves 476 participants. The results indicated that white and brown are implicitly preferred when compared to black.

Group identification

In this task, the participants had to measure their visual racial identification. Of the 542 children, 527 were not able to complete the task. Each race combination was presented twice to the participants. The comparisons were:

1. a) self-identification with the white in comparison to the black
2. b) self-identification with the white in comparison to the brown
3. c) self-identification with the brown in comparison to the black

In general, Rio Grande do Sul's children identified themselves with their own group. However, Bahia's children of the three groups (white, brown and black) identified themselves with the lightest skin groups.

Explicit race attitude

In the explicit race attitude task, the participants had to evaluate 15 children and indicate how much they liked them, in a scale of seven points, in which seven is the higher (and more positive) score. 531 out of the 542 participants completed the task. In general, the mean evaluation was of 5,42 for white targets, 4,82 for brown targets and 4,59 for black targets.

Association between color and social status

Regarding association between color and social status, the participants were informed they would see images of two children and of two cars or houses, and then they would have to point out which child lived in which house or owned each car. White children were associated with wealth in almost 74% of the answers; brown, in almost 49%, and black, in approximately 30%. This task showed a significant difference in associating white/wealth and brown or black/wealth, with a predisposition always towards white people. The lighter the skin tone, the stronger was the association with wealth.

Ethnicity and social status preference

Ethnicity and social status preferences were based on two preference ranges of five points. The participants had to indicate how much they liked black and white and wealthy and poor people. The results showed children between 6 and 7 years of age presented a higher preference towards white and wealthy people than the ones aged 8 and 9. To Airi, those results confirm the hypothesis that, when younger, children express their preferences more freely and without taking social standards into consideration. When they get older, their answers tend to be selected according to what they understand a socially acceptable answer would be.

As for the social impact, the researcher ensures her research is "really important, because discrimination level resulting of social inequality in Brazil is unquestionable." The professor says she is analyzing which will be the more appropriate way to broaden the research, approaching other questions and other groups, besides exploring other subject fields, since this type of study proved to have achieved good results.

Thesis

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Author: Airi Macias Sacco

Advisor: Silvia Helena Koller

Unit: Psychology Post Graduate Program

Translated by Suzy Resende Scarton, under the supervision and translation revision of Professor Elizamari Becker (IL/UFRGS).