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Beliefs about poverty related to social categorization in childhood

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this study was to determine whether the social categorization of poverty during childhood is based on essentialist beliefs. The study included 121 children, aged 5 to 7, from different socioeconomic backgrounds living in the city of Barranquilla, Colombia. The children stated that the nature of this social category is based on situations external to the individuals rather than essentialist reasons. No significant differences were found as regards age, gender or socioeconomic status (SES), except in the capacity of the respondents to self-categorize their social status. Children who find fewer differences between members and non-members of a given category tend to err in their self-categorization, which is important for the prevention of social exclusion.
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Creencias sobre la pobreza relacionadas con la categorización social en la infancia

Palabras clave:
Categorización social
Cognición infantil
Esencialismo
Pobreza
Infancia

RESUMEN

El objetivo de este estudio es determinar si la categorización social sobre la pobreza en la infancia está basada en creencias esencialistas. El estudio incluyó a 121 niños de entre 5 y 7 años de edad, de distinto nivel socioeconómico y residentes en la ciudad de Barranquilla, Colombia. Los niños plantearon que la naturaleza de esta categoría social está basada en situaciones externas a los individuos, en lugar de atribuirla a razones de tipo esencialista. No se encontraron diferencias estadísticamente significativas relacionadas con la edad, el sexo o el nivel socioeconómico, a excepción de la capacidad de autocategorizarse de acuerdo

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con su estatus social. Los niños que encuentran menos diferencias entre los miembros de la categoría y quienes no lo son tienden a equivocarse en la autocategorización, lo cual resulta importante para la prevención de la exclusión social.
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Categorization helps simplify the social environment, thus allowing us to focus our attention selectively and to make predictions based on general expectations (Erdley & Dweck, 1993) so that we can make decisions which are more likely to occur. Bar-Tal (1996) has studied how stereotypes and social categorization occur, suggesting that these are representations generalized to a group of people, objects or events as if they were all of a kind. That is, the categories capture the idea that objects, events or people are alike in important ways and therefore can be grouped and treated in a similar fashion, whilst being differentiated from other objects, events or people that do not belong in this group (Bar-Tal, 1996).

Certain social groups are considered categories because people routinely categorize others into social groups and therefore into categories (Bar-Tal, 1996). The characteristics attributed to categories of people are stereotypes, which involve learning the group category and then learning the attributes that characterize a particular group of people. The attitudes and behavioral intentions towards groups are formed in this learning process. According to Bar-Tal (1996), this process begins in early childhood.

It should be noted that categorizations and inferences that we form are not always accurate. If features are considered to be rigid rather than flexible categories, our judgments may become more rigid, and features eventually limit —rather than facilitate— the effective use of social information (Erdley & Dweck, 1993). Thus, categorization can lead to negative attitudes and maladaptive forms of relationships that are generally rooted in our cognitive structure. They occur even in the face of serious social problems such as prejudice, social exclusion and discrimination, which are based on stereotypes of social groups (Philip, Mahalingam & Sellers, 2010). Persistence of stereotypes depends on the relationship between people, their social environment and the hypotheses they form about the views of people who are important to them (Carnaghi & Yzerbyt, 2007; Philip, et al., 2010).

According to Medin (1989, 2005), we categorize on the basis of guiding theories, such that we are more likely to form a category if it has an explanatory relationship to the objects within it, rather than when we group attributes from a list (Del Río, 2008).

Social behavior has often been treated as belonging to the field of consciousness (not always reflexive), there is now considerable evidence that social behavior often operates in an implicit or unconscious way as a result of past experiences. Thus, attitudes, self-esteem, and stereotypes have important implicit modes in its operation (Greenwald & Banaji, 1995).

Psychological essentialism is defined as the tendency to believe that objects, people or groups have an underlying essence that makes them what they are (Medin, 1989). According to Prentice and Miller (2007), it is a common way to categorize representations, although it has powerful psychosocial consequences. "Essence" can be defined as the set of biological, cultural or social characteristics that underlie a social group and form a stable quality shared by all members of a group (Estrada, Oyarzún & Yzerbyt, 2007). One of the psychosocial consequences of essentialist thinking is the belief that human attributes are immutable and particularly likely to endorse and explain social stereotypes with reference to innate factors (Bastian & Haslam, 2006).

Essentialism in childhood cognition

Studies of cognitive development indicated that children categorize their experiences according to the superficial appearance of objects, gradually developing higher cognitive abilities such that they can categorize according to deeper elements (Piaget & Inhelder, 1975). Piaget and Inhelder (1975) say that an important aspect of intellectual development is the understanding of conservation, by which elements such as volume, mass, and number remain unchanged despite superficial variations in shape or appearance. Rholes and Ruble (1984) suggest that certain invariants in children's thinking are quantitative (volume), while others are qualitative (gender constancy) (Rholes & Ruble, 1984; Taylor, Rhodes & Gelman, 2009).

Rholes and Ruble (1984) suggest that children under the age of 8 rarely use stable personal constructs (dispositional) in their descriptions of others, tending to describe others in terms of superficial qualities such as appearance, possessions and place of residence. From the standpoint of attribution, this implies that younger children do not conceptualize the behavior of others in terms of internal factors.

Recent studies (Del Río, 2008; Del Río & Strasser, 2007; Diesendruck & HaLevi, 2006; Gelman, 2004) present evidence indicating that, contrary to what had been believed, from an early age, children attach to underlying traits when they form categories. Children are guided more by entities' essences than by their perceived similarities (Del Río & Strasser, 2007).

Thus, we can say that essentialism constitutes "a persistent bias of reasoning that affects the development of the categorization in a profound way, is integrated into our conceptual system, and emerges at an early age in different cultural con-

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