Written Emotional Disclosure and Boundary Making. Minority Children Writing About Discrimination

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Abstract

The present paper explores how “written emotional disclosure”, in particular writing about personal feelings and thoughts concerning discriminatory events, can represent an important opportunity for children to engage in the transformation of categorical boundaries through complex cognitive and emotional processes. In particular, the paper explores from a comparative perspective: 1) how minority and migrant children express their opinions about personal and vicarious experiences of discrimination in different cultural and social contexts; 2) how, through these writings, children develop some cognitive and emotional coping strategies to handle external categorization. At the educational level, children’s expressive writings can represent relevant material for educators in order to understand meanings that pupils bring with them into their classroom, as well as educational tools for children in multicultural contexts. I draw on some extracts from open-ended essays written by minority and migrant children aged 9-10 attending elementary schools in Japan and in Italy.

Keywords: minority children; discrimination; boundaries; social identity; emotions.
INTRODUCTION

The experience of confronting thoughts and emotions about upsetting issues can improve individual capacities to cope with stressful life events, and can lead to increased self-understanding (Clark, 1993; Pennebaker & Francis, 1996). It can also influence basic values and thinking patterns so as to develop different readings of past experiences (Pennebaker, 1997a). In particular, writing represents an important mode of emotional disclosure that might provide individuals with the opportunity to organize and make sense of past experiences in new alternative ways (Pennebaker, 1997b). Previous studies across the social sciences maintain that, in the context of education, the examination of pupils’ attitudes concerning diversity can be essential to understand and tackle issues of racism (e.g., Cangià & Pagani, 2014a; Ezekiel, 2002; Pagani, 2011; Pagani & Robustelli, 2010; Roberts, et al., 2008). According to these studies, creating a space for children and young people to talk about different issues of their interest can be important to offer them a sense that their experiences and ideas matter, and that these can actually be an integral part of the school curriculum.

The present paper aims to contribute to these studies by exploring how “written emotional disclosure”, in particular writing about personal feelings and thoughts concerning ethnic-based discrimination, can represent an opportunity for pupils to express their emotions, to think about their everyday life, and to explore and challenge their assumptions about, and their relationship with, others. “Written emotional disclosure” is defined as a verbal form of emotional expression whereby an emotionally charged experience is articulated into words and communicated through written channel (Kahn & Garrison, 2009, p. 573). The paper examines how these practices can serve as important precursors of, and opportunity for, the transformation of social categories. I use some extracts from open-ended essays about personal and vicarious experiences of discrimination, written by minority and migrant children aged 9-10 and enrolled in elementary schools in Japan and in Italy. Children do not merely mirror adults’ and dominant discourses about
ethnic, cultural and social identities, but through their ideas and emotions, they can engage in dynamic processes of identification, and propose new meanings for more complex, inclusive and multiple identities (e.g., Cangià, 2012; Jenks, 1992; Schultz, et al., 2000; Roberts, et al., 2008; Pache-Huber & Spyrou, 2012). Through the analysis of some extracts, I will explore how children, when writing about their feelings, reframe stereotypes on the basis of various social, economic, moral, and universal values. I introduce the case of Kinegawa educational project in order to describe how written emotional disclosure can be concretely implemented in multicultural contexts, and discuss possible psychological implications for children. I discuss how written compositions serve as educational material to understand not only the strategies through which children try to handle discrimination, but also those factors that, in their everyday life, seem to be especially important. Moreover, written compositions can be used as educational tools for other pupils (in the form of individual or group readings) to reflect on others’ negative experiences.

The two research contexts represent interesting cases of how writing practices can be used in different manners in order to make both “minority” and “majority” children express their feelings and thoughts about cultural diversity. Both Japan and Italy have long been described as “recent immigration countries” (Koff, 2006). Despite a diffused myth of internal “ethnic homogeneity” both in Japan and in Italy (Clough Marinaro & Walston, 2010; Graburn, et al., 2010), the visibility of foreign residents has increased substantially with the intensification of demands for reform oriented towards the integration of immigrants and other marginalized groups (Hankins, 2012). These demands have included the adoption of “multiculturalism” and “intercultural dialogue” as ideal policies, also in the context of education (Graburn, et al., 2010; Portera, 2004).
COMMON, MULTIPLE AND BLURRED IDENTITIES

The concept of “boundaries” has come to play an important role in the study of social identity. In social psychology, “social identity theory”, for example, has been concerned with the permeability of categorical boundaries, in particular with how individuals adapt to the surrounding environment through cognitive categorization and stereotyping processes (e.g., Tajfel & Turner, 1985). Experimental social psychology analyzes social categorization through empirically elicited tests and controlled interventions that modify the way in which “groups” are categorized by individuals, as well as the effects that these tests can have on people’s perceptions of groups’ boundaries (e.g., Crisp, et al. 2010; Gaertner, et al. 1993). These interventions have been recognized as significant strategies for reducing prejudice and for strengthening positive intergroup relations. For instance, the “common in-group identity model” asserts that intergroup prejudice can be reduced by interventions redirecting those cognitive and motivational processes leading to bias towards alternative factors of categorization (Gaertner, et al. 1993). These changes in perception can influence the ways people categorize themselves and others, and can modify the boundaries that are supposed to separate “in-group” members from “out-group” members. Boundaries can be modified on the basis of individual characteristics, inclusive factors relating to a superordinate and common identity shared with the “majority”, or counter-stereotypical and more positive information about the “minority” (Brewer & Miller, 1984; Miller, 2002). When boundaries are re-categorized and replaced with counter-stereotypical information about the “minority”, a “dual identity” representation - that is the concurrent representation of a “minority identity” and of a common identity shared with the “majority” - is maintained (Dovidio, et al., 2007). Other research discussed how members of minority groups tend to prefer either a dual identity or a common identity representation, depending on how they perceive their in-group’s social status, and whether they see groups’ boundaries as
flexible or non-flexible (Guerra, et al., 2012; Guerra, et al., 2013; Mullen, et al., 1992).

The present paper contributes to the study of identity and boundary work in two specific ways: on the one hand, it will complement social psychological models primarily based on laboratory studies, through the use of qualitative methods and more interpretative analyses, in particular by analyzing identities and boundary-making as complex and ambivalent processes constituted by a dynamic interaction of social, cultural and psychological dimensions. Differently from experimental social psychology, I wish to explore how these processes spontaneously unfold in children’s writings. In particular, I am concerned with the varied meanings of social and ethnic categories that children may propose themselves, and how they actively “blur ethnic boundaries” (e.g., Lamont & Molnar, 2002; Alba, 2005; Wimmer, 2013) when they try to handle stigmatization. The different processes of transformation of social categories (i.e., recategorization, decategorization) are not viewed as separate and mutually exclusive. As I will analyze, children can simultaneously refer to multiple and different classifications and representations of their own and others’ identities, and can subjectively combine the boundaries of the various “groups” they might feel to belong to.

On the other hand, I wish to extend the sociological and anthropological research on “ethnicity” through the use of cognitive perspectives (Brubaker, et al., 2004; DiMaggio, 1997). I draw on research agendas that do not assume the existence of pre-defined and separated groups and social identities (e.g., Brubaker 2004; Lamont, et al., 2002; Zagefka, 2009), but view “ethnicity” and “social identity” as a “multifaceted and dynamic” (Eamer, et al., 2014, p. 55) process, constituted by a dialectic interplay of “internal” and “external” dimensions, namely an individual sense of shared belonging within a group and an external recognition by outsiders (Jenkins, 2008).
RESEARCH CONTEXTS AND METHODS

The paper uses some children’s essays collected on the occasion of two studies carried out in Tokyo and in Rome respectively. One research study was conducted between 2007 and 2009 in Kinegawa district (Tokyo) for my Ph.D. dissertation at the Department of Social Anthropology of the University of Fribourg (Switzerland), with a special focus on the “buraku issue” (Cangià, 2013). The buraku issue refers to the problem of discrimination towards a category of people labeled as “Burakumin” (literally “hamlet people”), usually described as descendants of Japan’s outcasts of pre-modern times, engaged in special occupations (e.g., leather industry, meat-packing), and compelled to live in separate areas (the “buraku”). Despite the abolition of the status system in 1871, and the implementation of Dōwa (assimilation) Special Measures in the late ‘60s, Burakumin still experience forms of discrimination in terms of access to education and housing, discriminatory messages on the web, as well as background investigations conducted by private agencies at times of employment and marriage. External determination of “buraku origin” is currently based on one’s birth, former or current residence in a buraku district or on one’s engagement in the buraku industries. However, the “buraku” is a heterogeneous construct including a variety of individuals of different cultural and social backgrounds.

Kinegawa (also known as Higashi Sumida) is a leather and grease industrial area, recognized as a buraku district in Tokyo. Currently, people living in Kinegawa and the surroundings include Chinese, Koreans, South Asian (Filipinos, Thai, Malaysian, Bangladeshis), Africans, and Japanese people. The district has long been subject to forms of discrimination relating to the odor and the “dirtiness” associated with the leatherwork. In 1936, Kinegawa Elementary School was opened in the district, and operated as a Dōwa Education Institute until 2003, when it was closed due to the discrimination towards children who attended the school. Teachers and part of the community decided to maintain the memory and the educational project of the former school, and founded the Museum of Education and Leather Industry, Archives Kinegawa on the
ground floor of the school’s building. Compositions written since 1964 by pupils enrolled in the former elementary school and in surrounding schools are currently collected in printed-out diaries and displayed in the permanent exhibition of Archives Kinegawa as historical documentation (Cangià, 2012). Most of these compositions describe children’s everyday life in the neighborhood. Here, I use some extracts written by children aged 9-10.

I decided to integrate these data with some extracts from essays collected on the occasion of a large research study conducted in Central Italy by a team of researchers of the Institute of Cognitive Sciences and Technologies within the Project “Migration” of the Department of Social Sciences and Humanities, Cultural Heritage (National Research Council - Italy). This study especially focused on children, youths and their representations of multiculturalism in Italy (e.g., Pagani, et al. 2011; Pagani, 2014; Cangià & Pagani, 2014a; Cangià & Pagani, 2014b). In their schools, children and adolescents were asked to write anonymously open-ended essays about their opinions and feelings concerning the fact that people of different cultural backgrounds live in Italy. Participants were especially asked to focus on direct or indirect experiences at school and in society in general. They had to indicate only their gender. Sometimes, even when no explicit mention was made of their background, it was possible to infer from the text whether a pupil was Italian or immigrant. When analyzing essays written by immigrant children, I identified some interesting aspects in common with those observed in my analysis of Kinegawa children’s compositions. In the present paper, I use some essays written by some migrant children (aged 9-10) enrolled in an elementary school in the east of Rome, in particular in the neighborhood called Villa De Sanctis (in the past known as Casilino XXIII). The school is named Iqbal Masih, after a Pakistani child who became a symbol of abusive child labor in the developing world. Approximately 10% of the children enrolled in the school are immigrants from the near neighborhood “Centocelle”, an area characterized by a high rate of immigration and inhabited by a large number of low and middle working class families (e.g., artisans, workers, clerical workers).
Some pupils come from the urban Roma settlements located in the nearby area.

All the essays were analyzed through qualitative methods, including discourse, textual and content analysis. I analyze these writing practices as socio-culturally situated, through a look at the contextual differences that make these accounts of discrimination different between each other. However, in the analysis, I pay special attention on how children in different socio-cultural contexts can use similar psychological strategies to handle external categorization. I look for similarity among children’s subjective evaluation and interpretation of discriminatory acts, in particular by focusing on the main and recurrent contents, sources and forms of expression used to express thoughts and emotions. More specifically, I focus on the ideas expressed and the means employed to express these ideas.

MINORITY CHILDREN WRITING ABOUT DISCRIMINATION

All the essays written by children who directly address issues of discrimination, both in the case of the buraku context and in the Italian schools, present a very similar structure. First, children contextualize their thoughts by introducing the situation in which experiences of discrimination occurred, including the school, the neighborhood, public transports, the street or the playground. Children refer both to personal experiences and to vicarious cases of discrimination, which they directly witness or heard of through formal channels (e.g., media). In the case of Italy, the unfair treatment towards colored people is usually mentioned as a representative example of discrimination.

Following this contextualization, children usually try to personally evaluate events in a certain way, often interpret events as unacceptable behaviors, look for concrete reasons why discrimination should stop, and at times reflect on their attitudes and emotions. In many of these essays, these evaluations lead to interesting strategies of transformation of social
categories, including recategorization and decategorization.

**Recategorization**

Through “recategorization”, groups’ boundaries are replaced with more inclusive and positively perceived factors in common with the “majority”, or with counter-stereotypical information about the “minority” (Miller, 2002). These factors include social, economic and moral values (e.g., the work, laboriousness, honesty) and universal principles (e.g., brotherhood, equality, peace), and are often called upon also by “majority” children writing about prejudice in order to explain why discrimination is an unacceptable behavior. In particular, children often refer to “honesty” when describing “the good” immigrant, that is the one who “works honestly”, who “enters the country legally” to look for a better life, the one who does not deserve to be discriminated against. A couple of extracts from both contexts illustrate the use of these discursive sources:

People in the factory work very hard, I think that things like “it stinks” are bad words to say to the people in the factory (a 10 year-old child in Kinegawa).

My dream has always been to live all together, both white and black people, both immigrants and Italians, but without war […] I am a girl who likes making friends with everybody I don’t care what color they are or how they behave, because we are all the same (a 10-year old girl from Colombia in Rome).

As showed in these two extracts, sources such as social and economic values or universal principles are evoked through reference to personal and others’ emotions. Certain categorical attributes are not dramatized, but are downplayed or reversed in favor of other elements, such as equality, the laboriousness of the people working in the factory, or the usefulness of objects. In the following extract, a 10 year-old child implicitly expresses his negative emotions by describing his reaction to
unfair treatment. He hence tries to support his evaluations by replacing factors of external categorization (e.g., bad smell) with other positive aspects related to his grandfather’s job:

When my friends say that my town stinks I try to react with bad words. I mean, my grandfather works in a factory, everyday in such a hot place. His hands are all over blisters because he works hard. So, I think that bad words such as “stink” are really mean, because people work so hard in the factory.

Children often use images similar to “blisters on hands” in order to represent the difficulty of the leatherwork. These images serve as counter-stereotypical information about the minority, and can ideally help invert the negative perception of the buraku practice. Children in Kinegawa also refer to the usefulness of objects produced in the local factories as another important source to reverse negative stereotypes. More specifically, many of these children express positive feelings regarding the buraku work and produced objects, such as surprise, curiosity and interest, as well as their gratefulness to workers, when visiting the factory and learning how many things can be made out of oil and leather:

[...] By visiting the oil factory, I could understand better how much it is big. [...] The oil can be used for making food, soap, instant ramen noodles, bread, margarine, cookies and perfumes. I think that the oil is very useful. Sirs [leather workers], even if you were busy, thanks again a lot for teaching us so many interesting things (a 9 year-old child in Kinegawa).

Both in the case of Kinegawa and generally in many of the essays written in Italy, universal and moral principles relating to a common identity (e.g., mankind) are usually evoked to reframe the discriminated-against person’s identity (People here are human beings like everyone else). In sociology, recategorization processes based on universal principles are referred to as strategies of “universalism” and “particular universalism”
“Universalism” is an “individualist strategy” that involves abstracting oneself from specific cultural, racial or ethnic-like aspects through emphasizing human and moral qualities shared by all individuals. “Universalism” is an important recategorization strategy advanced by many children both in the case of Kinegawa and in the essays collected in Italy. Universal principles, like social, economic and moral values, are often associated with emotional representations, both of the very same child who writes and of the person who is described as being experiencing discrimination. “Universalist strategies” linked with emotional states are well illustrated by the following extract from an essay written by a 10 year-old Filipino boy in Rome:

Racists, I don’t stand racists […] because they mock black people, and I always say to a friend from Catechism as he teases black people that he should not mock them or they can get offended, and also that if you were an immigrant would you like if someone would mock you? […] then I say to him if you come to Catechism you should not make fun of people and that inside we are all the same and outside we are different.

In these lines, evident is the reference to religious principles that make “mocking people” for their skin color a negative act. Race (skin color) as a principle of categorization is replaced by universal and moral standards (inside we are all the same and outside we are different). Interestingly, these children seem to be able to transcend ethnic-like boundaries between different discriminated-against people through reference to “race”-based diversity. The use of religion in the boy’s lines can also be examined as a “particular universalist” strategy, in which negative categorization is replaced through a focus on universal language that is informed by particular collective or individual beliefs (Lamont, et al., 2002).

The Filipino child, previously in the essay, activates an interesting strategy to put into question the legitimacy of discrimination, in particular by inverting the code of normality (the definition of “immigrant”), and making the meanings conventionally attached to “natives” and “strangers” interchangeable:
Once when I was going back home I took the bus, when I got up there were Whites teasing [someone] of color. I told myself if White people come to Africa for instance they are strangers too.

The following extract was written by a 10 year-old Chinese girl. She ambivalently describes her experience of discrimination as due both to her personality and attitude towards her fellows and to her cultural origin:

I am an immigrant child and come from China. When I arrived in this school I used to have very difficult relationships with my school fellows because I was very distant and my fellows mocked me because I am Chinese.

She continues and tries to invert the event by looking for good reasons to see her origins as positive:

I think being Chinese is not a bad thing and living in China has been a beautiful experience that not every Italian child could live.

“Living in China” is described as a beautiful experience, and works in her words as a typical experiential and counter-stereotypical aspect that makes the “minority” membership salient.

**Decategorization**

Another important and common strategy is decategorization. Through “decategorization”, categorical factors are de-emphasized in favor of individual qualities, or affective dimensions. Minority group’s “members” are not perceived as belonging to a single and homogeneous group, but are individuated on the ground of other characteristics (Brewer & Miller, 1984). Disclosing emotions about negative events or cognitively categorizing and understanding the role of emotions in these events play a strong role in coping with categorization. Children often try to explicitly or implicitly define their or others’ emotional states, and try to explain
how emotions, especially the evaluation of emotions by others, can help change personal assumptions, put oneself in someone else’s shoes, and potentially stop discrimination. The Filipino boy, in this regard, is very clear:

He should not mock them or they can get offended, and also that if you were an immigrant would you like if someone would mock you?

He tries to imagine the feelings of other people experiencing discrimination, and makes the example of Jewish people in concentration camps:

I heard about a poem entitled *If this is a man* which tells about Jewish people in concentration camps where they are deprived of their names and of their freedom of thought, their heads are shaved, they have to work all the time, including children, youths and elder people, and when a child gets sick they kill him […]. They [children] cannot remember their happy past memories, when they were playing at the beach with other children and now they are treated like slaves, they are deprived of their identity […].

The imagination of others’ difficult experiences makes this child redefine “identity” on the basis of non-ethnic factors (e.g., names, freedom of thought, memories). The experience in concentration camps as the most extreme case of ethnic discrimination, namely “dehumanization”, is here narrated through decategorizing strategies based on a variety of elements, including emotions. Emotional constructs (e.g., goodness), as well as others’ feelings, are used as principles to stop discrimination also in the case of Kinegawa:

In the school of Kinegawa there are good people. […] I think about the feelings of other people, then I hope that we can make the school of Kinegawa a place without discrimination (a 10 year-old child). A change in personal emotional perception of, and attitudes towards,
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negative events can represent a coping strategy to alleviate the effects of external categorization. The Chinese girl, for instance, continues by describing how a change in her perception and attitudes towards her fellows helped ameliorate her relationships and feelings concerning experienced discrimination. In particular, she said, when she started to know her fellows better, and to participate in the school activities, she stopped caring about bad jokes, learnt how to react and finally saw her relationships improve:

After one year of school I started to have better relationships with my fellows and got to know them better and I did not care anymore about what they told me but I learnt to react to provocations, I started to participate in the conversations in the classroom and in their games.

Other emotional states, like for instance indifference (Once I was mocked but I acted as nothing happened), can represent other possible decategorizing solutions. Other times, the experience of discrimination is alleviated through the comfort of familiar relationships.

As previously analyzed in the case of Kinegawa, children often mention the difficulty and hardness of the leatherwork, or the usefulness of leather and oil-made objects, to recategorize the “minority identity” on the basis of counter-stereotypical elements. However, working the leather or the usefulness of the objects can also serve in decategorization strategies as individual-related or “dis-identifying” symbols (Goffman, 1969). Working the leather, as well as the objects made of oil or leather (e.g., instant noodles, shoes), are viewed by these children as “normal” things, and serve hence in their essays as “prestige symbols” to counteract the effect of a “stigma symbol” (Goffman, 1969), to potentially reverse the effects of the stigma, and to make the “minority identity” “normal”. In that sense, these images help create continuity with the “non-buraku”. However, children in Kinegawa do not use these images only as “normalizers”, but try to take pride in the “specialness” of the practice: the leatherwork can be viewed not only as a job as any other, but as a decategorized quality (e.g., mastery, skills) referring to individual
practitioners (e.g., a parent, a neighbor) (Cangià, 2012). Similarly, the 10 year-old Colombian girl, while firstly recategorizing boundaries on the basis of other more inclusive factors (e.g., equality), also make use of decategorizing elements such as the right to individual diversity:

I think these wars based on skin color are not fair because everybody has the right to be who they are.

The interplay between these different strategies of transformation of social categories demonstrates how children can actively combine the various categorical boundaries in various and overlapping manners.

**Children’s Boundary-Making from a Comparative Perspective**

According to the individualism-collectivism dichotomy common in cross-cultural psychological research⁶ (Matsumoto, 1990), “collectivist cultures” (e.g., Japan) are to be described as differing from “individualistic cultures” (e.g., the United States) along important values, including the importance attached to family, interrelatedness with others, and self-reliance, to name a few (Triandis, 1988). My study takes into account other dimensions for a comparative perspective, in particular other social and contextual factors that might affect between and within-individual variation in identity processes, and that make “individualism-collectivism” a less rigid dichotomy (Cangià, 2010; Stephan, et al., 1998).

The capability to construct a complex and multifaceted representation of personal and others’ identities, for instance, seems to be related to children’s psychological dimensions, and the way they cognitively and emotionally make sense of experienced diversity. However, the strategies herein introduced, although activated in the context of personal emotional disclosure, should not be viewed only as the mere result of private experiences and individual attributes. The choice of words and expressional modes to translate emotion-related experiences in written language can reflect structural elements linked to contextual socio-cultural values and social relationships relevant in children’s everyday life. Many factors can have an impact on the understanding of
discrimination, on the internalization of certain social categories, on the salience of categorical boundaries, and finally on the expression of emotions. These factors may include class and gender differences, variation in local group solidarity, personal and social networks, culture-based conventions of acceptable behavior, as well as more situational elements (Okamura, 1981) such as social desirability when writing to “official” recipients (school teachers or researchers). These factors can also include children’s “general knowledge of racism” (Essed, 1991), that is the information concerning discrimination acquired through formal (e.g., education) or informal (e.g., friends, family) channels, their knowledge about others’ experiences of similar discrimination, as well as media and adults’ language which children, most probably, come into contact with. These discursive and symbolic resources supporting individual ideas can present different degrees of emphasis and content for these children in the case of the buraku issue and in Italy.

In Kinegawa, community-based initiatives aiming to enhance self-esteem, self-awareness and solidarity among local people through a focus on local attachment, socio-cultural values, and the respect for human rights, have a certain impact on children’s language, opinions and attitudes. Children in Kinegawa and the surroundings can rely on the political environment influenced by the Buraku Liberation League’s agenda and the more general approach of the Dōwa Education. Most of the activities in this context focus simultaneously on local (hometown, community) and global meanings (equality), and help individuals to handle experiences of discrimination, to emphasize certain categorical boundaries and to make these especially relevant in the everyday life of the local people.

On the contrary, children in the Italian schools seem to rely on more personal and individual aspects, on the one hand, and on broader and universal meanings (skin colored racism; brotherhood), on the other. In this regard, educational activities in the Iqbal Masih school in the east of Rome, while addressing the attachment to the locality and the surrounding community among pupils (most of whom live in the nearby areas), focus specifically on broader values of intercultural education, in
particular the respect for diversity, and the attention to minority children. Recently, between the years 2010-2012, the school was involved in a European school cooperation partnership within the *Lifelong Learning Program Comenius*, a European Union-based program aimed at developing knowledge exchange, and at understanding cultural and linguistic diversity at the educational level, through a number of activities that include, among others, mobility of students, trainings for educators, and institutional partnerships.

This comparative analysis sheds light on how the transformation of categories can work through written emotional disclosure in very different cultural and social contexts. The next paragraph discusses the main psychological implications of written emotional disclosure practices, and how these practices can be implemented in the context of multicultural education.

**WRITTEN EMOTIONAL DISCLOSURE AT WORK: THE “WRITING ABOUT LIFE” APPROACH**

Pupils’ thoughts and emotions about discrimination should be valued as important in education, in order for children and educators to engage in a more thoughtful analysis of prejudice. In this regard, written emotional disclosure can help educators to understand meanings that pupils bring with them into their classroom, and pupils to have the time to reflect about their emotional world and their ideas about diversity. The educational project in Kinegawa and in the surrounding schools (Iwata, 2003) represents a concrete example of how writing practices, namely the “writing about life” (*tsuzurikata*) approach, became integral part of the school curriculum. This approach was put into practice in different schools through the educational method known in the *Dōwa Education* program on human rights, namely the “diary notebook” (*seikatsu noto*) method: children are asked to write down in their notebook personal observations about the everyday life in the neighborhood, about their friends, families and parents, in particular about their parents’ jobs, and
to bring the notebook to school. The teacher usually instructs pupils to choose an event or experience, to determine the period when the event occurred and to describe it in details. Once the child hands over the notebook with the work done, teachers, by returning thoughtful comments in these notebooks try to stimulate her/him to elaborate on aspects that have been either implicitly or explicitly raised in the writing and that seem to matter in the child’s life. Children, who first only wrote superficially about something, begin to focus on their deeper thoughts and feelings and write these down on the notebook. This method aims at training children to look at their life critically, to reflect on their experiences in the neighborhood and about discrimination, and to convert related emotional experiences into written language. In particular, the “writing about life” approach fundamentally lies in the idea that a critical view on past experiences can help children think differently about negative events and their meanings, as well as critically review their own attitudes (Akashi, 1995; Hirasawa & Nabeshima, 1995). As a result, expressive writings as such might ideally help foster children’s relationship with the neighborhood and their families, and their pride concerning their parents’ job in the leather factories (Cangià, 2012).

From a cognitive perspective, practices of “self-disclosure”, that is the interaction between at least two individuals where one intends to deliberately divulge something personal to another (Greene, et al., 2006), can play an important role in validating children’s self-worth. In particular, writing about stressful events can represent an occasion for children to disclose, reflect and elaborate on difficult emotional states (what in psychology is known as emotional complexity. See Lindquist & Barrett, 2008). Reflecting on personal emotions, in turn, can help to recognize and understand others’ emotions (Kang & Shaver, 2004), and ideally to make better sense of personal experiences (Greene, et al., 2006), like in the case of the Chinese girl’s composition and other essays previously analyzed. Writing can also give the time to reconsider personal role in social relations, so as to differentiate, and potentially integrate, conflicting beliefs and values, various personal attributes, and multiple group memberships and social identities (what in social
psychology is known as *social identity complexity*. See Roccas & Brewer, 2002), as examined for some simultaneous strategies of recategorization and decategorization activated by children in Kinegawa. It can also help reflect about the ambivalence of the “internal and external dialectic of identification”, and about “our understanding of who we are and of who other people are, and, reciprocally, other people’s understanding of themselves and of others (which includes us)” (Jenkins 2008, p. 5).

Listening to others’ experiences of discrimination can also help engage all children in a deeper exploration of others’ emotions and of personal assumptions about the world, as it was demonstrated by the Filipino boy’s reaction to Primo Levi’s book *If This is a Man*. In Kinegawa and the surroundings, joint lessons between children of different schools were often organized. Through reading other children’s compositions and discussing with their peers about these essays, pupils share experiences and confront other opinions and feelings, so as to better position themselves and their own role in regard to both personal and others’ experienced discrimination. Becoming aware of the contradictions and ambivalence that often characterize discriminatory acts can be an important cognitive strategy that helps develop autonomous and personal opinions, and potentially more empathetic attitudes in regard to these issues. Moreover, looking at the issue of discrimination not just as others’ business but as a personal problem, and as an issue in which everybody is somehow implicated, is one of the objectives of the Dōwa Education in Japan (Akashi, 1995), and represents another important strategy in Kinegawa education. This is a similar challenge envisaged by Megan Boler (1999) when she talks about a “testimonial reading” in education, that is a reading where the reader accepts the commitment to rethink her own assumptions about what she/he reads and to confront the difficulty of challenging taken-for-granted views.

**CONCLUSION**

The paper explored from a comparative perspective how minority and
migrant children, when writing about their thoughts and emotions concerning discrimination, activate similar coping strategies of transformation of categorical boundaries in different socio-cultural contexts. Variation in the sources employed by these children to describe personal and vicarious experiences of discrimination seem to be linked to discursive and contextual elements, and to the social relations relevant in their everyday environment. In the cases herein introduced, direct experiences of discrimination and the identification with a “minority” position seem to play a significant role in activating similar coping strategies of boundary transformation. In this regard, minority and migrant children and children with parents of mixed nationalities seem to be engaged with a potentially more active process of identification than “majority” children, who tend to take dominant discourses on identities for granted and embrace them more easily (Scourfield, et al., 2006). However, as already mentioned, also “majority” children at times demonstrate to be able to understand and conceptualize about cultural diversity in a complex fashion (Cangià & Pagani, 2014a). Personal experience in the neighborhood and at school can play a strong role for “native” children in constituting positive relationships with immigrant peers, or in developing positive perceptions about immigrant neighbors.

In general, written disclosure studies demonstrated that when individuals are given the opportunity to disclose about important topics, they perceive the experience as positive (Smyth & Pennebaker, 2001). As for the writings analyzed in the present paper, a dialogic style, which is a special characteristic of the many essays collected in both studies, shows a certain common need among children to talk about themselves and to look for someone who would listen to, and potentially understand, them. What is especially interesting in the writings herein illustrated is the fact that, differently from how demonstrated by some research in experimental psychology, children can simultaneously refer to multiple classifications at the same time (recategorized, decategorized,), rather than prefer one classification to the other (Aboud, 2003). The interplay between these classifications, as well as resulting cognitive and emotional abilities (e.g., emotional complexity, social identity complexity), can help to
deal with one’s own and others’ diversity, in particular to handle the
dialectical interaction between the internal and external dimensions of
identity processes. Providing children with the opportunity to safely talk
about themselves, for example through writing laboratories such as the
one conceived in Kinegawa, can also help educators identify the various
classifications through which children try to make sense of diversity.
Ultimately, individual and group readings of children’s self-writings
from different socio-cultural contexts can also be regarded as a concrete
way to use written emotional disclosure as a constructive method for
education in multicultural contexts. The findings of this study
demonstrated the complexity of children’s relationship with their own
and others’ diversity. Multicultural educational programs should be
enriched by a look at this complexity, in particular at the different
cognitive and emotional processes through which children experience
prejudice and cultural diversity. Therefore, this study paves the way for a
broader research agenda, aimed at informing multicultural education
and psychological programs for the reduction of “inter-group bias” from
a long-term and comparative perspective.

Notes
1 This article is partly based on a paper presented at the International Association for
Intercultural Education (IAIE), International Conference entitled “Unity and Disunity,
Connections and Separations: Intercultural education as a movement for promoting
multiple identities, social inclusion and transformation”, held in Zagreb, Croatia (17-21
September 2013). The article draws on two research studies conducted at the
Department of Social Anthropology of the University of Fribourg (Switzerland) and at
the Institute of Cognitive Sciences and Technologies of the Italian National Research
Council in Rome.
2 In sociology, “boundary-blurring” is defined as the process through which the
importance of ethnicity as a principle of categorization is reduced in favor of non-
ethnic principles (Wimmer, 2013, p. 61).
3 Dōwa Education was initiated by the Japanese government and the Buraku Liberation
League (the main buraku political movement founded in 1922) to tackle the buraku
and other forms of discrimination.
4 The exhibition includes the history of Kinegawa district, with the display of leather-
tanning machinery, artifacts, pictures, and children’s diaries.
Children’s writing in the two contexts can present some differences in the language competences (between buraku children of Japanese mother tongue and “first generation” immigrant children in Italy learning a new language). These differences are not easily evident in the English translated version. In the quotations, spelling, grammatical, syntactic, and lexical mistakes were not eliminated.

For instance, between the “Japanese” and “American” ways to perceive and express emotions.

The tendency for individuals to present themselves in a favorable manner (Pagani & Robustelli, 2010).
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