

The effects of implicit stereotypes about immigrants on Italian schools students

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Michela Carlana, professor at the Harvard Kennedy School, presented the results of a research work conducted in Italian schools in order to assess the impact of stereotypes on immigrant students in teacher-student interactions.

[FBK-IRVAPP](#) hosted **Michela Carlana**, professor at Harvard Kennedy School, Wednesday, June 14, 2023. Prof. Carlana presented the findings of the research work based on two experiments conducted in 2016/2017 and later during the Covid-19 pandemic period, respectively. The first experiment took place in January 2017 and used a sample of 102 Italian schools located in Northern Italy with at least 20 immigrant students enrolled; the second experiment was held online during the pandemic, again with the participation of Italian middle school teachers. The experiments involved the study of interactions between teachers and students in order to study implicit stereotypes about immigrant students in the Italian school setting.

We asked Michela Carlana **what stereotypes are** and **what are their possible effects within the Italian school system**.

– What are stereotypes and where do they come from?

Stereotypes are **representations that are used to simplify the way we see the world** and help us make **quick associations** when we need to make decisions quickly.

One example is gender stereotypes, which, unfortunately, are still widespread in Italy with a strong association between sciences and the male gender, and the humanities and the female gender.

Stereotypes, in themselves, are not a problem, except when they are used to generate discrimination and thus to treat differently people who would otherwise receive the same treatment, as in the case of students and the grades given to them depending on whether or not they are immigrants. Furthermore, stereotypes can induce a **self-fulfilling prophecy** when, for example, people or students who are the victims of a given stereotype begin to behave in the manner predicted by the stereotype, instead of reacting and continuing their traditional schooling.

– What tools have you used to measure the impact of stereotypes in the interaction between teachers and Italian school students?

One of the means that has been used to measure stereotypes is the **Implicit Association Test (IAT)**, a test created by two psychologists in the 1990s in the United States that is used to **record the implicit associations we have in our minds between different concepts**.

In the study presented, the measurement was carried out on a very large sample of teachers in Italian schools in order to collect stereotypes derived from teachers' implicit associations and observe how this then influences their behavior in terms of the grades given to students in their respective classes.

– Why do we worry about stereotypes? What is their impact on schools?

The underlying problem with stereotypes is, for example, that better immigrant students receive a lower grade, compared to Italian students who have the same standardized grade. This can discourage them, and it can induce that self-fulfilling prophecy we talked about earlier. If students receive misinformation they may think they are not very good at certain subjects and choose easier school programs as a result.

In an American Economic Review Paper and Proceedings we published last year with some of the authors who also participated in this research, we pointed out that **in Italy stereotypes are also particularly problematic when it comes to guidance counseling**: teachers who have a stronger stereotype tend to suggest to immigrant students vocational school programs instead of directing students to technical or other high schools.

– What have you found thanks to the experiments conducted in recent years and what are future prospects?

The main result of this study is that it helped to identify a way to try to decrease these inequalities and reduce the gap in grades given to immigrant students compared to native students.

By increasing awareness about stereotypes on immigrants in teachers through informing them about it, the initial gap can thus be narrowed, because teachers want the best for their students. Often these stereotypes are implicit without awareness or desire to bring negative consequences.

In the second part of the work, through the online experiment, we tried instead to find out whether it is possible to inform about the presence of stereotypes in society in general or whether it is necessary to give information about single stereotypes to teachers.

The result is that when we provide information about society stereotyping in general, we have very similar effects on average, because a good share of teachers change the grades they give

immigrant students compared to those they give to Italian students' grades. If, on the other hand, we inform about the presence of stereotypes about immigrants in general those who change the way they grade immigrants are the teachers with lower stereotyping scores.

If, on the contrary, they are informed of their individual stereotype, the ones who change are the teachers with more stereotypes about immigrants, thus the very group we would like to target primarily.

Looking ahead, it may be hard to collect data on implicit teacher stereotypes, but fortunately we have access to large-scale administrative data that allows us to understand where issues are most persistent and widespread, and we can then use this data to help teachers raise their awareness.

Indeed, teachers tend to want the best for their students. In conclusion, **stereotypes are a hindrance to teachers and their task of best helping students.**

– In your research work, have you addressed studies that also deal with other types of stereotypes besides immigration?

I have also dealt with **gender stereotypes** and in particular those stereotypes that **associate the scientific field with males**. What I've found is that female students who have teachers with higher gender stereotypes tend to learn less when it comes to maths. So part of the gender gap we observe in science subjects is due to the exposure to gender stereotypes and is not a natural or innate part of students.

In addition, female students' school choices are also affected, as it is evident that they go for easier school programs when have teachers who have more stereotypes about gender.

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