The Development of Social Stereotyping in 3- to 6-Year-Olds: Stereotype Content Across Social Groups and Age Effects.  
Candace Lapan, Janet J. Boseovski, & Kathleen McClinton  
University of North Carolina at Greensboro

Introduction

- Preschoolers tend to stereotype peers with certain physical and non-physical characteristics (e.g., obesity and physical handicaps; Spelke, 1991; accents: Kinler, Dejesus, & Spelle, 2009).
- No single study has examined children’s stereotyping of multiple stigmatized groups. Thus, it is unclear how specific beliefs about these groups vary and change with age. Also, little is known about which specific negative attributions are associated with different peer groups and how these attributions change with age.
- The present study examined 3- to 6-year-old’s attributions about overweight peers, peers with accents, and peers with physical disabilities.

Method

- Fifty-three participants rated four hypothetical peers (i.e., overweight, accent, physical disability and typical) on a number of behaviors that were representative of four different traits: dumb/smart, unfriendly/friendly, weak/strong, and greedy/generous.

Sample Description

“This is Jason. He is a chubby boy. He weighs a lot. He is heavier than skinny and thin kids. He is 5-6 years old’s. His friends think he is friendly but they also know he is a little bit dumb. They think he is weak but they also know he is generous.”

Results

- A series of 2 (age group: 3- to 4-year-olds and 5- to 6-year-olds; between-subjects variable) x 4 (story: overweight, accent, physical disability, and control; within-subjects variable) mixed ANOVAs were conducted on children’s mean trait ratings. Separate analyses were conducted for each trait (i.e., dumb, friendly, weak, and generous).

- **Dumb** (e.g., “Does it take a long time before Jamie can learn something new and do it on his own?”)
  - A marginal interaction between story and age F (3, 50) = 2.56, p = .06, indicated that older children rated the overweight character higher on “dumb” behaviors as compared to the control character, ps < .05, but there was no difference for younger children (see Figure 1).

- **Friendly** (e.g., “Does Jason like talking to make new friends?”)
  - A marginal interaction between story and age, F (3, 50) = 2.56, p = .06, indicated that older children rated the character with an accent significantly lower on friendly behaviors as compared to the control character, ps < .05, but there was no difference for younger children (see Figure 2).

- **Weak** (e.g., “Do you think Jamie cannot lift things that are very heavy?”)
  - All participants perceived the overweight character and the character with physical problems as more weak than the control character, F (3, 50) = 2.56, p = .06, post hoc ps < .05 (see Figure 3).

- **Generous** (e.g., “Do you think Jamie would share his lunch with someone who forgets theirs today?”)
  - There was no significant main effect of story or age, and no interaction between the two variables (see Figure 3).

Conclusions

- The current findings reveal that children’s negative peer views are specific to certain traits and behaviors based on the group in question.
- Younger children’s stereotypes may be focused more on physical differences (e.g., overweight and physically disabled peers perceived as weak).
- Older children begin to attribute additional negative traits to other groups (e.g., peers with accents perceived as less friendly).
- Interventions may be more successful and less time consuming if they focus on influencing children’s negative group-specific beliefs.

References