ORIGINAL ARTICLE

The Role of Moral Disengagement, Self-Efficacy and Social-Anxiety in Secondary School Teachers' Prejudice: A Person-Centered Approach

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Abstract

Teachers play a crucial role in fostering inclusive school environments for students from diverse backgrounds. However, harboring prejudiced attitudes towards minority students can have adverse social and psychological effects on these individuals. This study investigates the ethnic and homophobic prejudice profiles of Italian secondary school teachers ($N=552$, $M_{age} = 46.15$, 76.4% females) using a person-centered approach. It explores how these prejudice profiles predict moral disengagement mechanisms, self-efficacy, and social anxiety among teachers. Participants completed assessments on subtle and blatant ethnic prejudice, attitudes toward the representation of homosexuality, moral disengagement, self-efficacy in teaching, and social anxiety. Latent profile analysis identified three prejudice profiles among teachers: low, moderate, and high prejudice. The results, based on a structural equation model, revealed that teachers with high prejudice profiles were more likely to employ moral disengagement mechanisms and reported higher levels of social anxiety. The study underscores the significance of interventions and monitoring efforts tailored to educators, encompassing their social, moral, and individual dimensions.

Keywords Teachers · Moral Disengagement · Prejudice · Homosexuality · Ethnicity

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Introduction

Creating inclusive educational settings in today's societies, where there is increasing global mobility, is crucial for students' social and academic development. Within this context, teachers have a critical role and important responsibility, as their attitudes, beliefs and behaviours can significantly impact the classroom environment and shape the experiences of students from diverse backgrounds and identities (D'Angelo & Dixey, 2001; Pace et al., 2022). Prejudice, in its different forms, has been regarded as a negative force that works against inclusive and equitable education. Specifically, both ethnic and homophobic prejudice can perpetuate discrimination and hinder the creation of safe and supportive learning environments (D'Urso et al., 2023a). The concept of moral disengagement, which refers to the cognitive processes that enable individuals to justify harmful actions or disengage from ethical responsibilities, can offer insight into the underlying mechanisms that sustain prejudice (D'Urso et al., 2023b). Furthermore, exploring the interplay between teachers' prejudice, self-efficacy and social anxiety provides a thorough understanding of the complex dynamics underlying their attitudes and behaviours. Adopting a person-centred approach, this study aims to identify the most common profiles of teacher's ethnic and homophobic prejudice and to investigate whether these profiles predict moral disengagement mechanisms, self-efficacy, and social anxiety in teachers. By exploring these dimensions, this research aims to shed light on the implications of teachers' attitudes and behaviours which are conveyed through teacher-student interactions and inform strategies for promoting inclusive educational environments.

Teacher's Ethnic and Homophobic Prejudices

Prejudice can be defined as a set of negative attitudes or evaluations directed towards individuals or groups, typically stemming from generalized and inadequate knowledge or understanding of others (Allport, 1954). It has different forms such as ethnic prejudice (i.e., prejudice against people of different ethnic backgrounds) and homophobic prejudice (i.e., prejudice against people who are members of sexual minorities) (Lal & Garg, 2020; Pettigrew & Meertens, 1995). Teachers' holding ethnic and homophobic prejudices is particularly problematic as their negative attitudes can lead to unfair treatment, unfair assessment, the disregard of students' needs, and unjust disciplinary actions (Brown & Chu, 2012; Costa et al., n.d.; Glock & Schuchart, 2021; Honkasilta et al., 2016; Kisfalusi et al., 2020; Peterson et al., 2016; Riddle & Sinclair, 2019). Teacher attitudes are also an important determinant of school culture and climate which are crucially important in generating positive student outcomes (Dessel, 2010; Graham & Juvonen, 2002; Jeltova & Fish, 2013; Schachner et al., 2019). The prejudicial attitudes of teachers can also affect how their students perceive and evaluate other groups as teachers can act as adult referents by conveying societal norms and standards through the educational process (Pérez-Testor et al., 2010; Vervaet et al., 2018). Ultimately, the prejudiced attitudes held by both teachers and students can culminate in the exclusive and discriminatory treatment of individuals belonging to ethnic and sexual minority groups and undermine the establishment of an inclusive and supportive school environment that values diversity (Alan et al.,

2021; Brown, 2017; Civitillo et al., 2022; Pace et al., 2022; Scandurra et al., 2017). The presence of such discriminatory behaviours can result in harmful consequences for marginalised students, impacting their academic achievement, psychological well-being, and overall educational experiences in negative ways.

Teachers' ethnic prejudice towards ethnic minorities can occur in different forms (i.e. subtle and blatant ethnic prejudice, see Pettigrew & Meertens, 1995). Subtle prejudice refers to more covert and indirect forms of bias, whereas blatant prejudice involves overt and explicit expressions of prejudice. These different forms of prejudice are important to be recognised and examined as they can result in different negative consequences for ethnic minority students. For example, research shows that subtle forms of teacher's ethnic prejudice can result in different sets of expectations, different quality of interaction, less feedback, attention, and support for ethnic minority students (Holder & Kessels, 2017; Lorenz, 2021; Tenenbaum & Ruck, 2007; van Ewijk, 2011; Yeager et al., 2014). On the other hand, blatant forms of teachers' ethnic prejudice can manifest through harsh discipline and treatment, and biased comments targeting ethnic minority students which are visible forms of discrimination (Gregory & Roberts, 2017; Khanlou et al., 2008; Zambrana et al., 2017). In the current study, both subtle and blatant forms of teacher prejudice are examined to create a more nuanced understanding of the complex dynamics which would ultimately guide inclusive teaching practices and inform interventions and policies that promote inclusivity and reduce disparities in educational settings.

While research on teachers' ethnic prejudice is relatively well-established, there is a scarcity of literature exploring teachers' homophobic prejudice and the psychological factors that influence it. Teachers' homophobic prejudice and attitudes can manifest in various ways. Research shows that teachers' homophobic attitudes can result in their reluctance to address and discuss topics about sexuality and homosexuality (Bhana, 2012; D'Urso et al., 2017; Robinson & Ferfolja, 2002; Scandurra et al., 2017). Such reluctance can create silence around sexual orientation and lead to the marginalisation of sexual minority students. Studies based on both homosexual and heterosexual students' perspectives on homophobia document that teachers can ignore, underestimate, or fail to recognise and respond to discrimination and bullying towards sexual minority students (Allen, 2020; Baruch-Dominguez et al., 2016). Previous research also shows that teachers can perpetuate sexist stereotypes and engage in discriminatory practices towards sexual minority students (Russell et al., 2001; Scandurra et al., 2017).

Overall, research examining teachers' negative attitudes against various minorities has mostly focused exclusively on one type of prejudice. However, the development and expression of negative attitudes toward different minority groups can be strongly intertwined. Relatedly, the concept of generalized prejudice refers to the common variance in prejudice against different groups (Akrami et al., 2011), or else said, the extent to which individuals who reject an outgroup (e.g., ethnic minorities) would be equally prone to reject another (e.g., sexual minorities). Extensive research has documented such interrelationships (Bergh et al., 2016; for a review, see Bergh & Brandt, 2023), although prior studies have mostly relied on identifying shared variance in different types of prejudices. Adopting a person-centred approach (Bergman et al., 2003; Bergman & El-Khouri, 2003) allows to identify several groups of indi-

viduals based on the combination of different types of prejudice. By moving beyond the study of mean-level and shared variance patterns, this approach accounts for the unique heterogeneity that characterizes the group of teachers and identifies specific profiles of generalized prejudice. Relatedly, the current study sought to fill this gap by identifying different profiles of teachers depending on their levels of subtle and blatant ethnic prejudice and homophobic attitudes.

The literature has also highlighted the relevant impact of teacher prejudices on student populations with diverse backgrounds (Anderson et al., 2019; Jones & Brown, 2020). These prejudices, whether based on ethnicity, sexual orientation, or other factors, can negatively influence academic outcomes, psychological well-being, and students' sense of belonging in the classroom (e.g., Michaels et al., 2022; Hussain & Jones, 2021). Additionally, incorporating an intersectional lens into this discourse is crucial for understanding how compounded identities intersect and amplify experiences of prejudice (Fruja Amthor, 2017). For example, a student belonging to multiple marginalized groups may face unique challenges stemming from the intersection of their various identities, exacerbating the impact of teacher biases on their educational experiences (e.g., Sadowski, 2021; Juvonen et al., 2019).

Understanding the Implications of Teachers' Prejudice

Besides identifying different groups of people based on their levels of ethnic and homophobic prejudice, it is also important to understand the implications of such characterization. For instance, generalized prejudice has been associated with several individual (D'Urso et al., 2023b) and interpersonal (Poteat et al., 2015) outcomes. Similarly, being in a specific prejudice profile might influence teachers' cognitive (i.e., moral disengagement mechanisms), individual (i.e., teaching self-efficacy), and interpersonal (i.e., social anxiety) characteristics. In turn, these characteristics can impact how teachers approach their educational tasks, establish supportive relationships with their students, and create an inclusive environment for youth. Understanding the intricate ways in which prejudices permeate the classroom milieu and impact student psychology warrants a multidimensional exploration. Drawing upon the literature (e.g., Steele, 2011; Dweck, 2006), it is possible to understand the psychological and social mechanisms underpinning these phenomena. Steele's research on stereotype, indeed, threat elucidates how preconceived notions can detrimentally shape students' self-concept and academic performance. Complementarily, Dweck's work on fixed versus growth mindsets provides insights into how teacher-student interactions can either reinforce or mitigate the effects of prejudice on identity development and learning outcomes. Integrating these theories with perspectives from social learning (e.g., Bandura, 2006) and identity development (e.g., McLean & Pasupathi, 2012) can yield a holistic understanding of the dynamics at play within educational settings.

Teachers' Moral Disengagement Mechanisms

Understanding the implications of teachers' prejudice, including its various manifestations and effects on both individuals and interpersonal dynamics, is crucial. Moreover, delving into teachers' moral disengagement mechanisms sheds light on how

some educators reconcile prejudiced attitudes with their moral principles, ultimately impacting their behavior in educational settings. Research, indeed, shows that the majority of teachers uphold the value of human dignity and demonstrate strong dedication to human rights (Florian & Camedda, 2020; Osler, 2016). However, despite their general endorsement of these values, a notable portion of teachers still can have prejudiced attitudes towards immigrants or sexual minorities, which contradict established moral standards (D'Urso et al., 2023a; D'Urso & Symonds, 2021; Strohmeier & Gradinger, 2021). This contradiction ultimately can create a cognitive dissonance.

Based on Bandura's theoretical framework, people alleviate their cognitive dissonance by utilising self-justification processes which enable them to distance themselves from morally harmful actions that cause harm to others and consequently avoid the negative emotions (i.e., shame and guilt) that might arise (Bandura, 2002). This psychological process is called moral disengagement, which allows individuals to act contrary to their own moral principles by disengaging themselves from the ethical consequences of their actions (Bandura, 1999). According to Bandura's theory, moral disengagement encompasses a set of self-justification processes: (1) attribution of blame: attributing blame to external factors or victims; (2) distorting consequences: downplaying the harmful consequences of their actions; (3) euphemistic language: using language that masks the true nature of their actions; (4) advantageous comparison: comparing their behaviour to more immorally extreme examples to diminish the severity of their actions; (5) dehumanisation: dehumanising the victims who may deserve less empathy and moral consideration; (6) displacement of responsibility: shifting responsibility to higher authorities; (7) diffusion of responsibility: distributing responsibility among a group; (8) moral justification: minimise, distort or ignore the actual harm caused by their actions (Bandura, 1999, 2006).

In educational settings, moral disengagement can manifest in various forms, exerting detrimental effects on decision-making processes, teacher-student relationships, and the methodologies employed (e.g., Wu & He, 2022). For instance, when educators turn a blind eye to instances of bullying or cheating, they engage in moral disengagement by rationalizing or minimizing the harm caused. This not only compromises the integrity of educational institutions but also undermines trust between educators and students. Furthermore, when curricula lack diversity and fail to acknowledge diverse perspectives, they perpetuate moral disengagement by marginalizing certain groups and hindering inclusive educational practices.

Numerous investigations have explored the relationship between moral disengagement processes and prejudice. For example, prior research has highlighted a reciprocal association between homophobic attitudes and moral disengagement processes both among young adults (Camodeca et al., 2019) and primary and secondary teachers (D'Urso & Symonds, 2021). Moreover, another study revealed that individuals who endorsed racist attitudes consistently used moral disengagement strategies in their discourse (Faulkner & Bliuc, 2016). However, to the extent of our knowledge, no prior research has attempted to understand how teachers characterized by different combinations of prejudice levels would differ in the extent to which they employ moral disengagement mechanisms.

Relatedly, moral disengagement self-justification processes can provide significant insight into how teachers maintain prejudice against ethnic and sexual minority

students, even when these attitudes contradict their own moral standards or societal norms. However, studies examining this interplay among teachers are relatively limited. Recent research documented a positive correlation between moral disengagement mechanisms such as dehumanization and blame attribution, and homophobic attitudes among primary and secondary teachers in Italy (D'Urso & Symonds, 2021). Similarly, a few studies revealed that teachers who reported high levels of moral disengagement were more likely to disregard peer harassment targeting ethnic and religious minorities (Strohmeier & Gradinger, 2021) and had higher levels of subtle ethnic prejudice (D'Urso et al., 2023a). The aforementioned studies on teachers, however, did not explore how teachers' ethnic and homophobic prejudice are related to each of the eight moral disengagement mechanisms. Additionally, there has been a lack of research examining this relationship using a person-centered statistical approach, which allows for the creation of teacher prejudice profiles. Based on the previous research, we expected that teacher profiles of ethnic and homophobic prejudice would predict moral disengagement mechanisms.

Teachers' Self-Efficacy

Self-efficacy, as delineated by Bandura in 1977, encapsulates an individual's belief in their capacity to execute a particular behavior successfully and attain desired outcomes. When applied to educators, it manifests as teacher self-efficacy—an amalgamation of personal convictions concerning competence and effectiveness in orchestrating, coordinating, and executing activities geared toward specific educational goals (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2007). This construct has emerged as a linchpin in understanding various social attitudes and behaviors, including prejudice and moral disengagement. In this line, Crowson and Brandes (2014) conducted a study elucidating how pre-service teachers harboring significant prejudice against students with disabilities exhibited diminished self-efficacy and a propensity toward resisting inclusive educational practices. This underscores the detrimental impact of endorsing prejudice on educators' confidence in navigating diverse student cohorts effectively. Parallel research, such as that by Gini et al. (2014), has shed light on how individuals entwined in moral disengagement—a cognitive mechanism facilitating the rationalization of harmful actions sans guilt or remorse—often experience a depletion in self-efficacy. Relatedly, the current research aims to expand the knowledge base by examining whether teachers characterized by a given prejudice profile would report differences in their self-efficacy. Drawing from the previous research, we expected that self-efficacy would be a significant outcome of teacher prejudice towards ethnic and sexual minority students.

Teachers' Social Anxiety

Social anxiety can be defined as an intense fear or discomfort in social situations with a strong concern about being negatively judged, embarrassed, or humiliated by others, which can give rise to feelings of exclusion, fear of not belonging and a reluctance to embrace diversity (Finchilescu, 2010). Eventually, this may lead to prejudice and negative attitudes towards different groups in order to maintain a sense

of comfort. Substantiating this assertion, research has indicated a significant positive correlation between social anxiety and homophobic prejudice (Bernat et al., 2001; Folkierska-Żukowska et al., 2022). Only one recent study investigated how teachers' social anxiety influenced their ethnic and homophobic prejudice (D'Urso et al., 2023b). They found that social anxiety demonstrated an impact on homophobic attitudes only, and it may contribute to the arousal of negative emotions associated with the fear of negative judgments. In the current study, we expected teacher homophobic prejudice would predict their level of social anxiety.

The Current Study

The current study aims (1) to identify the most common teacher profiles of ethnic and homophobic prejudice towards ethnic and sexual minorities in Italy and (2) to explore whether Italian teachers' ethnic and homophobic prejudice profiles predict moral disengagement mechanisms, self-efficacy, and social anxiety in teachers. Currently, the socio-political atmosphere surrounding ethnic and sexual minorities has been a topic of significant discussion and debate in today's societies specifically in Italy. With the increasing global mobility of people because of different reasons such as wars, conflicts or climate change, immigration's social, cultural, and political implications for both the host societies and the ethnic minority communities have increased. According to the demographic indicators report for 2022 showed that immigration is on the rise in Italy (Italian Institute of Statistics, 2023). The literature shows that immigrants in Italy encounter different forms and levels of discrimination (Di Napoli et al., 2017; Salvati et al., 2020). On the other hand, homophobia has been considered another significant concern in Italy as there are still instances of discrimination and prejudice based on sexual orientation although progress has been made in promoting sexual minority rights (Callahan & Loscocco, 2023). In the current study, therefore, we aim to explore the factors which influence Italian teachers' ethnic and homophobic prejudice and illuminate the complex dynamics that impact their attitudes, ultimately shaping their interactions with students and guiding the development of strategies to cultivate inclusive and ethically responsible educational environments in Italy. In the current study, we uniquely adopted a person-centered approach as this type of approach offers valuable insights that cannot be obtained through variable-centered approaches (Bergman & Trost, 2006). More specifically, through using a latent profile analysis, we were able to identify teacher prejudice subgroups and capture distinct characteristics present within our sample. Building upon the preceding discourse on research, the following hypotheses were scrutinized: It was anticipated that distinct teacher profiles characterized by ethnic and homophobic prejudices would emerge, each manifesting a distinct pattern of scores (H1). It was hypothesized that these teacher profiles, delineated by ethnic and homophobic prejudices, would serve as predictors for moral disengagement mechanisms (H2). Additionally, it was postulated that these teacher profiles, reflective of ethnic and homophobic prejudices, would also forecast levels of self-efficacy and social anxiety (H3).

Methods

Participants

Participants in this cross-sectional study were 552 Italian secondary school teachers (M_{age} = 46.15, SD=9.85, 76.4% females) from the central regions of Italy. Participants have been teaching for an average of 17.21 years (SD=9.98). Most teachers (43%) reported they had a left-wing political orientation, followed by those who voted for moderate-center parties (33.9%), and those who endorsed far-right (11.5%) and right-wing (8.8%) political attitudes.

Little's (1988) Missing Completely at Random (MCAR) test yielded a non-significant χ^2 (χ^2=7706.036, df=8322, p=1.000), indicating that data were missing completely at random. Therefore, the total sample of 552 participants was included in the analyses, and missing data were handled with the Full Information Maximum Likelihood (FIML) procedure available in M*plus* (Kelloway, 2015). The participants were selected through snowball sampling across the entire territory. Participants were recruited online via various social media platforms (e.g., emails, Facebook groups, blogs) and were asked to distribute the link to the online survey to colleagues who might also be interested in participating. Participation was voluntary and confidential, and active informed consent was obtained prior to participation.

The study is cross-sectional. The data were collected between November 2020 and January 2021. All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were compliant with the ethical standards approved by the Helsinki Declaration of 1964 (and subsequent amendments).

Measures

Prejudice Against Immigrants

The Subtle and Blatant Prejudice Scale (Arcuri & Boca, 1996) was used to assess teachers' attitudes toward ethnic minority individuals. The scale includes 20 items across two subscales, which participants had to rate on a 6-point Likert scale (from 1 "*absolutely disagree*" to 6 "*absolutely agree*"). The subtle prejudice subscale assesses attitudes related to the defense of traditional values, exaggeration of cultural differences, and denial of positive emotions toward ethnic minorities (10 items; sample item: "Foreign immigrants are different from Italians in the values that they teach their children"). The blatant prejudice subscale includes items related to the threat and rejection of immigrants (10 items; sample item: "Foreign immigrants have jobs that Italians should have"). Cronbach's Alphas were 0.81 and 0.83 for the subtle and blatant subscales, respectively.

Teacher Attitudes Towards the Representation of Homosexuality in the Media

Teachers' attitudes toward the representation of homosexuality in the media were assessed using the TAHFT scale (D'Urso & Symonds, 2021). This scale includes 14 items (e.g., "Homosexual issues should never be referred to, as they are morally

wrong") and participants were asked to rate their agreement on a 5-point Likert scale (from 1 "*strongly disagree*" to 5 "*strongly agree*"). Cronbach's Alphas was 0.94.

Moral Disengagement

To evaluate the extent to which teachers adopt moral disengagement mechanisms, the Italian version of the moral disengagement scale (Caprara et al., 1996) was used. This scale includes 32 items evaluating the eight moral disengagement mechanisms originally identified by Bandura (1999). Participants were asked to rate their agreement with each item on a 5-point Likert scale (from 1 "*completely disagree*" to 5 "*completely agree*"). In line with previous research, a total moral disengagement score was computed (Cronbach's alpha was 0.91) as an interpretation of each mechanism separately was problematic (see Preliminary Analyses below).

Teaching Self-Efficacy

Participants' self-efficacy in teaching was assessed using 12 items (e.g., "I know how to involve even the most resistant and difficult pupils in the various activities foreseen in my teaching") that align with Bandura's theory (1997, 2018). Participants answered each item on a 7-point Likert scale (from 1 "*completely disagree*" to 5 "*completely agree*"). Cronbach's Alpha was 0.94.

Social Anxiety

The Social Phobia Inventory (SPIN; Connor et al., 2000) includes 17 items (e.g., "I avoid doing things or speaking to people for fear of embarrassment) used to screen for and measure the severity of social anxiety or social phobia. Participants answered each item on a 5-point Likert scale (from 0 "*completely false*" to 4 "*completely true*"). Cronbach's Alpha was .94.

Results

Preliminary Analyses

Descriptive analyses were computed using IBM SPSS Version 23.0 for Windows. Means, standard deviations, and correlations among study variables are reported in Table 1. As a preliminary step, the factorial structure of the moral disengagement scale was examined to understand whether different mechanisms could be identified from the items of the scale.

To this end, a principal component Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) with direct oblimin rotation was conducted. First, the Kaiser– Meyer–Olkin measure of 0.91, which was above the recommended cutoff value of 0.60 (Beavers et al., 2013), and the significant Bartlett sphericity test (χ^2 (496)=5,813.23, $p<.001$) indicated the factorability of the current sample and the adequacy of the item correlation matrix, respectively. In line with prior studies (Petruccelli et al., 2017), a single-factor solu-

Table 1 Means, standard deviations, and correlations among study variables

	M	SD	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.
1. Sex										
2. Age	46.15	9.85	-0.08							
3. Years teaching	17.21	9.98	-0.07	0.88^{***}						
4. Subtle Prejudice	3.35	0.78	0.02	0.24^{***}	0.21^{***}					
5. Blatant Prejudice	2.62	0.84	0.05	0.18	0.14^{**}	0.66^{***}				
6. Attitudes toward Homosexuality	2.57	0.81	0.02	0.33^{***}	0.27^{***}	0.31^{***}	0.55^{***}			
7. Moral Disengagement	1.59	0.48	-0.02	0.02	0.04	0.27^{***}	0.07	0.05		
8. Teaching Self-Efficacy	5.89	0.85	-0.02	0.05	-0.02	-0.06	0.00	0.03	-0.08	
9. Social anxiety	16.21	14.05	0.14^{**}	-0.04	-0.08	-0.04	0.11^{**}	0.11^{**}	0.05	-0.22^{***}

Note. Sex: 0=Male, 1=Female

$^{*}p<.05$; $^{**}p<.01$; $^{***}p<.001$

tion emerged as the best-fitting one, explaining 28.59% of the variance and with factor loadings ranging from 0.42 to 0.80. Therefore, this single-factor solution was used in the subsequent models. All the remaining analyses were conducted in M*plus* 8.6 (Muthén & Muthén, 1998–2017), using the Maximum Likelihood Robust (MLR) estimator (Satorra & Bentler, 2001).

Latent Profile Analysis

The first goal of the current study was to examine whether teachers could be distinguished into different groups based on their levels of negative attitudes toward ethnicity and homosexuality. To achieve this objective, as well as to testing H1, a multivariate Latent Profile Analysis (LPA) was conducted utilizing teachers' scores on both subtle and blatant prejudice scales, along with their attitudes toward homosexuality in the media scale. Models with an increasing number of classes were tested. A combination of fit indices, theoretical and empirical meaningfulness, and parsimony criteria was used to determine the best solution. Regarding fit indices, adding one group should result in an improvement in model fit, as highlighted by a decrease in the Sample Size Adjusted Bayesian Information Criterium (SSA-BIC; Sclove, 1987), a significant value of the adjusted Lo–Mendell–Rubin Likelihood Ratio test (Lo et al., 2001), and an Entropy value equal to or higher than 0.75 (Reinecke, 2006). As regards theoretical and empirical meaningfulness, we expected a number of profiles that effectively differentiate teachers' prejudices against various groups. Additionally, besides considering comparison fit indices and theoretical expectations, the more parsimonious class solution should be retained. Finally, each subgroup identified by the LPA procedure should comprise at least 5% of the total sample for meaningful interpretation of findings. The three-class solution provided the best fit for the data (Table 2). Unstandardized parameter estimates of the LPA model are reported in Table 3. The first group, which included 25% of teachers, displayed low levels of both subtle and blatant prejudice against immigrants and negative attitudes toward homosexuality and it was labeled the *low prejudice group*. The second group, comprising 66% of teachers, reported moderate levels of prejudices, therefore it was labeled the *moderate prejudice group.* The last group, including the remaining 15% of participants, displayed high levels of negative attitudes toward migrants and homosexuality and it was labeled the *high prejudice group*. In all groups, subtle ethnic prejudice scores were the highest compared to both blatant prejudice against immigrants and negative attitudes toward homosexuality.

Regression Analysis

The second goal of the present study was to examine whether membership in one of the three groups of prejudice scores would be associated with teachers' use of moral disengagement mechanisms, teaching self-efficacy, and social anxiety. To this end, as well as to testing H2 and H3, a regression analysis was conducted in Mplus within a Structural Equation Model framework, utilizing latent factors to represent the outcome variables. Participants' gender, age, and years of teaching experience were also included as covariates. The regression model displayed a good fit: $\chi^2 = 4496.505$,

Table 2 Profile solutions resulting from the latent profile analysis

Solution	SSA-BIC	Entropy	Adj. LMR-LRT	Profile prevalence (%)				
				1	2	3	4	5
1-class solution	3978.903	-	-	100				
2-class solution	3712.931	0.627	267.910	62	38			
3-class solution	**3551.616**	**0.774**	**167.241*****	**60**	**25**	**15**		
4-class solution	3507.954	0.824	54.069***	59	23	17	1	
5-class solution	3449.527	0.844	68.273**	53	23	18	5	1

Note. SSA-BIC=Sample Size Adjusted Bayesian Information Criterium; Adj. LMR-LRT=Adjusted Lo-Mendell-Rubin Likelihood Ratio Test

*$p<.05$; **$p<.01$; ***$p<.001$

Table 3 Unstandardized parameter estimates for the LPA model

	Mean (SE)	Variance (SE)
Low prejudice group (25%)		
Subtle prejudice	2.581*** (0.095)	0.313*** (0.028)
Blatant prejudice	1.738*** (0.069)	0.209*** (0.017)
Attitudes toward homosexuality	1.889*** (0.074)	0.452*** (0.033)
Moderate prejudice group (60%)		
Subtle prejudice	3.439*** (0.050)	0.313*** (0.028)
Blatant prejudice	2.649*** (0.061)	0.209*** (0.017)
Attitudes toward homosexuality	2.683*** (0.062)	0.452*** (0.033)
High prejudice group (15%)		
Subtle prejudice	4.293*** (0.084)	0.313*** (0.028)
Blatant prejudice	3.999*** (0.114)	0.209*** (0.017)
Attitudes toward homosexuality	3.242*** (0.102)	0.452*** (0.033)

Note. *SE*=Standard Error

***$p<.001$

$p<.001$; CFI=0.814; TLI=0.804; SRMR=0.062; RMSEA [90% C.I.]=0.048 [0.046, 0.050]. Standardized results are reported in Table 4. As can be inferred, teachers in the high prejudice group reported a higher tendency to rely on moral disengagement mechanisms and higher levels of social anxiety. However, no association emerged between the prejudice group and teaching self-efficacy levels. The covariates were significantly associated with some, but not all, dependent variables. Specifically, older teachers reported higher levels of self-efficacy in doing their job, while female participants who had been teaching for longer periods of time reported respectively higher and lower levels of social anxiety.

Discussion

Teachers are crucial social agents for the development and adjustment of their students. On the one hand, they act as referents for the socialization and consolidation of students' own beliefs (Bandura, 1977; Bergamaschi et al., 2022). On the other hand, teachers' attitudes can influence their relationship with students of diverse back-

Table 4 Standardized results of the regression analyses

	β (SE)		
	Moral Disengagement	Teaching Self-Efficacy	Social Anxiety
Predictor			
Prejudice Group	0.153** (0.050)	−0.024 (0.044)	0.103* (0.041)
Covariates			
Sex	−0.034 (0.044)	−0.015 (0.045)	0.133** (0.041)
Age	−0.130 (0.097)	0.311* (0.129)	0.148 (0.090)
Years Teaching	0.150 (0.096)	−0.271 (0.152)	−0.237* (0.093)

Note. Prejudice group: 1 = Low prejudice, 2 = Moderate prejudice, 3 = High prejudice; Sex: 0 = Male, 1 = Female. $β$ = standardized regression coefficient; SE = Standard Error
*p < .05; **p < .01; ***p < .001

grounds (e.g., Göbel & Preusche, 2020) and the general climate of the classroom environment (e.g., Abacioglu et al., 2020), with important consequences for youth's psychosocial adjustment (for a meta-analysis, see Civitillo et al., 2023). In light of this, it is crucial to understand how teachers approach the ethnic and sexual diversity that characterizes both the educational context and society at large, and what the cognitive (i.e., moral disengagement), individual (i.e., self-efficacy), and interpersonal (i.e., social anxiety) implications of such attitudes are.

Different Targets, Similar Prejudice: A Person-Centered Approach to Identifying Teachers' Prejudice Profiles

The first goal of the current study was to examine whether teachers could be assigned to different groups based on their levels of ethnic and homophobic prejudices combined. Consistent with expectations, the variability in participants' prejudice levels could be traced back to different profiles. Specifically, teachers displayed either low, average, or high levels of prejudice consistently across different targets (i.e., ethnic minorities and homosexual people). Interestingly, the most represented profile was the one characterized by moderate levels of prejudice against both ethnic and sexual minorities, while only a quarter of teachers displayed low levels of prejudice against ethnic and sexual minorities. These findings are in line with previous research conducted among youth (Bobba et al., 2023) and adults (Meeusen et al., 2018). Overall, they highlight the need for interventions aimed at supporting teachers in learning to deal with diversity and implementing supportive and inclusive practices in the school context (Civitillo & Juang, 2020).

Findings from the current study also support the notion of generalized prejudice, capturing the extent to which individuals display negative attitudes against members of different outgroups (Akrami et al., 2011). However, prior research has mostly relied on variable-centered approaches to identifying a common latent generalized prejudice factor (Bergh & Akrami, 2016), while neglecting to account for the variability in attitudes and the ways in which individuals evaluate different targets depending on their shared and unique characteristics (e.g., Meeusen et al., 2017). Adopting a person-centered approach allows us to identify both the generality and specificity in how teachers approach different marginalized groups, such as ethnic

and sexual minorities (Meeusen et al., 2018). Relatedly, the current findings highlight that teachers can be broadly distinguished between those with low, average, and high prejudice, despite differences in their subtle and blatant ethnic and homophobic attitudes. Interestingly, subtle ethnic prejudice scores were the highest within each profile. This finding is especially alarming, as previous research has highlighted that even covert or implicit expressions of prejudice by teachers can contribute to the divide in adjustment outcomes between ethnic majority and minority students (e.g., Chin et al., 2020; Peterson et al., 2016). Therefore, it is crucial to tackle different forms of teachers' attitudes and understand their implications for youth's experiences within and outside the classroom context.

What Does Prejudice Imply? Unraveling the Cognitive, Individual, and Interpersonal Consequences of Teachers' Prejudice

The second goal of the current study was to examine the cognitive (i.e., moral disengagement), individual (i.e., self-efficacy), and interpersonal (i.e., social anxiety) consequences of different prejudice profiles for teachers' adjustment and functioning. We found only partial support for our hypothesis. Specifically, teachers' prejudice profiles were significantly associated only with their moral disengagement and social anxiety but not with their self-efficacy in teaching.

In line with prior research (e.g., D'Urso & Symonds, 2021; Faulkner & Bliuc, 2016), teachers characterized by higher levels of prejudice against both ethnic and sexual minorities appeared to rely more often on moral disengagement cognitive strategies. Teachers might adopt these mechanisms as a way to distance themselves from attitudes that deviate from societal moral standards (Maftei & Holman, 2022). However, teachers' cognitive strategies have been found to influence their tendency to identify and intervene against bullying (e.g., van Gils et al., 2023) and peer harassment incidents targeting ethnic and religious minorities (Strohmeier & Gradinger, 2021), highlighting the extended consequences of prejudice for students. Furthermore, prejudiced teachers reported higher levels of social anxiety. This finding highlights the detrimental consequences of holding prejudice also for individual (e.g., life satisfaction; e.g., Bazán-Monasterio et al., 2021) and interpersonal (e.g., social support; e.g., Dinh et al., 2014) adjustment. This is especially relevant for teachers, as their levels of social anxiety have been previously linked to job burnout (Vassilopoulos, 2012).

Interestingly, and contrary to prior research on attitudes toward disability (Crowson & Brandes, 2014), membership in different prejudice profiles was not associated with teachers' self-efficacy in accomplishing educational goals and tasks. This finding could be explained in relation to the characteristics of the teaching environment in which our participants were immersed. Although the Italian educational system is becoming increasingly diverse, ethnic minority students represent 10.3% of the overall student population in the country with great variability (i.e., this percentage ranges from 3 to 17.1%) across different regions (Ministero della Pubblica Istruzione, 2022). Therefore, some teachers might work in still highly homogeneous classrooms, where they can accomplish educational activities regardless of their own attitudes and beliefs.

Last, the current findings highlight the role of teachers' demographics in influencing their levels of self-efficacy and social anxiety (but not moral disengagement). Specifically, older teachers, but not those who were in service for longer, were found to report higher self-efficacy in fulfilling their teaching tasks. This finding is in line with only a few studies (Ekins et al., 2016; Subban et al., 2021) documenting the role of teachers' age in influencing their sense of efficacy in completing educational tasks (for a review, see Wray et al., 2022). Additionally, social anxiety was found to be higher among female teachers, in line with available evidence on gender differences for youth's (e.g., Nelemans et al., 2016; Ranta et al., 2007) and adults' (e.g., Asher & Aderka, 2018) psychosocial adjustment.

Strengths, Limitations, and Suggestions for Future Research

The current study examined general and unique variability in teachers' ethnic and homophobic prejudice and how their tendency to endorse negative attitudes toward different minority groups could influence their cognitive, individual, and interpersonal adjustment. Therefore, by adopting a person-centred approach, this study provides novel insight into how teachers' attitudes can shape their accomplishment of educational tasks within the school environment. Nevertheless, the present findings should be read in light of some limitations.

First of all, this study relied on a cross-sectional design. Therefore, it does not warrant conclusions in terms of causality. Future research should strive to assess individuals' attitudes and adjustments longitudinally to understand the chain of effects and possibly reciprocal associations. Second, although teachers' gender was controlled for in the current analyses, the sample of participants included mostly females. This might limit the generalizability of current findings and more research is needed to understand whether similar prejudice profiles and associations with individual outcomes could be replicated in a gender-balanced group of educators. Third, limited information was available on the characteristics of the classroom contexts in which teachers worked. Nevertheless, the percentage of ethnic minority students in the classroom and the type of curriculum taught by participants could provide a more nuanced understanding of the interplay between teachers' prejudice profiles and self-efficacy in accomplishing their jobs. Last, examining the consequences of teachers' prejudicial attitudes on students' adjustment was outside the scope of the current study. Nevertheless, understanding these associations is crucial to identifying the needs of educators and pupils and implementing interventions aimed at supporting a positive and inclusive learning environment for all youth, regardless of them being part of minoritized groups.

Data Data can be requested from the corresponding author, who is also the study coordinator.

Declarations

Conflict of Interest The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

Ethical Approval All procedures performed in studies involving human participants followed the ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki Declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.

Informed Consent Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

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