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Cross-ethnic friendships: Are they really rare? Evidence from secondary schools around London



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ABSTRACT

This study examined current cross-ethnic friendship patterns in secondary schools around London, UK, and the effects of ethnic group and ethnic diversity on cross-ethnic friendship selection and quality. Questionnaires including self-report ethnic group definitions and measures of same-/cross-ethnic friendship numbers, along with the quality of 3 best cross-ethnic friends, were distributed to 684 Year 7 (aged 11) British students (256 White European, 63 Middle Easterner, 118 Black, 247 South Asian) recruited from 9 multi-ethnic secondary schools (37 classrooms) in Greater London. In contrast to most previous research which suggested the relative rarity of cross-ethnic friendships, findings showed that cross-ethnic friendships were in fact frequent and of high quality, outnumbering same-ethnic friendships for all ethnic groups. After controlling for gender, classroom gender composition, SES, percentage of available same-ethnic peers, ethnic identity and perceived ethnic discrimination, classroom ethnic diversity still had a marginally positive effect on cross-ethnic friendship selection, but had no effect on cross-ethnic friendship quality. White British children reported higher cross-ethnic friendship selection and lower cross-ethnic friendship quality compared to other ethnic groups, but this depended on classroom ethnic diversity. Implications of the findings are discussed in the light of intergroup contact and friendship formation theories. We conclude that research on cross-ethnic friendships is crucial in providing insights into how intergroup relationships are formed during early adolescence in modern multiethnic settings like London secondary schools.

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1. Introduction

Over the last decade, the UK has witnessed a considerable increase in ethnic minority populations residing in inner cities. London is today one of the most ethnically diverse cities in the UK and the world (Sturgis, Brunton-Smith, Khua, & Jackson, 2011), representing a unique and dynamic social environment for its residents coming from various cultural, ethnic and religious backgrounds. Although recent demographic trends have illustrated this particular context where the population of different ethnic minority groups has been increasing sharply, especially in educational settings (Hamnett, 2012; Wohland,

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Rees, Norman, Boden, & Jasinska, 2010), there is little recent empirical data examining how such multiethnic contexts might affect cross-ethnic friendships among secondary school year children.

Previous research on children's cross-ethnic friendships mainly originates from the intergroup contact literature, which has documented the robust effect of cross-ethnic friendships in promoting positive intergroup attitudes (e.g., Aboud, Mendelson, & Purdy, 2003; Feddes, Noack, & Rutland, 2009) and from the developmental psychology literature, which has emphasized the positive outcomes of cross-ethnic friendships in childhood (e.g., Kawabata & Crick, 2008, 2011a; Lease & Blake, 2005). Cross-ethnic friendships increase intimate knowledge, empathy and self-disclosure among members of different groups (Turner, Hewstone, & Voci, 2007), in addition to providing the typical benefits of friendships such as increasing social competence and skills, adjustment and satisfaction in the school environment (e.g., Hunter & Elias, 1999; Lease & Blake, 2005).

Despite their social and developmental benefits, cross-ethnic friendships tend to be relatively rare and low in quality. Earlier studies after desegregation projects in the US (Hallinan & Smith, 1985; Hallinan & Williams, 1989) and more recent studies in the US (Bellmore, Nishina, Witkov, Graham, & Juvonen, 2007; Graham & Cohen, 1997; Kao & Joyner, 2004), Canada (Schneider, Udvari, & Dixon, 2007) and Europe (Verkuyten, 2001) suggest that cross-ethnic friendships are uncommon and low in quality. Undoubtedly, the social context, in particular the ethnic composition of schools and classrooms, and the ethnic status of children (majority vs. minority), play a significant role in how peer relationships are formed during childhood (Graham, Taylor, & Ho, 2009; Kawabata & Crick, 2008). Both intergroup contact and friendship theories provide explanations about how ethnic composition may affect the development of cross-ethnic friendships across different ethnic groups. However, no clear agreement has been reached about the effects of ethnic diversity and ethnic group on cross-ethnic friendships in ethnically diverse settings.

The current work investigated whether cross-ethnic friendships in a specific British context, multi-ethnic secondary schools in London, are necessarily as rare and low in quality as previous studies in various contexts have demonstrated. We further explored whether classroom ethnic diversity and ethnic group are associated with the selection and the quality of cross-ethnic friendships, after controlling for the percentage of available same-ethnic peers in classroom, gender, classroom gender composition, socio-economic status (SES), perceived ethnic discrimination and ethnic identity.

1.1. *Cross-ethnic friendships in social context: theoretical and empirical work*

1.1.1. *Cross-ethnic friendships and ethnic diversity*

Cross-ethnic friendships in multiethnic contexts have been primarily investigated following the basic tenets of intergroup contact theory (Allport, 1954) which assumed that contact between members of different groups would improve positive intergroup relations. Schools in particular have been suggested as convenient social settings for the development of intergroup contact by ensuring equal status and common goals (Pettigrew, 1998; Schofield, 1991). With the reformulation of the contact theory, more attention has been drawn to cross-ethnic friendships, which promote positive intergroup relations by providing long-term, mutual, and affective relationships that include self-disclosure, empathy and trust (Pettigrew, 1998; Turner et al., 2007). Empirical research has supported this assumption, and cross-ethnic friendships have consistently been found to improve positive outgroup attitudes among children and adolescents (e.g., Aboud et al., 2003; Feddes et al., 2009; Levin, Van Laar, & Sidanius, 2003; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006).

Supporting intergroup contact theory, propinquity, i.e., physical proximity between different groups, has been suggested to increase intergroup contact and friendships in earlier theories of friendship formation (Blau, 1974, 1977; Homans, 1950). A great deal of previous empirical work found a direct positive link between the number of potential cross-ethnic friends in schools or classrooms and the frequency of cross-ethnic friendships (Damico & Sparks, 1986; Hallinan & Teixeira, 1987; Howes & Wu, 1990; Quillian & Campbell, 2003). Yet, opportunities for cross-ethnic friendships alone may not be sufficient for the actual development of cross-ethnic friendships (Mouw & Entwisle, 2006; Sigelman, Bledsoe, Welch, & Combs, 1996). It has been suggested that homophily, the tendency to choose friends with similar characteristics, also affects friendship formation. Research shows that racial/ethnic homophily is one of the strongest divides that influence friendships (Kandel, 1978; McPherson, Smith-Lovin, & Cook, 2001). Therefore, when people have opportunities to form relationships with their own ethnic group, they are inclined to do so (Moody, 2001).

Empirically, Joyner and Kao (2000) found that the likelihood of interracial friendships increases as the proportion of available same-race peers decreases. Moody (2001), using the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health in the US, concluded that friendship segregation is at the highest level in moderately heterogeneous schools, but decreased significantly with extreme ethnic heterogeneity. The author explained this nonlinear relationship by highlighting the effect of racial categorization which becomes salient in moderately heterogeneous environments. Moody also based his findings on the ethnic competition theory (Blalock, 1967; Scheepers, Gijssberts, & Coenders, 2002) and indicated that in moderately heterogeneous settings, ethnic majorities may feel threatened by high numbers of ethnic minorities. In a study in the Netherlands, Vervoort, Scholte, and Scheepers (2011) found that White participants had more negative outgroup attitudes and more positive ingroup attitudes when there were higher numbers of ethnic minorities in the classroom. Therefore, racial/ethnic salience may increase in such environments, consequently restricting the formation of cross-ethnic friendships.

Quillian and Campbell (2003) argued that in ethnically diverse environments, propinquity and homophily operate in opposite ways; homophily appears to increase the number of same-ethnic friendships, while propinquity and opportunity for cross-ethnic contact may enhance the formation of cross-ethnic friendships. Similarly, Wilson and Rodkin (2012) suggested

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