Preadolescents' understanding and reasoning about asylum seeker peers and friendships

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Available online 2 September 2005

Abstract

The present study examined ethnically Dutch preadolescents' understanding and reasoning about asylum seeker peers and friendships. The description of an asylum seeker was compared with that of a Moroccan and a Dutch peer. The findings suggest that asylum seekers were described more negatively than peers from the other two groups. Additionally, we examined the willingness and reasons for wanting or not wanting to be friends with an asylum seeker and a Moroccan peer. It was found that asylum seekers were more often rejected than Moroccans. The negative description and rejection of asylum seekers were strongest among participants living close to a center for asylum seekers. The reasoning about friendship acceptance or rejection was examined in terms of individual reasons as well as peer group interactions. It is shown that fact construction or empirical 'grounding' plays an important role in early adolescents' reasoning about friendship exclusion.
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Keywords: Preadolescents; Asylum seekers; Friendship; Acceptance; Rejection; Intergroup contact; Peer exclusion; Outgroup membership

1. Introduction

The purpose of the present study was to examine preadolescents' understanding and reasoning about asylum seeker peers and friendships, and to explore possible situational differences related to visible contacts with asylum seekers. Almost nothing is known about children's understanding of asylum

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seekers and little is known about how children reason about possible friendships based on group membership.

As a theoretical framework, we used social representation theory, developed in European social psychology (Moscovici, 1984). Concepts such as 'situated cognition', 'socially shared knowledge', and 'social representation' have been proposed as alternatives or additions to Piaget's constructive work on intellectual development (see Emler & Ohana, 1993; Resnick, Levine & Teasly, 1991). In these approaches, cognition is seen as embedded in historical, cultural and sociorelational contexts. Cognitions are not purely individual constructions but are greatly influenced by the kinds of beliefs in the child's environment. The construction of meaning is seen as a social process, and meanings as social products. Common understandings are being created and recreated through interaction and communication between individuals and groups.

Social representation theory is more like a heuristic framework than a system of interrelated propositions with clear hypotheses that can be tested empirically. Empirical investigations have used social representation theory for studying the development of knowledge (e.g., Emler & Dickinson, 1985; Emler, Ohana & Moscovici, 1987; Lloyd, 1987; Verkuyten, Kinket & van der Wielen, 1997). The theory focuses on everyday understandings and the content of knowledge. This is in accordance with our goal of investigating early adolescents' understanding of asylum seeker peers rather than cognitive processes. Additionally, we focused on the reasoning of the participants, by investigating the content of their explanations for wanting or not wanting to be friends with an asylum seeker peer. These explanations shed light on the socially accepted principles used to explain behavior and, hence, on the commonplaces that function as justifications. Furthermore, because social representation theory emphasizes the importance of interaction for creating understandings, we discuss two examples of our focus-group study on the ways that preadolescents discuss contacts with asylum seeker peers.

The study was conducted in the Netherlands and is part of a research project on ethnic, racial and cultural group relations among preadolescents from the Dutch majority group and various categories of minorities (see Verkuyten, 2004a, 2005a, for reviews). The focus of the present study was on ethnically Dutch preadolescents' descriptions of a 'typical' asylum seeker peer and their reasoning for wanting or not wanting to be friends with such a peer. For comparison purposes, the participants were also asked to describe a 'typical' Moroccan and Dutch peer. Additionally, they were asked to indicate whether and why they wanted to be friends with a Moroccan peer. Together with Turks, Moroccans are the 'established' ethnic minority group that is the least accepted in the Netherlands (Hagendoorn, 1995; Verkuyten & Kinket, 2000). Furthermore, the descriptions and reasoning of preadolescents living close to an asylum seeker center were compared with those of participants having no direct contacts with asylum seekers.

In the following sections, we first elaborate on the category of asylum seekers and the role of intergroup contact. Subsequently, children's reasoning about group-based exclusion and friendships is discussed.

1.1. Understanding asylum seekers

While there are many studies that have examined the development of ethnic and racial group stereotypes, prejudice and discrimination (see Aboud & Amato, 2001, for a review), these studies have been predominantly concerned with children's views and attitudes towards 'established' minority groups that, racially or culturally, are considered relatively homogeneous and that have a long established