



## In-group and out-group attitudes of Muslim children

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### ABSTRACT

Although negative stereotypes towards Muslims escalated after the events of September 11th, little is known about how Muslim children think about their own group members. Therefore, the current study examined Muslim children's attitudes towards Muslims and non-Muslims. Sixty-five 5- to 8-year-old Muslim children, enrolled in an Islamic school, engaged in two tasks. In the attribution task, children rated pictures of Muslims and non-Muslims on an adjective bipolar scale containing positive and negative adjectives. In the preference task, children were asked who they preferred as a neighbor, teacher, and friend. Children made more positive attributions for Muslims than non-Muslims, with young children providing more negative evaluations of non-Muslims than older children. Children also preferred Muslims as potential teachers, neighbors, and friends. Implications of Muslim children's attitudes towards in-group and out-group members are discussed.

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### Introduction

In the aftermath of September 11th, negative stereotypes towards Muslim individuals escalated across the nation (Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR), 2006). Many Americans held lingering resentment and reservations towards Muslim-Americans, which was reinforced by what millions of Americans saw on television (Hendricks, Ortiz, Sugie, & Miller, 2007; Panagopoulos, 2006; Shaheen, 2003). Much of the media portrayed images of Muslims as uncivilized, brutal, heartless, religious fanatics who only care for wealth and power (Shaheen, 2003). In 2006, CAIR found that approximately 1 in 4 Americans believe that Islam is a religion of hatred and violence. In addition, when asked about the first thought that comes to mind when hearing the word 'Muslim,' 26% of Americans reported words such as violence, hatred, terrorists, war, guns, and rag-heads (CAIR, 2006). Moreover, objects or symbols related to the word 'Muslim,' such as the hijab (i.e., female head covering) and emblematic structures, were frequently identified to initiate hate victimization (Hendricks et al., 2007).

As a result, approximately 83% of Muslim individuals reported an increase in implicit racism and discrimination following September 11th, with "hearing or being told an offensive joke" as the most commonly endorsed experience (Sheridan, 2006). Such discrimination could pose a great threat to young Muslim-Americans' identity development. Indeed, members of minority groups often strive to find an appropriate balance between identifying with their country (or

their parents' country) of origin and their host country (Deaux, 2000). Moreover, balancing one's identity becomes especially difficult when an individual living in a host country is targeted for being a member of an out-group. In such cases, the individual must decide whether to accept the host country's practices at the cost of isolating his or her own cultural practices or to integrate both identities without hurting either one. Many young Muslim-Americans face difficulties with their Muslim identities because of their out-group membership and unfair victimization (Sirin & Fine, 2007; Sirin, Bikmen, Mir, Fine, Zaal, & Katsiaficas, 2008; Zaal, Salah, & Fine, 2007). In fact, although some integrate their Muslim and American identities, about 40% of Muslim-Americans ages 18 to 25 years feel that their identities are separate or in conflict (Sirin et al., 2008). Therefore, it is evident that the negative attributions and stereotypes our broader society holds towards Muslims may impact the well-being of Muslim adults. However, how much do the effects of negative stereotypes extend into childhood?

Although little research has examined the effects of negative stereotypes on Muslim children, there is a significant body of research examining its effects on other minority groups that, like Muslim-Americans, are also subjected to negative attributions and stereotypes. More specifically, researchers have examined how the negative stereotypes can affect the types of attributions children make towards members of stigmatized groups (Augoustinos & Rosewarne, 2001; Bigler & Liben, 1993; Brylinsky & Moore, 1994; Musher-Eizenman, Holub, Miller, Goldstein, & Edwards-Leeper, 2004). For example, one study found that children ages 4 to 9 years attributed more negative traits to African-Americans, whereas they attributed more positive traits Caucasian-Americans (Augoustinos & Rosewarne, 2001; Bigler & Liben, 1993). Likewise, research on stereotypes towards overweight individuals has found that children around the age of 5 endorse more negative traits for

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overweight individuals and more positive traits for thin or average-weight individuals (Brylinsky & Moore, 1994; Musher-Eizenman et al., 2004).

In addition to the negative attributions children may make towards stereotyped groups, children may also make choices that are consistent with their stereotyped beliefs (Averhart & Bigler, 1997; Musher-Eizenman et al., 2004). For example, in one study children not only made negative attributions towards overweight individuals, they also indicated that they would rarely prefer to be friends with overweight individuals when contrasted against thin and average-weight individuals (Musher-Eizenman et al., 2004). Similarly, African-American children ages 5 to 7 years chose a lighter-complexioned individual over a darker-complexioned individual when asked whom they would prefer as a potential teacher, neighbor, and friend (Averhart & Bigler, 1997). Stereotypes have also been found to influence behaviors other than selecting friends, like deciding who to trust: for instance, sixth-graders with the highest levels of prejudice against African-Americans showed lower levels of trust towards African-American speakers over Caucasian speakers, even when the African-American speakers were much more credible (Aronson & Golden, 1962).

Such negative attitudes towards stereotyped groups become especially problematic given that children of the stigmatized groups have been shown to make stereotype-consistent attributions towards their own group members and may even reject association with their own group (Averhart & Bigler, 1997; Clark & Clark, 1950; Dunham, Baron, & Banaji, 2007; Williams & Davidson, 2009). Indeed, the classic Clark experiment asked African-American children to color a drawing of a boy or girl “the color you like to be,” and found that only 48% of the participants preferred the color brown, whereas a significant 52% rejected the color brown (Clark & Clark, 1950). Despite some severe methodological weaknesses in this particular study, recent research yields similar findings (Averhart & Bigler, 1997; Williams & Davidson, 2009). For instance, African-American children ages 5 to 10 years assigned more negative traits to “only black people,” and provided fewer positive trait labels to pictures of African-American children than Caucasian-American children (Averhart & Bigler, 1997; Williams & Davidson, 2009). These explicit stereotypes exist towards skin tone as well: African-American children and college students sometimes view individuals with darker skin more negatively than those with lighter skin (Hall, 1992; Maddox & Gray, 2002; Williams & Davidson, 2009). Of note, some research has also found that, although some stigmatized individuals report *positive* attitudes towards their own in-group members when explicit measures are used, those same individuals show a preference for the out-group when implicit measures are used (Jost, Banaji, & Nosek, 2004; Nosek, Banaji, & Greenwald, 2002).

The above research is evidence that stereotypes against groups exist even in childhood, and that members of stigmatized groups may hold negative attitudes towards their own group members. Much less is known about the stereotypes that are held against Muslim children and how those stereotypes may influence beliefs and behavior. However, there is evidence that the attitudes children hold about Muslims may also be negative. For example, in one study, Israeli children and adults perceived Arabs more negatively than Jews in that they were more likely to endorse that Arabs were dirty, lazy, unintelligent, violent, and vengeful (Bar-Tal & Teichman, 2005). Similar attitudes were also found among Israeli and Palestinian children such that both groups of children held negative attitudes about the other (Brennick, Lee-Kim, Killen, Fox, Raviv, & Leavitt, 2007). Given the negative effects stereotypes can have on a stigmatized group, and given that negative stereotypes towards Muslims exist, it is important to understand how Muslim individuals think about themselves and others, particularly within the context of the escalating stereotypes that have been documented in our culture today.

The purpose of the present investigation, then, was to investigate whether Muslim children hold attitudes that are consistent with the stereotypes towards members of their own group. Previous research demonstrates that children as young as age 5 are capable of recognizing

that stereotypes exist (Augoustinos & Rosewarne, 2001; Bigler & Liben, 1993; Brown & Bigler, 2005; McKown & Weinstein, 2003). In fact, children from stigmatized groups (i.e., African-American and Latin-American) are more likely than children from non-stigmatized groups to be aware of broadly held ethnic stereotypes (McKown & Weinstein, 2003). Awareness of these stereotypes increases with age, tending to be fully developed by the age of 10 (McKown & Weinstein, 2003). Therefore, in order to examine the developmental differences among Muslim children's group attitudes, in the current study, we focused on children between the ages of 5 and 8 years.

Tasks used by Averhart and Bigler (1997) examining stereotypes towards African-Americans were adopted in the current study to examine Muslim children's attitudes towards Muslim and non-Muslim individuals. Muslim children were asked to rate a pair of pictures (i.e., Muslim and non-Muslim adults) on a 7-point scale with a positive and negative adjective on each end. This helped provide insight into children's attitudes towards members of each group. Children's preferences were also measured by asking them which individual (i.e., Muslim or non-Muslim) they preferred as a neighbor, teacher, and friend.

The experimenters' group membership was also varied between subjects to examine how group membership may impact children's responses. Previous research has found that children's responses to preference and attitude questions can sometimes be affected by the experimenter's race. For instance, in one study, children were more likely to endorse preferences that were consistent rather than inconsistent with the experimenter's race (Sattler, 1970). Therefore, for this study, two female experimenters (Muslim and non-Muslim) were involved in testing to examine potential experimenter-bias effects (i.e., if children's responses were affected by experimenter).

Several predictions were made for this study. First, we expected that Muslim children would be more likely to attribute stereotypical adjectives to members of their own group given the negative attitudes in the broader American culture towards Muslim individuals. Specifically, we anticipated that Muslim children would provide more negative ratings for members of their own group and more positive ratings for members outside of their group. Second, we expected that Muslim children would be more likely to prefer non-Muslim individuals, or out-group members, as potential teachers, neighbors, and friends. Third, we expected developmental differences such that younger children would be more extreme in their preferences and negative attitudes than older children. This prediction was consistent with previous research finding that older children demonstrate fewer prejudices towards the out-group than younger children (Aboud, 1988). Finally, we also expected that if children were influenced by the experimenter's group membership, then children would provide more positive attitudes towards Muslim individuals when tested by a Muslim experimenter and more positive attitudes towards non-Muslim individuals when tested by a non-Muslim experimenter. This prediction is consistent with previous research examining experimenter-bias effects (Sattler, 1970).

## Methods

### Participants

Participants were 65 Muslim children ages 5 to 8 years, which included thirty five 5- and 6-year-olds ( $M = 5.96, SD = .55$ ; 13 males, 22 females) and thirty 7- and 8-year-olds ( $M = 8.25, SD = .69$ ; 18 males, 12 females). Participants were enrolled in kindergarten through third grade in an Islamic school, which predominantly consists of Arab- and South Asian-American students from families of middle to high socioeconomic status. The majority of the staff and faculty at the school are Muslims with the exception of a few non-Muslim teachers.

Parent letters and consent forms inviting parents with children attending the school to participate in the research project were sent

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