Evaluation of an intervention using cross-race friend storybooks to reduce prejudice among majority race young children

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ABSTRACT

We tested a cross-race friendship picture book intervention under two conditions that aimed to facilitate the reduction of racial prejudice that children of two age groups ascribe to adults reading the book (communicators) and their own prejudice. White majority children, 113 kindergarteners (M = 5.97 years) and 103 second graders (M = 7.93 years) were randomly assigned to an ingroup (White) or outgroup (Black) communicator and skill training. They were pretested on racial attitudes they ascribed to their photographed communicator and then trained in reconciliation or classification. They heard four cross-race friend stories; then were retested on communicator attitudes, own attitudes and cognitive elaboration. Results indicated only second graders, and those able to reconcile differences in perspectives, predicted on the basis of their photo alone that outgroup communicators would hold positive attitudes toward Blacks. After communicators read the stories and explicitly stated their antibias attitude, reports changed among second graders who now rated both communicators as holding more positive Black attitudes. Second graders also held more positive Black attitudes themselves. Kindergarteners consistently assumed both ingroup and outgroup communicators were pro-White. Children elaborated more about the Black story characters when read to by an outgroup (Black) communicator. In conclusion, cross-race friend storybooks are a promising way to expose children to other racial groups and to antibias attitudes, under certain conditions.

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1. Introduction

Mixed outcomes have been found with past home and school interventions to reduce racial/ethnic prejudice in children under 8 years of age, underscoring the need to examine conditions that enhance their effectiveness. Two common strategies, namely direct contact with children from other racial groups and media and/or instruction that tell and show children about other racial groups, were similarly effective with majority race (mainly White) children in that two-thirds of the systematically reviewed studies yielded positive attitude change (Aboud et al., 2012). Because majority children in North America and elsewhere have few opportunities for direct contact with minority children (Derman-Sparks & Ramsey, 2011), indirect contact via picture storybooks, called media-mediated contact, is coming under closer scrutiny. Interventions to prevent and reduce prejudice among children are central

to efforts to promote a more equal and inclusive society, reduce bullying and violence, and set norms of respect for diversity.

Media-mediated contact was operationalized here by showing and reading to White children picture storybooks about the exciting adventures of a White child with a Black friend (hereafter called cross-race friend storybooks or simply storybooks). It combines some features of direct contact with an outgroup friend with features of media interventions. Direct contact occurs naturally in integrated schools when children make friends with peers, and it has also been studied experimentally by putting children from different racial groups together to work or play. Media interventions expose children to picture storybooks, television or video depicting children of different racial groups playing together (Cameron, Rutland, Brown, & Douch, 2006), though sometimes a respectful, antibias message is stated explicitly (Verkuyten & De Wolf, 2007). Several controlled evaluations of Sesame Street programs (e.g. Cole et al., 2003; Fluent Public Opinion, 2008) and others with short exposures to video and/or stories (Kowalski, 1998; Lichter, Johnson, & Ryan, 1973; Persson & Musher-Eisenman, 2003; Verkuyten & De Wolf, 2007; Wham, Barnhart, & Cook, 1996) found mixed attitudinal outcomes for children over 6 years, and little impact on younger ones.

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Still, the storybook interventions look promising for young children, in particular if we can identify reasons for their mixed effectiveness and overcome the challenges with specific education-related inputs. One possible reason for these mixed results is that children are distorting the antibias message of the stories, specifically by ascribing biased attitudes to the adult reading the story. Only a few studies asked children to report on the communicating adults' attitudes (Johnson & Aboud, 2013; Pahlke, Bigler, & Suizzo, 2012; Verkuyten & De Wolf, 2007; Vittrup & Holden, 2010) and there were obvious gaps in the accuracy of their ascriptions. These gaps raise concerns about whether children are receiving the intended antibias message. Three variables that may improve the accuracy of these ascriptions are the child's age, reconciliation skills, and the race of the communicator (the adult reading the story). Thus, the purpose of the present study was to determine if age, reconciliation, and the race of the communicator could improve the accuracy with which children assess the unbiased attitudes of a communicator.

We used the basic cross-race friend storybook intervention with White children from kindergarten and second grade, the age group where findings have yielded the most mixed results. Even in comparison with same-race storybooks, those exposed to cross-race stories showed few benefits (e.g. Katz & Zalk, 1978; Lichter et al., 1973). The second variable, reconciliation skills, was expected to

enhance the impact of the stories if children could acknowledge the respectful antibias attitude of the adult reading the stories. The third variable, namely whether the communicator's race was ingroup White or outgroup Black, was expected to influence the attitudes children ascribed to the communicator. Here we use the term "ingroup" to refer to the participants' White racial group and "outgroup" to refer specifically to brown-skinned people or Blacks. Bias refers to attitudes or communicated messages that White targets are good and/or Black targets are bad; whereas antibias refers to attitudes or communicated messages that Black targets are good (White targets might be described as good or neutral).

By combining a popular school activity, namely teacher-led story reading, with variations on the reading adult's race, and variations in children's reconciliation skills, we build on a conceptual framework (Bigler & Liben, 2006) that proposes age-related cognitive filters as the source of distortion leading to stereotype maintenance (see Fig. 1). Bigler and Liben identify variables relevant to distorted processing of stereotype-inconsistent information, and we add parallel variables relevant to distortion of attitudinal messages.

The specific relevance of our selected variables is explained by more micro-level theories of attitude change and of how children ascribe attitudes to others. One is communication theory which explains change following exposure to antibias messages
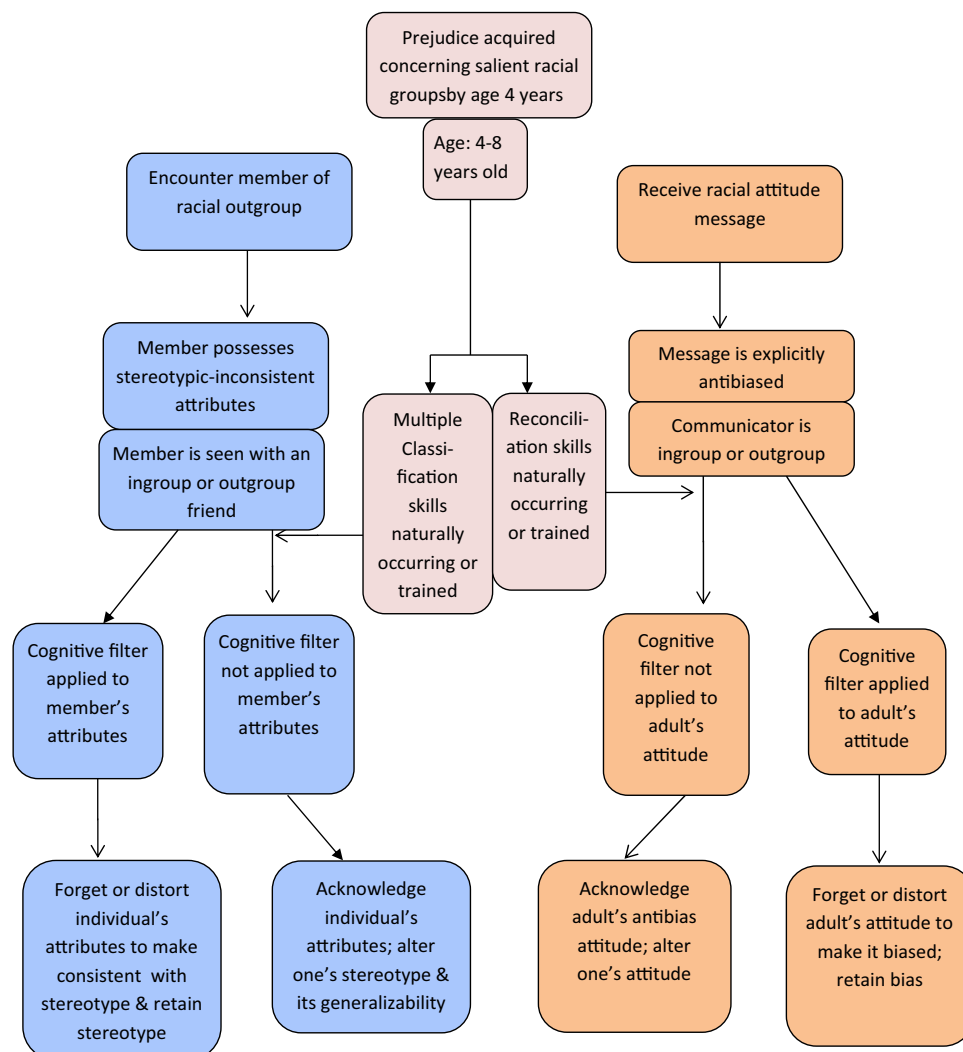
Fig. 1. Conceptual framework of processes involved in the maintenance or modification of racial prejudice (extended from Bigler & Liben's, 2006, encounters with outgroup members, to include also receipt of antibias messages from Aboud, 2005).