



Liking and disliking minority-group classmates: Explaining the mixed findings for the influence of ethnic classroom composition on interethnic attitudes



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ABSTRACT

Research on the influence of the number of ethnic minority group classmates on majority group students' interethnic attitudes produced conflicting results. With data from 728 early adolescents, we found that the effect of the ethnic class composition depends on two opposing student-level mechanisms. First, majority group students who liked a larger number of minority group classmates developed more positive attitudes toward minority groups. Second, students who disliked a larger number of outgroup classmates developed more negative outgroup attitudes. In our sample, these two effects neutralized each other because the sample consisted of about the same number of students that liked most of their outgroup classmates and students that disliked most outgroup classmates. Results were consistent in cross-sectional and longitudinal analyses. These results support a new interpretation of the mixed findings in past research, suggesting that past studies may have differed in the number of students who liked and disliked outgroup classmates.

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1. Introduction

Building on Allport's (1954) contact hypothesis, numerous studies predicted that mixing students of different ethnicities in schools would improve students' attitudes toward other ethnic groups (e.g., Bakker et al., 2007; Ellison and Powers, 1994; Moody, 2001; Vervoort et al., 2011). Yet, empirical tests of this prediction have produced mixed results (Thijs and Verkuyten, 2014). Some studies have found that the number of members of other ethnic groups a student encountered at school predicted positive attitudes of the student toward these groups during childhood, and also later in life (Ellison and Powers, 1994; Patchen, 1982; Van Geel and Vedder, 2011; Wagner et al., 2003; Wood and Sonleitner, 1996). However, others provided no support for a relationship between school or classroom composition and outgroup attitudes (Bakker et al., 2007; Wagner et al., 1989). Furthermore, recent research even found a negative relationship between the number of outgroup classmates and students' attitudes toward the ethnic groups of these classmates (Vervoort et al., 2011).

We propose that earlier research produced these mixed findings because it was often assumed that having outgroup classmates automatically results in positive intergroup contact. However, interaction with outgroup members can also be

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perceived as unpleasant (Pettigrew and Tropp, 2006), which leads to negative rather than positive outgroup attitudes (Barlow et al., 2012; Pettigrew et al., 2011).

To improve, the present study focuses on the effect of liking and disliking of individual outgroup classmates on attitudes toward the outgroup as a whole. We build on research on stereotype change, which has shown that people adjust their attitudes toward an outgroup to what they think about individual members of that group (Columb and Plant, 2011; Garcia-Marques and Mackie, 1999; Kunda and Oleson, 1997). Instead of measuring positive and negative contact experiences, this approach acknowledges that students in mixed school classes may not interact frequently and may, thus, often not be able to report actual contact (Turner et al., 2007). This is particularly problematic for negative contact experiences, because students may avoid actual interaction with negatively perceived others and thus not report negative contact. However, even without such interactions, students may still like or dislike their outgroup classmates (Dijkstra et al., 2010, 2007), which has been shown to be generalized toward their attitudes toward the outgroup as a whole (Stark et al., 2013).

The notion that interpersonal liking and disliking relationships are generalized to outgroup attitudes offers a new interpretation of the mixed findings of previous research on the effects of classroom composition. Studies that found a positive effect of ethnic classroom composition on outgroup attitudes may have focused on settings with more liking than disliking relationships between members of different groups. Those studies that did not find an effect may have investigated settings where the effects of liking and disliking relationships cancelled each other out. And in the study that reported more negative attitudes in mixed classes, students may have mostly disliked their classmates from other ethnic groups.

We contrast our new predictions in particular against a hypothesis derived from group-threat theory (Quillian, 1995), which has been tested most often in search for explanations for negative effects of classroom composition on interethnic relations (e.g., Moody, 2001; Vervoort et al., 2011). Other explanations of the mixed findings that have been offered include varying behavior of the teachers, multicultural curriculums but also differences between studies in terms of the respondents' age, differences in the dependent variables used, and the influence of omitted variables (Bekhuis et al., 2013; Thijs and Verkuyten, 2014). The present study cannot test all these explanations but it is unlikely that any of these processes could be confounded with the new student-level mechanisms we are proposing.

We study the attitudes of 728 native Dutch students in the Netherlands toward the ethnic minority groups of Turkish and Moroccan people. Hypotheses are tested both cross-sectionally and longitudinally to minimize the problem of wrong conclusions due to a potential reversed causal effect of students' outgroup attitudes on their liking or disliking of outgroup classmates.

1.1. *Liking and disliking classmates instead of contact*

Earlier studies on the effect of classroom composition on outgroup attitudes may have produced mixed findings because the amount of interethnic contact was conceptualized as the number of outgroup classmates the students had (e.g., Bakker et al., 2007; Ellison and Powers, 1994; Vervoort et al., 2011). We argue that equating exposure to outgroup members in the classroom with intergroup contact may be misleading because the positive effect of intergroup contact on prejudice reduction is mainly mediated by affective mechanisms that develop in *positive* relationships (Pettigrew et al., 2011; Swart et al., 2011), such as intergroup friendships (Davies et al., 2011). If students do not form such positive relationships but experience the contact as being negative, exposure to outgroup classmates can have the opposite effect and increase negative attitudes (Bekhuis et al., 2013).

Instead of assuming that exposure to outgroup classmates represents intergroup contact, we study whether students like or dislike each of their individual classmates. Conceptualizing interpersonal attitudes between classmates in terms of liking and disliking goes beyond research on intergroup contact with its focus on actual interactions such as in friendships (Davies et al., 2011) or violent encounters (Schmid et al., 2008). Our approach acknowledges that individuals can form positive or negative attitudes toward strangers without actual interaction, simply on basis of their looks and behavior (Havekes et al., 2013). In school classes, for instance, it has been shown that observing a classmate bullying someone else creates disliking of the bully (Dijkstra et al., 2007). Moreover, physically fit or attractive students are more liked by their classmates and, consequently, less fit or attractive students are less liked (Dijkstra et al., 2010).

We propose that positive and negative interpersonal evaluations of classmates affect intergroup attitudes in the same fashion as positive and negative contact experiences. This notion builds on a long tradition of research on stereotype change, which has shown that people generalize from what they think about individual members of outgroups toward their attitudes toward the outgroup as a whole (Johnston and Hewstone, 1992; Kunda and Oleson, 1997; Paolini et al., 2009). This process can reduce negative attitudes toward other groups if the opinion about the individual outgroup member is positive (Garcia-Marques and Mackie, 1999). For instance, a number of studies found that exposure to Barack Obama at the time of the 2008 U.S. presidential election reduced anti-Black prejudice (Bernstein et al., 2010; Columb and Plant, 2011; Plant et al., 2009). However, attitude generalization can also result in more negative outgroup attitudes if the opinion about individual group members is negative (Dolderer et al., 2009). In fact, recent research has shown that students in school classes generalize positive and negative attitudes they have toward classmates from other ethnic groups to the same extent (Stark et al., 2013).

The process of generalizing positive and negative interpersonal attitudes may offer a new explanation of the conflicting findings on the effect of ethnic class composition on students' interethnic attitudes. If in a school class students like more of

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