



Ethnic composition of school classes, majority–minority friendships, and adolescents' intergroup attitudes in the Netherlands

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The relationships between the proportion of ethnic minority adolescents in school classes, the proportion and quality of majority–minority friendships and intergroup attitudes were examined using multi-level analysis ($N = 2386$ adolescents in 117 school classes in the Netherlands). In school classes with high proportions of ethnic minority adolescents, both ethnic majority and ethnic minority adolescents reported more negative out-group attitudes. Moreover, in these school classes, ethnic majority adolescents showed more positive in-group attitudes, whereas ethnic minority adolescents showed less positive in-group attitudes. The proportion of majority–minority friendships was related to less negative out-group attitudes for ethnic majority adolescents only. The quality of majority–minority friendships was related to less negative out-group and in-group attitudes for both the ethnic majority and ethnic minority adolescents. The results are discussed in the light of contact theory and ethnic competition theory.

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Introduction

Many countries have multi-ethnic populations nowadays. In 2005, according to UN figures, 12.9 per cent of the US population and 8.8 per cent of the EU population consisted of immigrants. For the Netherlands, this was 10.1 percent (United Nations, 2005). Dutch politicians encourage ethnic integration in various areas of life, including the Dutch school system. The emergence of schools in which more than 50 per cent of the pupils are from ethnic minorities is often discussed as an obstacle to social integration. Dutch politicians try to prevent the emergence of such schools and prefer school classes consisting of different ethnic groups with a view to promoting intergroup contacts and reducing negative intergroup attitudes. However, empirical evidence supporting the assumption that mixing ethnic majority and ethnic minority adolescents in school classes and the resulting intergroup contacts reduce negative intergroup attitudes is still inconclusive (McGlothlin & Killen, 2006). The present study investigated whether the proportion of ethnic minority adolescents in classes and intergroup friendships are related to adolescents' intergroup attitudes. Our work was guided by two dominant theories: contact theory and ethnic competition theory.

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Contact theory

According to contact theory (Allport, 1954), contact with out-group members reduces negative out-group attitudes. Scholars have identified different mechanisms underlying the relationship between intergroup contacts and intergroup attitudes. Some focus on the cognitive mechanism whereby intergroup contacts lead to more knowledge about, and more accurate perceptions of, people from other ethnic groups, resulting in less prejudice (e.g. Schalk-Soekar, Van de Vijver, & Hoogsteder, 2004). Others point to affective processes, such as lower intergroup anxiety and more self-disclosure, which explain why intergroup contacts result in less negative out-group attitudes (e.g. Pettigrew, 1997; Phinney, Ferguson, & Tate, 1997; Turner, Voci, & Hewstone, 2007). Either way, since a school class is a social context in which contacts with classmates is almost inevitable (Vermeij, 2006), more opportunities for intergroup contacts in class are expected to be related to less negative intergroup attitudes.

However, some found that the opportunities for contact often increase the likelihood of contact, but do not always have a direct effect on out-group attitudes (Phinney et al., 1997; Turner et al., 2007; Wagner, Van Dick, Pettigrew, & Christ, 2003). In addition, not every intergroup contact is thought to be equally strongly related to out-group attitudes. From the meta-study by Pettigrew and Tropp (2006), it has become apparent that, although intergroup contact is generally related to less negative out-group attitudes, contact that also meets optimal conditions is more strongly related to less negative attitudes. These conditions include equal status, cooperation, common goals and institutional support (see Allport, 1954). Intergroup friendships meet these conditions (Pettigrew, 1997) and are found to be related to less intergroup anxiety and more self-disclosure, resulting in less negative out-group attitudes (Turner et al., 2007). Finally, because affective processes are thought to underlie the relationship between intergroup friendships and out-group attitudes, particularly the quality of intergroup friendships seems to play an important part in reducing negative out-group attitudes (see also Aboud, Mendelson, & Purdy, 2003; Kao & Joyner, 2004).

Ethnic competition theory

In contrast to contact theory, ethnic competition theory (Blalock, 1967; Scheepers, Gijssberts, & Coenders, 2002) states that ethnic majority members are more likely to feel threatened by ethnic minorities if these increase in number (e.g. Coenders, Gijssberts, & Scheepers, 2004). As a result, the majority group is likely to have more negative attitudes towards ethnic minorities. Research across several European countries showed rather consistently that, in European countries with high proportions of non-European ethnic minorities, negative out-group attitudes were more prevalent among ethnic majority group members (Scheepers et al., 2002). Not only high proportions of ethnic minorities in the broad society, but also in the small context of a school class might induce more negative out-group attitudes in the ethnic majority group (Vermeij, 2006). Until now, however, research that has studied this hypothesis directly is scarce and not unequivocal.

Applying both contact theory and ethnic competition theory to explain the relationship between the proportion of ethnic minority adolescents in classes and intergroup attitudes results in seemingly contradictory hypotheses. Based on ethnic competition theory, it is hypothesized that a higher proportion of out-group members in classes is related to *more* negative out-group attitudes. Based on contact theory, one might expect that a higher number of opportunities for intergroup contact is related to *less* negative out-group attitudes. According to a more restricted form of contact theory, only a higher number and higher quality of intergroup friendships are expected to be related to less negative out-group attitudes.

In-group attitudes

Not only out-group attitudes, but also in-group attitudes are relevant to be considered in relation to the proportion of ethnic minority adolescents in classes. Social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) states that individuals have a fundamental need to perceive their own ethnic group as superior to other ethnic groups. As a consequence, they apply to themselves the positive characteristics they perceive among the members of their own ethnic group (social identification), and they value other ethnic groups negatively (social contra-identification). According to ethnic competition theory, these processes intensify when threat is experienced. Hence, experience of ethnic threat due to high proportions of ethnic minorities in school classes is not only expected to be related to more negative out-group attitudes, but also to more positive in-group attitudes (Scheepers et al., 2002). Empirical studies (e.g. Coenders et al., 2004) have indeed shown negative out-group attitudes to be often strongly related to more positive in-group attitudes. Whether the same applies to the small-scale context of a school class has so far not been studied extensively. The second aim of the present study was therefore to explore the relation between the proportion of ethnic minority adolescents in school classes, intergroup friendships and *in-group* attitudes.

In sum, the present study aimed to study the relationship between the proportion of ethnic minorities in school class, intergroup friendships and intergroup attitudes. We contribute to research in several ways. First, whereas most studies merely focused on the ethnic majority group, we also studied the ethnic minorities' intergroup attitudes. Second, we explicitly studied the role of the ethnic composition of classes in a large sample of schools. Furthermore, in contrast to most studies, we did not only study out-group attitudes, but also examined in-group attitudes.

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