



# Friendships and outgroup attitudes among ethnic minority youth: The mediating role of ethnic and host society identification



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## ABSTRACT

This study investigates among ethnic minority adolescents how friendships with ethnic minority and majority group peers are related to their attitudes towards the majority outgroup.

Friendships with majority group peers are proposed to be indirectly related to outgroup attitudes through host society identification. Friendships with ethnic ingroup peers are proposed to be indirectly related to outgroup attitudes through ethnic ingroup identification.

Hypotheses were tested longitudinally among ethnic minority adolescents ( $n = 244$ ) who recently entered middle schools in the Netherlands. Lagged structural equation models showed that friendships with majority group peers were related to stronger identification with the host society which was in turn related to improved attitudes toward the majority outgroup. Ingroup friendships and ingroup identification was not related to outgroup attitudes. Additional analyses indicated that the relation between host society identification and majority group friendships was bidirectional.

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## 1. Introduction

With many societies becoming more ethnically diverse it is increasingly important to understand the determinants of intergroup attitudes. The majority of studies focuses on the attitudes of natives towards immigrants and ethnic minorities. However, there is also the question about conditions that encourage or hamper host society identification of minority group members and the consequences of this identification for their attitude towards the native majority group. In several societies, concerns have been expressed about their assumed lack of host society belonging and the corresponding negative attitudes towards natives (see Verkuyten, 2014).

Studies on contact between different ethnic groups have shown that positive intergroup contacts and friendships in particular, are related to more favorable outgroup attitudes (Allport, 1954; Davies, Tropp, Aron, Pettigrew, & Wright, 2011; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). Intergroup contact improves outgroup attitudes because it enhances knowledge about outgroup

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members, reduces intergroup anxiety, and increases empathy and perspective taking (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2008). In addition, the common ingroup identity model (Dovidio, Gaertner, & Saguy, 2007) suggests that intergroup contact affects group identifications (Maliepaard & Phalet, 2012), and that group identifications in turn are related to intergroup attitudes (Gaertner & Dovidio, 2000).

From an acculturation perspective, identification with the ethnic ingroup and identification with the host society correspond to two central questions in the acculturation process (Berry, 1997). First, is maintaining one's ethnic heritage culture and identity considered to be important? And second, is developing relationships and commitments with the larger society valued? The current study relates these two aspects of acculturation to how ethnic minority adolescents in the Netherlands view the native majority group. With panel data, we investigate whether friendships with ethnic ingroup peers and with majority outgroup peers are associated with ethnic ingroup identification and host society identification, and whether these group identifications in turn are related to improved attitudes towards the majority outgroup.

This study adds to previous research on intergroup contact and outgroup attitudes in three ways. First, whereas most previous studies examined how outgroup friendships affect outgroup attitudes, the current study also examines whether ethnic ingroup friendships are related to outgroup attitudes. People with an immigrant background are confronted with bicultural worlds (Ryder, Alden, & Paulhus, 2000) in which they can identify with their ethnic ingroup as well as with the host society (Berry, 2005; Ryder et al., 2000; Verkuyten, 2014). To get insight in how this may be related to their outgroup attitudes, we examine the role of identification and friendships with ethnic ingroup members and identification and friendships with host society members.

Second, whereas several studies examined cognitive and affective mediators of the relationship between intergroup contact and outgroup attitudes (for meta-analytical results see Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006; Swart, Hewstone, Christ, & Voci, 2011), few studies examined whether the contact-attitudes link is mediated by identification with the superordinate group (e.g. Eller & Abrams, 2003). More specifically, it has not been investigated whether friendships with majority group members are indirectly related to outgroup attitudes through identification with the host society. Third, whereas most of the intergroup contact literature investigated contact effects among majority group members, the current research adds to the relatively few studies (e.g. Binder et al., 2009; Tropp & Pettigrew, 2005) that examined intergroup contact effects among minority group members. An understanding of the associations between group identifications, in- and outgroup contact (friendships), and attitudes towards the majority group, sheds further light on the acculturation process of immigrant youth.

These associations will be examined longitudinally among children (12–14 years) of immigrants during their first year of middle school in the Netherlands. Over the past decades, ethnic diversity of the Dutch school population has increased due to immigration and an increasing number of second-generation immigrants (SCP, 2012). Among the largest immigrant groups are the Turks and Moroccans that came to the Netherlands as labor immigrants and that have the lowest social status (in terms of education and labor market position) and are the least accepted, also by native early adolescents (SCP, 2012; Verkuyten & Kinket, 2000). There are also members of ex-colonial groups of Surinamese and Antilleans that have relatively higher social status and are more accepted in society (Castles & Miller, 2003). Furthermore, there are non-western immigrants from many other and numerically smaller groups that tend to have a relatively unfavorable social position (e.g., from Somalia, Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan).

### 1.1. Majority group friends and host society identification

Peers are an important source of influence during adolescence (see Brechwald & Prinstein, 2011), and play a central role in identity formation (Meeus & Dekovic, 1995; Meeus, 2011). Friends convey social norms that are regulated through processes of social control, which lead to similarities in opinions and behaviors over time. Friendships of ethnic minority students with majority peers are therefore likely to lead to similarities (reduced differences) in behaviors and opinions between members of these groups (Stark & Flache, 2012). Reduced differences between groups make group boundaries less salient leading to more inclusive ingroups. If this is the case, then friendships with ethnic majority members are likely to strengthen minority students' identification with the host society. This is particularly likely in countries where the native majority group is seen as representative of the host country (like in the Netherlands where the Dutch term used for the natives – 'Nederlanders' – is similar as the one used for the country – 'Nederland').

In turn, based on social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) and the common ingroup identity model (Gaertner, Dovidio, Anastasio, Bachman, & Rust, 1993), it can be expected that identification with the host society improves attitudes toward the majority group. Social identity research has shown that higher identifiers tend to view the ingroup more favorably (Brown & Hewstone, 2005). Gaertner et al. (1993) argued that if the ingroup becomes more inclusive, former subgroups become part of one superordinate ingroup, which will lead to more positive attitudes toward members of those subgroups. Accordingly, the common ingroup identity model (Dovidio et al., 2007; Gaertner et al., 1993; Gaertner, Dovidio, & Bachman, 1996) proposes that for contact to reduce prejudice it needs to be structured in such a way that it leads to identification with an inclusive superordinate category. In line with this reasoning, research has shown that superordinate identities improve outgroup attitudes among minority as well as majority group members (Nier et al., 2001; Pfeifer et al., 2007). This suggests that identification with the host society will improve the attitudes of ethnic minority youth towards majority group members.

We expect that friendships of ethnic minority students with majority group peers are related to identification with the host society. Furthermore, based on the common ingroup identity model (Gaertner et al., 1993) we expect that identification with the host society is related to improved attitudes toward the majority group. Thus, we hypothesize that friendships with

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