



Multiculturalism in the classroom: Ethnic attitudes and classmates' beliefs

Jochem Thijs*, Maykel Verkuyten

Utrecht University, The Netherlands

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ABSTRACT

As classmates form an important social reference group for preadolescents, this study examined the relation between classmates' multicultural beliefs and the ethnic attitudes of fifth- and sixth-grade ethnic majority students (ages 9–13). Thirty-eight school classes in the Netherlands participated. We focused on the native Dutch ($n = 548$) but information from all students ($N = 838$) was used to assess classmates' beliefs and other classroom variables. Multilevel analyses showed that classmates' multicultural beliefs were positively related to students' ethnic out-group attitudes, especially for children who felt more accepted by their peers, and negatively to their attitude toward the Dutch in-group. These links were mediated by students' personal multicultural beliefs, and they were independent of the proportion of co-ethnics in the classroom. Results indicate that it is important to look at specific peer groups (i.e. classmates) to understand children's interethnic attitudes.

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1. Introduction

Various studies have demonstrated the importance of in-group norms for prejudice and intergroup attitudes more generally (e.g., Crandall, Eshleman, & Obrien, 2002; Gabarrot, Falomir-Pichastor, & Mugny, 2009; Jetten, Spears, & Manstead, 1996). In particular, there has been growing attention to the ways in which children's out-group attitudes are related to the norms and beliefs of their in-group peers, and because these peers can differ between contexts the normative setting will also differ. For instance, Social Identity Development Theory (Nesdale, 2008) and the developmental subjective group dynamics model (Abrams, Rutland, & Cameron, 2003; Abrams, Rutland, Pelletier, & Cameron, 2009) propose that in-group norms are important for children's out-group attitudes. Many of the findings on norms and intergroup relationships are based on experimental research with situational (minimal) groups (but see Jasinskaja-Lahti, Mähönen, & Liebkind, 2011). Clearly, this type of research has high internal validity but its ecological validity is limited. The acknowledgment of the importance of social norms and that norms can differ between social contexts has not led to many contextual analyses of intergroup relations. The focus remains very much on the individual with his or her motivational needs and cognitive processes and the ways in which groups and group divisions become incorporated psychologically. The group and group norms are not seen as having their own characteristics and as being external to the individual but as part of the person's self-concept. So while the goal of these studies is to explain social behavior, the methodological and empirical commitment has been to the properties and processes of individuals.

In the present study we examined how the ethnic attitudes of native Dutch preadolescents are related to the actual multicultural beliefs of their classmates. Most of these classmates, but not all of them, were native Dutch, that is ethnic

* Corresponding author at: Ercomer, Utrecht University, Heidelberglaan 2, 3584 CS Utrecht, The Netherlands. Tel.: +31 30 253 5560; fax: +31 30 253 4733.

E-mail address: j.t.thijs@uu.nl (J. Thijs).

in-group members. We focused on preadolescence (ages 9–13) because this is an important period for the development of intergroup attitudes (Ruble et al., 2004) and is characterized by an increased sensitivity to the norms and beliefs of the peer group (Berndt, 1979; Prinstein & Dodge, 2008; Mrug & Windle, 2009). We studied classmates because children spend many hours in school, and in the Netherlands preadolescents typically stay in the same class all school year long. Classmates form an important social reference group for preadolescents (see Thijs, Verkuyten, & Helmond, 2010), and reference groups provide important prescriptive and descriptive information about social reality (Kelley, 1952; Turner, 1991).

We examined the attitudes toward the Dutch in-group and two ethnic out-groups, Turks and Moroccans, which are the least-liked ethnic groups in the Netherlands, also among preadolescents (Verkuyten & Kinket, 2000; Verkuyten & Thijs, 2010). Two research questions were addressed. First, we tested whether children's ethnic attitudes were related to the multicultural beliefs of their classmates and whether these relations depended on children's age and perceived peer acceptance. Second, we examined whether the links between ethnic attitudes and classmates' beliefs were mediated by children's own multicultural beliefs.

1.1. Group norms and children's group attitudes

In research on children's intergroup attitudes, in-group norms have typically been considered by manipulating (e.g., Nesdale, Maass, Durkin, & Griffith, 2005) or measuring (e.g., Abrams et al., 2003) children's perceptions of the group attitudes that are dominant or most commonly held in their in-group. The available evidence suggests that groups are important for out-group attitudes. Kiesner, Maass, Cadinu, and Vallese (2003) found that early adolescents provided similar evaluations of stigmatized out-groups as the members of their self-nominated friendship group. Poteat (2007) provided longitudinal evidence for a peer group socialization effect on homophobic attitudes. Further, early adolescents' ethnic attitudes have been found to be uniquely related to the out-group attitudes of their classmates (Thijs & Verkuyten, 2011).

In the present research we focus on normative beliefs rather than attitudes as a source of peer group influence on the ethnic attitudes of preadolescents. Unlike group attitudes, normative beliefs are explicitly prescriptive. That is to say, they refer to the way things should be and reflect a feeling of 'oughtness' (see Blanton & Burkley, 2008; Turner, 1991). Social dominance beliefs, for example, involve the idea that the in-group *should* dominate out-groups (Pratto, Sidanius, Stallworth, & Malle, 1994). People who strongly endorse these beliefs are assumed to strive for in-group dominance and power whereas those who endorse them weakly would be motivated to display altruistic concerns (Duckitt, Wagner, du Plessis, & Birum, 2002). To date, only the study by Poteat, Espelage, and Green (2007) has shown that these kind of peer beliefs matter for the group evaluations of adolescents. These authors examined how homophobic attitudes in one's peer groups were related to social dominance beliefs of (early) adolescents. Children's attitudes were related to their personal dominance beliefs, but also to the average beliefs of their peer group (Poteat et al., 2007; Poteat & Spanierman, 2010). Thus, prescriptive peer group beliefs seem to matter for individual attitudes. In the present study we examined classmates' beliefs about multiculturalism.

1.2. Multiculturalism

Multiculturalism is defined differently and takes different forms in schools and countries. The diversity of multicultural ideas, initiatives and practices is substantial. However, the notion of 'multicultural recognition' signals some common arguments underlying these differences. In general, multicultural approaches in the areas of societal change and education involve fostering knowledge and an understanding of cultural differences. The focus is on an appreciation of diversity by acknowledging and respecting minority group identities and cultures (Fowers & Richardson, 1996). Multiculturalism tries to stimulate majority members to be more tolerant and respectful towards minorities and to develop a more 'open attitude towards what you do not know' (Verkuyten, 2004, p. 58). It offers a positive view of cultural maintenance by ethnic minority groups, and by stating what is appropriate and acceptable, it has normative implications. Experimental research among majority group members has shown that multicultural beliefs lead to less prejudice and more positive out-group attitudes (Verkuyten, 2005; Wolsko, Park, Judd, & Wittenbrink, 2000).

For majority group members, multiculturalism may also involve a less positive and more 'modest' attitude toward the in-group, as was shown among native Dutch adolescents in the Netherlands (Verkuyten, Thijs, & Bekhuis, 2010). The belief that minority cultures should be respected and appreciated, challenges the dominant position of the majority in-group (see also Morrison, Plaut, & Ybarra, 2010). For majorities, multiculturalism stimulates a less ethnocentric and 'deprovincialized' perspective from which the own traditions, customs, norms, and values are critically regarded and not seen as the only way to manage and look at the world (see Pettigrew, 1998).

We expected that classmates' multicultural beliefs would be positively related to children's own attitudes toward Turks and Moroccans (out-groups), but negatively to their attitude toward the Dutch (in-group). Yet, we also anticipated that classmates would be especially important for children's out-group attitudes. In general, out-group attitudes are formed relatively late in life and tend to depend quite strongly on contextual conditions (Brewer, 2001; Cameron, Alvarez, Ruble, & Fuligni, 2001; Nesdale, 2008). Early adolescents may turn to their peers for information to evaluate out-groups, especially when the number of out-group classmates is relatively small as is the case in the current study. By contrast, according to Social Identity Developmental Theory (Nesdale, 2008) and as shown by parental ethnic socialization studies (see Hughes et al., 2006), in-group attitudes are formed relatively early in childhood and therefore should be less strongly related to the class context.

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