



# The parent–child similarity in cross-group friendship and anti-immigrant prejudice: A study among 15-year old adolescents and both their parents in Belgium

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## ABSTRACT

The aim of this article is to investigate the role of parental cross-group friendships on the anti-immigrant prejudice of their children. It is hypothesized that the relation between parental cross-group friendship and the child's prejudice can be mediated by two intergenerational transmission mechanisms: (1) via parent–child similarity in prejudice, and (2) via parent–child similarity in cross-group friendship. Data stem from the Parent–Child Socialization Study (2012), a representative sample among adolescents and both their parents in Belgium. Controlling for the mediating mechanisms, no direct relationship between parental cross-group friendship and adolescents' prejudice was found. Parental cross-group friendships was, however, indirectly related via parent–child anti-immigrant prejudice and cross-group friendship similarity. It is concluded that prejudice is strongly related within families.

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## 1. Introduction

Adolescence is a time in which basic democratic norms such as tolerance and equality are shaped and acquired (Flanagan, 2013; Hooghe, 2004; Niemi & Hepburn, 1995). Previous research has indeed indicated that adolescents already have well-defined opinions about different minority groups in society and that these opinions remain rather stable when entering adulthood (Hooghe & Wilkenfeld, 2007; Miller & Sears, 1986). Whereas individual-based personality traits are important predictors of intergroup attitudes, authors in the field of socialization assume that intergroup attitudes like prejudice are learned within a given social context during the formative adolescent years (e.g. Allport, 1954). In general, it could be argued that personality is embedded in a social context, and a full understanding of the role of personality in the development of prejudice at least requires an adequate consideration of social determinants.

In this article, I argue that the home environment is a crucial aspect of this social context and provides important foundations for attitude and behavior development. Family members are found to have a considerable impact on each other's feelings of prejudice through the system of intergenerational transmission and similarity (Degner & Dalege, 2013; O'Bryan, Fishbein, & Ritchey, 2004; Rodríguez-García & Wagner, 2009). While previous research has mostly been directed toward the intergenerational similarity in

prejudice, “i.e. an attitude”, less attention has been devoted to parent–child similarity in intergroup contact, “i.e. a situational experience” (Allport, 1954; Degner & Dalege, 2013). While both the attitudinal and situational component obviously interact, it is odd to find little research disentangling both mechanisms, since it is known that intergroup experiences can more easily be observed and imitated than intergroup attitudes (Bandura, 1977).

Recent research efforts (e.g. Dhont & Van Hiel, 2012; Rodríguez-García & Wagner, 2009; White et al., 2009) have tried to integrate the intergroup experiences in the attitude transmission model by including intergroup contact as a moderator in the prejudice transmission model. Dhont and Van Hiel (2012) and Rodríguez-García and Wagner (2009) argue that adolescents with positive intergroup contact experiences rely more on these personal experiences than on their parents' intergroup attitudes, reducing parent–child similarity in prejudice. As such, they conclude that adolescents' intergroup contact experiences function as a buffer against the intergenerational similarity in prejudice.

In addition to the work of Dhont and Van Hiel (2012) and Rodríguez-García and Wagner (2009), I emphasize that intergroup contact experience – as is the case for prejudice – is embedded in the family context and can also be related between parents and children. As such, intergroup contact cannot only be seen as a buffer against the intergenerational similarity in prejudice, but also as part of the learning process within the family. Therefore, this article will investigate parent–child similarity in prejudice and intergroup contact experiences by including ‘parental intergroup contact

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experiences' (here measured as cross-group friendship) in the transmission model. I hypothesize that parental cross-group friendship is directly related to the level of prejudice of the children and that this direct relationship is mediated by two transmission mechanisms: (1) via parent–child cross-group friendship similarity; and (2) via parent–child prejudice similarity. In other words, relying on the contact hypothesis, I will examine whether parent–child cross-group friendship similarity can only be found in families having stronger values of tolerance or whether it is a separate mechanism of intergroup experience transmission, independent of attitudinal similarity.

Prejudice can be directed toward different outgroups, as long as it includes feelings of dislike toward that specific outgroup, while favoring one's own ingroup (Brown & Zagefka, 2005). In this article, I specifically focus on prejudice toward immigrants, as this minority group is often subject to negative attitudes, stereotypes and discriminatory behavior in Western Europe (Davidov, Meuleman, Billiet, & Schmidt, 2008).

Empirically, this article contributes by making use of the Parent–Child Socialization Study 2012, a new representative survey of 3426 15-year old adolescents and both their parents. This survey was especially designed to overcome methodological shortcomings of other transmission research (Hughes et al., 2006): questionnaires were distributed among a representative adolescent sample and both their parents so that direct measures were obtained from mother and father. These data allow to explore cross-group friendship similarity, independent of prejudice similarity.

## 2. Literature

### 2.1. Anti-immigrant prejudice in Belgium

Most of the contemporary definitions of prejudice still go back to the traditional conceptualization by Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswick, Levinson, and Sanford (1950) in 'The Authoritarian Personality' and Allport (1954) in 'The Nature of Prejudice'. Adorno and his colleagues defined prejudice as "feelings of dislike against a specific group" and distinguished it from ethnocentrism which was defined as "a general rejection of outgroups" (p. 102). For Allport, prejudice is a "hostile attitude toward a person who belongs to a group, simply because he belongs to that group, and is therefore presumed to have the objectionable qualities ascribed to the group" (p. 8). In this article, prejudice is defined as a negative attitude toward a specific group or towards members of the group (Stangor, 2009). As such, different forms of prejudice can be distinguished: e.g. anti-immigrant prejudice, sexual prejudice, ethnic prejudice, anti-Muslim prejudice. In this article, specific focus is put on anti-immigrant prejudice, as prejudice in Belgium is most often directed toward this group (Dejaeghere, Hooghe, & Claes, 2012).

Like other Western European countries, Belgium has become increasingly diverse during the past decades. According to OECD data, 15% of the total population is foreign-born which is somewhat above the OECD average of 12.5% (OECD, 2013). In the last 10 years, migration rates increased more rapidly in Belgium than in the neighboring countries like the Netherlands, Germany and France (National Institute for Statistics, 2010). Since 2008, the most common countries of origin are Morocco, France, the Netherlands and Italy (OECD, 2013).

Research has pointed out that native Belgians perceive ethnic minorities and immigrants as persons with non-EU roots, mostly belonging to the Maghreb Arabic community and Turkey (Centre for Equal Opportunities, 2009). Meuleman, Davidov, and Billiet (2009) found that the levels of anti-immigrant prejudice in Belgium are not significantly different from the European average. Although it is often assumed that Belgium is a diverse country

because of the presence of Dutch and French language groups, in practice both language groups are strongly segregated, with the Dutch-speaking group in the north of the country, and the French-speaking group in the south of the country. For all practical purposes, therefore, the linguistic division of the country does not contribute to the experience of diversity of most inhabitants of Belgium (Deschouwer, 2009).

### 2.2. Family socialization and intergroup contact

An extensive body of research has investigated the determinants and predictors of prejudice and intergroup relations in adolescence. Broadly, two approaches can be distinguished: an individual-based and a social experience approach. The individual-based approach mainly focuses on correlates within the person like personality factors, while the social experience approach emphasizes situational and contextual factors (Akrami, Ekehammar, Bergh, Dahlstrand, & Malmsten, 2009). More recently, an interactionist perspective has been suggested, combining both theoretical stances (e.g. Duckitt & Sibley, 2010). The argument is that personality and social factors are mutually dependent and that the combination of both defines how prejudice is constructed. While personality traits are important determinants of prejudice, in this article I only focus on two central social experiences in adolescence: family socialization and intergroup contact, that also shape personality characteristics.

In his seminal work, Allport (1954) emphasized that children acquire prejudice by being part of a certain social environment: "No child is born prejudiced. . . the context of his learning is always the social structure in which his personality develops" (Allport, 1954, p. 324). In this social context, prejudice is shaped by means of social learning, conformity and intergroup contact (Aboud, 2006). With the concept of 'intergenerational transmission' I refer to the social learning and conformity mechanisms in which family members are judged to be the most influential role models for their children. On the one hand, because parents are often the first and principal source of information, children tend to imitate and conform to the explicit attitudes and behaviors of their parents. Recently, it has been found that even the nonverbal behavior (e.g. avoidance of eye contact) of parents interacting with outgroups can be picked up by very young children (Castelli, De Dea, & Nesdale, 2008). On the other hand, parents can actively engage in transmitting intergroup attitudes by creating learning environments in which they intentionally teach their children basic social values, norms and behavior.

In the literature on socialization, there is, however, still a debate on the directionality of the transmission process: do parents influence their children, do children influence their parents, or is the influence reciprocal? In their review article on socialization, Knafo and Galansky (2008) emphasize the importance of controlling for different processes of child influence. Children can consciously or unconsciously change their parents values in a direction similar or even opposite to their own values. Moreover, child influences seem to occur mainly in families with authoritative parenting patterns (Pinquart & Silbereisen, 2004). Not many authors in this field have addressed this question on the directionality of intergenerational prejudice similarity (except e.g. Rodríguez-García & Wagner, 2009; Vollebergh, Iedema, & Raaijmakers, 2001). Making use of a longitudinal design on ethnocentrism transmission, Vollebergh et al. (2001) found the effects of parents on children to be larger than the effects of children on their parents. Rodríguez-García and Wagner (2009) too found more evidence for the unidirectional transmission model (children resemble their parents) than the bidirectional model. Due to the cross-sectional nature of the data in the present study, no contribution to the directionality of the prejudice transmission process can be made and it is only possible

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