

## **Social identity and ethnic prejudice in children**

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Prejudice (i.e. unjustified feelings of dislike or hatred towards members of ethnic minority groups) has long been a significant social problem in ethnically diverse countries (Brown, 1995). Indeed, contrary to earlier reports that prejudice was systematically declining, recent evidence suggests that prejudice may simply be being expressed in new disguises, and may actually be increasing (e.g. Dovidio & Gaertner, 1991; Duckitt, 1991; Pettigrew & Meertens, 1995).

While the presence of ethnic prejudice is problematic in any sector of the community, the possibility that it may be widespread among school age (and even younger) children is of particular concern. During this period, children acquire social knowledge and attitudes which may endure into adulthood and which, in the case of ethnic prejudice, have the potential to lead to short- and long-term psychological and physical harm to young members of minority groups. At the least, it may foster intergroup divisions or distance which, again, may prove to be long lasting (Durkin, 1995).

Although there has been an extensive amount of research which has addressed the development of ethnic prejudice in children, there is currently little agreement on many of the central issues. For example, there is uncertainty as to the age at which prejudice emerges in children, whether or not there are age-related phases or stages through which prejudice develops, what the psychological processes or mechanisms are which govern the acquisition of ethnic prejudice, and the impact that children's emerging linguistic and cognitive abilities have upon their acquisition and retention of ethnic prejudice. Moreover, as we shall see, the extant theoretical approaches are limited in the extent to which their accounts encompass the known phenomena relating to children's prejudice.

The aim of this paper is to outline a model which provides a comprehensive account of the development of ethnic prejudice in children. The model draws heavily upon a theoretical approach, social identity theory (SIT; Tajfel & Turner, 1979) and its more recent elaboration, self-categorisation theory (SCT; Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher & Wetherell, 1987) which arguably provides the most widely endorsed current explanation of prejudice in adults. However, since SIT was not expressly formulated to explain the development of prejudice in children, it requires some modifications and extensions in order to take the unique characteristics and circumstances of children into account.

To provide a context for the model which will be outlined below, the main explanations of children's prejudice which currently appear in the literature will be briefly considered. Emphasis will be placed on the findings related to dominant or majority group children since it is this group that most commonly expresses prejudice towards members of specific ethnic minority groups (Verkuyten & Masson, 1995).

## **Theoretical approaches to the development of children's prejudice**

There are currently three major approaches to accounting for the development of ethnic prejudice in children, including emotional maladjustment, social reflection, and sociocognitive development.

### **Emotional maladjustment**

This approach links the acquisition of prejudice to the development of a particular personality type, the Authoritarian Personality (Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswik, Levinson & Sanford, 1950). Much influenced by Freudian thinking, children's prejudice is considered to stem from emotional maladjustment arising from a repressive and harshly disciplined upbringing. Under these circumstances, the child's resulting frustration, anger and hostility towards his/her parents is considered to be displaced away from the parents towards scapegoats who are weaker and lack authority and power, such as members of minority groups.

While a positive feature of this theory is that it provides an explanation for any differences in levels of prejudice which may occur between individuals (Aboud, 1988), it does not account for the uniformity of prejudice across whole groups of people which may occur in particular places and times, nor why some groups are the recipients of prejudice but not others (Brown, 1995). In general, the approach ignores the influence on people's (including children's) intergroup attitudes and behaviour of important aspects of their social environment, including the attitudes of significant others, prevailing societal norms, and the relationships between the members of the dominant cultural group and the members of minority groups.

### **Social reflection**

The social reflection approach takes the latter point as a fundamental premise - children's prejudice is simply considered to reflect the community's attitudes and values, which are typically transmitted by the child's parents. According to this view, (eg. Horowitz & Horowitz, 1938; Kinder & Sears, 1981), children learn their attitudes towards particular ethnic groups, either by direct training or by observing and imitating their parents' verbal and non-verbal behaviour, presumably because the children are rewarded for their imitative behaviour, identify with their parents, or want to please them.

However, while positive correlations have been reported between the ethnic attitudes of children and their parents (eg. Bird, Monachesi & Burdick, 1952; Harris, Gough & Martin, 1950; Horowitz & Horowitz, 1938; Goodman, 1952; Radke & Trager, 1950) and that there are similarities in the statements of parents and their children concerning ethnic minority groups (eg. Radke-Yarrow, Trager, & Miller, 1952), the correlations have typically been low (eg. Bird et al, 1952; Frenkel-Brunswik & Havel, 1953) and sometimes nonexistent (eg. Pushkin, in Davey, 1983; Aboud & Doyle, 1996).

These findings emphasise the point that it is incorrect to assume that children are simply empty containers into which prevailing societal prejudices are poured, or sponges that soak up dominant ethnic attitudes (Brown, 1995; Milner, 1996; Davey, 1983). On the contrary, children's intellectual capacities reveal dramatic development

through the middle childhood years and they are active participants in seeking to understand and control both their cognitive and social worlds (eg. Durkin, 1995).

### **Sociocognitive theory**

According to sociocognitive theory (Aboud, 1988), a child's attitude to other groups of children depends upon his/her level of development in relation to two overlapping sequences of perceptual-cognitive development. One sequence involves the process that dominates a child's experience at a particular time. The child is initially considered to be dominated by affective-perceptual processes associated with fear of the unknown and attachment to the familiar. Perceptual processes subsequently dominate with preference for the (similar) ingroup and rejection of the (different) outgroup being determined primarily by physical attributes (eg. skin colour, language, body size). Thereafter, cognitive processes take ascendancy with the advent of the concrete operational stage of cognitive development around 7 years of age and, later, formal operational thinking (Flavell, 1963). The effect of the transition to cognitive processes is that the child is increasingly able to understand the individual rather than the group-based qualities of people. Overlapping this sequence is a second sequence of development which is concerned with changes in the child's focus of attention. Whereas very young children mostly focus on themselves and their preferences and perceptions, older children emphasise categories of people such that individuals are seen as members of these categories or groups. Still later, however, children focus on individuals, who are liked or disliked for their personal rather than group qualities.

Based on these sociocognitive developments, Aboud (1988) argues that ingroup bias and outgroup prejudice increase to a peak at around 7 years of age, when group differences are paramount. However, with a subsequent increase in the child's cognitive abilities, occasioned by the onset of concrete operational thinking around 7 years of age, Aboud claims that there is a systematic decline in group-based biases, which is further enhanced when the child's ever-increasing cognitive abilities allow him/her to attend to the differences between individuals.

While it is now widely accepted that cognitive developmental changes are implicated in the acquisition and expression of many social behaviours (Durkin, 1995), it is, nevertheless, fair to say that their causal significance in children's ethnic prejudice remains unclear. Further, sociocognitive theory is silent on the possibility that children (and adults) can actually develop long-lasting prejudices in the absence of any negative contact with an ethnic minority group member (Brown, 1995).

In addition, rather than ethnic prejudice reducing during the primary school years, some studies have reported that ingroup preference remained at the same level from 7 to 12 years (eg. Asher & Allen, 1969; Banks & Rompf, 1973; Milner, 1973; Weiland & Coughlin, 1979; Teplin, 1976; Davey, 1983), while others reported that it actually increased during these years (eg. Hraba & Grant, 1970; Bartel, Bartel & Grill, 1973; Rice, Ruiz & Padilla, 1974; Vaughan & Thompson, 1961).

Perhaps, most importantly, sociocognitive theory offers a developmental account which is inappropriately indifferent to the social context and motivational considerations. For example, the cues to which even young children respond (eg., skin colour, obesity, handicappedness) have a distinctiveness which is socially

determined, particularly by the labels and evaluative statements applied to groups by peers and adults (Katz, 1976; Marsh, 1970; Vaughan, 1987). Thus, some but not all physical differences are associated with prejudice in both children and adults, the physical differences young children respond to are also those of racial significance to adults (Katz, Sohn & Zalk, 1975), and strong prejudices (eg. towards particular national groups, religions, homosexuals) can occur even in the absence of physical differences (Tajfel, Jahoda, Nemeth, Rim & Johnson, 1972).

In sum, this necessarily abbreviated review serves to highlight the limitations in the extant theoretical accounts of children's prejudice. It emphasises the need for a theory which is both more comprehensive, and gives due recognition to the influence of social motivational issues in the development of children's prejudice

### **Social identity and prejudice in children**

An approach which places considerable emphasis on social motivational considerations and awareness of social structure in accounting for ethnic prejudice is provided by social identity theory (SIT, Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

### **Social identity theory**

According to SIT, prejudice and discrimination towards members of ethnic outgroups ultimately derives from the desire of individuals to identify with social groups which are considered to be positively distinctive or comparatively superior to other groups, in order to enhance their own self-esteem. The consequences of group identification are that ingroup members are perceived to be similar and to possess positive qualities and hence are subject to positive bias. In contrast, outgroup members are perceived to be different and to possess less favourable qualities and hence may attract prejudice and discrimination. Numerous studies of adults and adolescents have now provided broad support for SIT (see reviews by Brewer, 1979; Brown, 1995; Hogg & Abrams, 1988; Mullen, Brown & Smith, 1991), especially in research using the minimal group paradigm (Tajfel, Billig, Bundy & Flament, 1971).

Although SIT is probably the most widely endorsed social psychological account of ethnic prejudice in adults at the present time, the theory is virtually mute on the issue of the development of prejudice in children. According to several researchers, however, there are good grounds for supposing that SIT might provide an explanation of ethnic prejudice in both children and adults (eg. Davey, 1983; Vaughan, 1988; Milner, 1996; Nesdale, in press, a, b; Nesdale & Flessler, 1999). For example, consistent with the basic assumptions of the theory are findings indicating that children from as young as 3 years have a developing awareness of which groups are better off and more highly regarded than others, that they make comparisons between their standing as a member of one social group versus other ethnic groups, and that they prefer to be members of groups with higher rather than lower social status (eg. Goodman, 1946; Radke & Trager, 1950; Davey, 1983; Vaughan, 1987; Milner, 1996; Nesdale, in press; Nesdale & Flessler, 1999).

Despite these findings, however, it needs be recognised that the theory still has little to say concerning the unique circumstances of growing children. Issues such as the nature of the instigation of the developmental process in young children, whether or not there are age-related changes in the acquisition process, whether these changes

are influenced by other cognitive and linguistic acquisitions, and so on, are not addressed by SIT.

The remainder of this paper will sketch out a model which provides a more complete account of the development of prejudice in children. The model draws upon SIT for its core assumptions, but recognises that there are changes in children's intergroup behaviour which are linked to increasing age.

### **Developmental social identity theory of prejudice**

It is proposed that children who display ethnic prejudice pass through four sequential development phases (undifferentiated, ethnic awareness, ethnic preference, ethnic prejudice). The phases are differentiated in terms of the behaviours which characterise them, and the events which precipitate changes from one phase to the next.

#### **Developmental Phase 1: Undifferentiated**

Prior to 2-3 years, racial cues are typically not salient to young children - they respond to environmental objects (including unfamiliar people) on a largely random basis in terms of what catches their attention. Among a host of achievements, however, they do learn to discriminate the colours (as well as other attributes) of inanimate objects.

#### **Developmental Phase 2: Ethnic Awareness**

Ethnic awareness begins to emerge at around 3 years, particularly among those children who live in multi-racial societies (eg. Clark & Clark, 1939; Goodman, 1946-1 Stevenson & Stevenson, 1960) and that awareness likely begins following an adult's identification/labelling of an outgroup member (eg. "yes, that person has black skin - he is an Aboriginal/Afro- American"). It is important to note, however, that young children do not appear to construct social categories on an idiosyncratic basis - they enter an environment in which the key social categories (eg., race, gender) are already specified and the nature of intergroup relations is established.

A crucially important and early achievement in this sequence concerns the child's *ethnic self-identification* - the realisation that s/he is a member of a particular group. The evidence suggests that self-identification begins to occur soon after children become aware of ethnic or racial categories (as young as 3 years) and is accurate in virtually all dominant group children in multi-racial communities by 6 to 7 years (see Aboud, 1988, for a review).

#### **Developmental Phase 3: Ethnic Preference**

Self-identification as a member of the dominant social group comprises an important piece of a child's identity jigsaw - in this case, it is the first piece of the child's social (as compared with personal) identity (Turner et al, 1987). The child learns that s/he belongs to, or is a member of, a particular (ethnic) group.

The effect of this new understanding is twofold. First, there appears to be an early focussing on the ingroup rather than the outgroup, on similarity rather than difference,

on relative superiority rather than inferiority. Contrary to other views (eg. Aboud, 1988), what is being emphasised is that ethnic self-identification does not automatically instigate an outgroup focus with accompanying outgroup dislike - it mainly activates a focus on, and accompanying preference for, the ingroup.

Second, the affect felt by children for their new ingroup appears to be comparatively mild - it is more of a leaning towards, a favouring of, a preference for, rather than a strongly positive affective response (ie. an attitude). Indeed, elsewhere it has been referred to as an "orientation" (Goodman, 1964, Proshansky, 1966), an "incipient attitude" (Goodman, 1964), or a "concept attitude" (Katz, 1976).

In short, rather than instigating outgroup prejudice, the effect of ethnic self-identification appears to be the instigation of an ingroup focus and bias. Consistent with this view is an array of research on children's ethnic preference choices which indicates that friendship and playmate preferences are unrelated to ethnic preferences or outgroup stereotype responses (eg. Hraba & Grant, 1970, Fishbein & Imai, 1993), that there is no correlation between outgroup stereotypes and outgroup bullying (eg. Boulton, 1995), that the negativity of the outgroup stereotype drops when the response is open-ended versus forced choice (eg. Lerner & Buehrig, 1975, Lerner & Schroeder, 1971), and that young children rarely give rejection of the outgroup stimulus figure as a reason for their choice of the ingroup stimulus figure (eg. Zinser, Rich & Bailey, 1981). Indeed, ethnicity is typically not an especially salient social category to young children, and certainly pales in comparison with the gender category - friendship and playmate preferences are typically determined by gender, at least up to 10 or 11 years of age (eg. Fishbein & Imai, 1993; Helgerson, 1943).

In sum, ethnic self-identification facilitates a growing understanding of the social structure in the community, the standing of the different groups, and their interrelationships, and the language used to describe other group members. For dominant group children, it prompts a focus on, and preference for, the ethnic ingroup. (In contrast, minority group children often reject their ingroup in favour of the culturally dominant outgroup.) However, if ethnic preference is merely that (ie. preference not prejudice), the question remains as to how ethnic preference crystallises and hardens into a negative attitude or prejudice.

#### **Developmental Phase 4: Ethnic Prejudice**

Contrary to Aboud's (1988) claim that ethnic prejudice diminishes in children from 7 years onwards as a result of cognitive acquisitions, the present view is that it is precisely in this period that prejudice actually crystallises and emerges in those children who come to hold such attitudes.

In essence, prejudice entails an active process of change from a state of mere ethnic preference. It requires shifts in focus in each of the child's perceptual, affective, cognitive and behavioural domains. Rather than being focussed on the ingroup and its positive differentiation from the outgroup, prejudice implies at least an equal focus on ingroup and outgroup, if not an obsessive focussing on the outgroup. Instead of liking an outgroup member less than an ingroup member, prejudice means that outgroup members are disliked or hated. Rather than knowing and being able to reproduce

(negative) "facts" about ethnic minorities, a prejudiced person holds them as his/her own. Finally, instead of engaging in inter-ethnic play and friendship, prejudice means derogating and discriminating against minority group members, whenever the occasion arises.

Clearly, the transition from having a preference for the ingroup to feeling prejudice towards an ethnic minority group is not inconsiderable. According to the present model, the transition from ethnic preference to prejudice depends upon several elements.

### **Acquisition of ethnic constancy**

An essential prerequisite of ethnic prejudice appears to be the acquisition of the concept of *ethnic constancy* - the understanding that ethnic group membership is immutable and, like gender, does not change with age (Katz, 1976; Semaj, 1980). As part of children's developing and elaborating concept of ethnic group noted earlier, they learn the significant ethnic cues that differentiate groups and can correctly label positive and negative instances. Moreover, children learn that ethnic cues, unlike size, are resilient to changes in age (Katz, 1976). The importance of ethnic constancy is that when it is acquired, the perceptual and cognitive components of ethnic attitudes are now brought into functional inter-relationship - minority outgroups (as well as the ingroup) now have a substance and longevity to which negative (or positive) attitudes may be attached (Semaj, 1980).

### **Acquisition of social cognitive skills**

Other things being equal, whether or not children who have ethnic constancy develop and express prejudice towards minority group members is likely to be influenced by whether they acquire several important social cognitive abilities. These include the ability to decentre and take the perspective of a minority group child, the ability to empathise and experience the feelings of such children, and the ability to engage in higher level moral reasoning (eg., Kohlberg, 1976; Selman & Byrne, 1974; Feffer & Gourevitch, 1960). However, although there is some indirect evidence consistent with these speculations (eg. Clark, Hocevar & Dembo, 1980; Madge, 1976), the impact of children's developing social cognitive abilities on their ethnic prejudice remains to be assessed directly.

### **Social identity processes**

While the acquisition of sociocognitive abilities are certainly contrary to, and might impede, the development of prejudice, it is nevertheless likely that the principal determinant of children's prejudice is a social process. Instead of merely preferring the ingroup, it is probable that dominant group children change to disliking minority outgroups when they adopt the negative ethnic attitudes which prevail in their social environment.

As noted earlier, however, children do not simply ape the ethnic attitudes and behaviours of those around them. Consistent with SIT (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), children begin actively disliking ethnic minorities when they adopt, *as their own*, the negative outgroup attitudes which prevail among those people whom they value and with whom they identify, in their social environment. That is, the child adopts a particular attitude because it fits with his view of himself as belonging to a social

group with a particular set of attitudes, beliefs and behaviours, and deriving positive distinctiveness from that group membership (Milner, 1996).

Three factors are proposed to facilitate social identification and hence the change from ethnic preference to prejudice. First, the probability of children adopting an ethnic prejudice as their own will increase to the extent to which that prejudice is widely shared and expressed unequivocally by people in the child's social environment (Proshansky, 1966). As consensus increases, prejudice will become increasingly normative in the community, with concomitant expectations that it will be adopted by all ingroup members, including children.

Second, the tendency for children to develop ethnic prejudice will increase as competition, tension and conflict increases between members of the dominant and ethnic minority group(s) (Brown, 1995). Under these circumstances, ingroup identification and bias will increase, with a commensurate increase in outgroup rejection, dislike and hatred.

Third, the tendency towards ethnic prejudice in children will be greatest when members of the dominant group increasingly feel that their social standing is threatened by an ethnic outgroup (eg. Long, Spears & Manstead, 1994; Branscombe & Wann, 1994; Stephan, Ybarra, Martinez, Schwarzwald & Tur-Kaspa, 1998; Quillian, 1995; Hamm, 1993; Levin & McDevitts, 1993).

However, although there is considerable support for the substantial impact of the third factor, at least in relation to prejudice in adults, research findings in relation to children on this, and the other factors, is currently lacking.

### **Implications**

While positive correlations between the ethnic attitudes of children and their parents might normally be expected, this need not necessarily be so. The particular ethnic attitudes adopted by children reflect their own interests and perceptions, rather than those who might seek to influence them.

The social identification processes which have been described are likely to overwhelm the sociocognitive acquisitions of role-taking and moral reasoning, at least in relation to particular disliked ethnic outgroups.

Age-related changes in children's ethnic prejudice should not be expected as a matter of course. While prejudice is unlikely to occur in children younger than 6 or 7 years because their cognitive abilities would not have achieved the requisite level of maturation, their subsequent attitudes towards members of ethnic outgroups will depend upon their prevailing social group identification.

Children (and adults) may *never* display ethnic prejudice because they choose *not* to identify with the particular social group whose prevailing attitude and behaviour towards an ethnic minority group is negative and punitive.

## Conclusion

Although a number of attempts have been made to account for the development of ethnic prejudice in children, none of these theoretical approaches provides a comprehensive explanation of the development of children's ethnic attitudes and behaviour.

The developmental social identity theory of prejudice which has been proposed in this paper is compelling because it provides a good fit of the existing pattern of data relating to children's prejudice. Importantly, it recognises the considerable influence exerted by social factors on the acquisition of children's prejudice, yet does not view children simply as pale imitators of the attitudes of those in their social environment. Further, in focusing on children's social motivations as the key to the development of their intergroup attitudes, a social identity-based approach also facilitates a long overdue shift in emphasis away from the prevailing emphasis on the pre-dominance of cognitive processes in much social developmental research.

Having said that, considerable additional research is still required to confirm the efficacy of the present model. Of particular significance is the need for research to address the social identity processes proposed to underly the shift from ethnic preference to prejudice in children. In addition, research is required to assess the relative impact on children's prejudice of social cognitive acquisitions such as decentration, empathy, and moral reasoning. Given the significance of the issue, the importance of this research cannot be overemphasised.

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