Ethnic attitudes of minority students and their contact with majority group teachers

Jochem Thijs *, Maykel Verkuyten

Utrecht University, The Netherlands

A B S T R A C T

Research on intergroup attitudes in children has focused on contact with out-group peers but neglected the role of adults. This cross-sectional self-report study examined the association between the ethnic attitudes of 174 minority (Turkish- and Moroccan–Dutch) preadolescents (ages 9–13) and the perceived interpersonal relationships with their (native Dutch) majority group teachers. Majority classmates (97 native Dutch children) were included as a control group. Analyses showed that Turkish and Moroccan students who had better relationships with their Dutch teacher had more positive attitudes toward the Dutch out-group, especially in relatively segregated classrooms. The positive aspect of the relationship ('closeness') was more important than the negative aspect ('conflict'). The link between out-group attitudes and the relationship with majority teachers was not significant for the majority students. Findings show that contact theory can be applied to interactions between children and important adults, and that student-teacher relationships can contribute to more harmonious ethnic relations.

© 2012 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

In many Western countries, schools are segregated along ethnic lines (Karsten, 2010). For instance, in the four largest cities in The Netherlands, where the current study was conducted, ethnic minority students tend to have many more minority classmates compared to majority students (73% versus 26%; Gijsberts & Herweijer, 2010). School segregation is problematic for all kinds of reasons. In particular, segregated schools provide students with little opportunities for regular, daily contacts with peers from other ethnic groups. According to intergroup contact theory, these contacts are important for the promotion of ethnic integration and positive intergroup relations (Allport, 1954; Tropp & Prenovost, 2008). However, fellow students are not the only source of out-group contact, especially not for ethnic minority children. Although school segregation implies that minority students visit schools with small proportions of majority students, most of their teachers tend to be of a majority background. For instance, in the American educational system the workforce is predominantly white (Little & Bartlett, 2010), and in the Netherlands, most teachers are native Dutch (Thijs, Westhof, & Koomen, 2012).

In the present study, we examine whether minority children's perception of the relationship with their majority teacher is related to their attitude toward the majority out-group. This is important for two reasons. First, it allows us to test whether intergroup contact theory can be generalized to the domain of the student-teacher relationship. This relationship is critical for children's adjustment but has been neglected in contact research. Second, our results could have

considerable practical value: If there are significant associations between (minority) children's out-group attitudes and their relationship with out-group teachers this implies that those relationships should be included in school-based attempts to improve interethnic attitudes. We focus on native Dutch teachers and preadolescent students of Turkish and Moroccan backgrounds. People of Turkish and Moroccan origin are the largest ethnic minority groups in Dutch society. They face the highest level of prejudice and discrimination and they have the lowest socioeconomic status (Gijsberts & Dagevos, 2010).

We examine minority children's attitude toward the majority out-group in two different ways. Following many other studies (e.g., Cairns, Kenworthy, Campbell, & Hewstone, 2006; Wolsko, Park, Judd, & Wittenbrink, 2006) including research among preadolescents (Verkuyten & Thijs, 2001, 2010) we directly examine children's general out-group feelings. In addition, we investigate the degree to which children make an evaluative distinction between the out-group and the in-group in favor of the latter. This so-called 'in-group bias' is a relative measure of out-group attitude and has the advantage of taking possible effects of some response biases into account, such as the tendency to give positive responses. Furthermore, intergroup contact might not only have an effect on out-group attitudes but can also reduce in-group bias by leading to a less positive attitude toward the in-group (Verkuyten, Thijs, & Bekhuis, 2010). Thus, a focus on out-group feeling and in-group bias allows us to develop a more detailed understanding of contact effects in the classroom. Following intergroup contact theory we expect that a positive relationship with one's Dutch teacher is associated with a more positive attitude toward the Dutch in general (i.e., more positive evaluations and less bias). However, we also expect this relationship to be stronger in more

segregated schools where there are few native Dutch students. We explain these predictions below.

Intergroup contact theory

Numerous studies have used intergroup contact theory to examine out-group attitudes in adults and children (Allport, 1954; Pettigrew, 1998). According to the theory, having contact with specific out-group members leads to more favorable evaluations of the out-group in general. This is especially likely when there is institutional support, common goals, and when the contact takes place between equal-status participants. There is much empirical evidence for these propositions, from longitudinal research and from research among children and young adolescents (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006; Tropp & Prenovost, 2008). However, the evidence is stronger for majority group members than for ethnic minorities (Binder et al., 2009; Feddes, Noack, & Rutland, 2009; Vezzali, Giovanni, & Capozza, 2010). One reason for this might be that minorities perceive a lack of equal-status in their interactions with majority members (Tropp & Pettigrew, 2005). Minorities tend to be well aware of their group's lower status in society and contact in unequal-status relationships might reinforce rather than weaken existing stereotypes.

Another condition for successful contact is that it should have high acquaintance or friendship potential (Cook, 1978; Pettigrew, 1998). This means that the contact should permit for the development of meaningful, positive relationships between members of the groups concerned. Contact with high acquaintance potential is likely to meet other conditions for successful contact (a common goal, cooperation, equal status) as well (see Feddes et al., 2009; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2011). Moreover, it allows for acquiring new and more accurate information about the out-group, for the discovery of unexpected similarities, and for disconfirming negative stereotypes about that group. Hence, compared to other kinds of contact, cross-ethnic friendship has been found to be particularly important for positive out-group attitudes and reduced in-group bias. Summarizing the research literature, Pettigrew and Tropp (2011, p. 119) conclude that there is "compelling evidence that cross-group friendships are especially effective in reducing prejudice and promoting a host of positive intergroup outcomes." Moreover, unlike superficial or short-lived contacts, these friendships appear to be equally effective for minority and majority groups (see for a meta-analysis, Davies, Tropp, Aron, Pettigrew, & Wright, 2011).

Ethnic school segregation forms an important obstacle for the development of cross-ethnic friendships. However, friendships with out-group peers are not the only type of relationships with high acquaintance potential. Contacts with meaningful adults might also be important for shaping out-group attitudes, such as the attitude of minority children toward the majority group. In the present study, we examine the dyadic relationship between preadolescent minority students and their majority teacher. In the Dutch school system, preadolescents typically have the same single teacher the whole year round. Thus, similar to cross-ethnic friendships, cross-ethnic relationships with teachers provide children with many important opportunities for positive intergroup contact.

Relationship with out-group teachers

Intergroup contact research has focused on peer relations and neglected the role of the student-teacher relationship. Yet, this relationship has important implications for students' academic, social, and psychological adjustment. Teachers can function as 'secondary attachment figures' which means that they provide support and emotional security when needed. This function is particularly evident for young children (see Thijs & Koomen, 2008), but teachers continue to be important figures throughout the school years (Baker, 2006; Little & Kobak, 2003; Murray & Greenberg, 2000). Research has

found significant links between the quality of the student-teacher relationship and a range of student outcomes, such as academic engagement and achievement (Roorda, Koomen, Spilt, & Oort, 2011), and social, behavioral, and emotional problems (Hamre & Pianta, 2001; Murray & Greenberg, 2000; Rudasill, Reio, Stipanovic, & Taylor, 2010). However, as far as we know, previous research has not examined whether and when the student-teacher relationship is associated with students' out-group attitudes.

There are good reasons to apply contact theory to the domain of the student–teacher relationship. It can be argued that the role division between students and teachers undermines successful contact because it violates the condition of equal status. However, teachers are not always dominant in their interactions with children and children are not always submissive (see Thijs, Koomen, Roorda, & ten Hagen, 2011). The student-teacher role division does not rule out the formation of high-quality relationships where students and teachers interact as "equals" (Pianta, Hamre, & Stuhlman, 2003). Student–teacher relationships may contain many of the qualities found in friendships with peers. In positive high-quality relationships, students and teachers develop mutual trust and positive affect, and they truly get to know each other (Pianta et al., 2003). Such characteristics facilitate out-group learning and the reduction of intergroup anxiety (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2011). Furthermore, positive contact with out-group teachers might be especially likely to lead to favorable attitudes toward the out-group in general. Compared to peers, teachers are important authority figures in children's lives and therefore more easily regarded as exemplary for the majority group as a whole. Moreover, teachers represent the school as an institution, and institutional support is one of the conditions for optimal contact (Allport, 1954; Pettigrew, 1998).

The relationship with one's teacher can also develop in a more negative direction. The large majority of contact research has focused on positive rather than negative contact experiences (Paolini, Harwood, & Rubin, 2010; Pettigrew, 2008). Yet, contacts can also be negative and an important question is whether both types of contacts are equally meaningful for intergroup attitudes. There is some evidence that positive contact experiences are more important for out-group attitudes than the absence of negative ones (Pettigrew, 2008; Stark, 2011). However, Paolini et al. (2010) argued that negative contact experiences are more important because they strengthen group boundaries and confirm stereotypes, and there are indications that the differential effects of positive versus negative contact depend on the specific context in which contact takes place (Bekhuis, Ruiter, & Coenders, 2011).

In the present study we include the relationship dimensions of *closeness and conflict* to examine the differential effects of positive versus negative contact with teachers. Both dimensions can be reliably measured in teachers (Pianta et al., 2003) and in children (Spilt, Koomen, & Mantzicopoulos, 2010; Wu, Hughes, & Kwok, 2010), and involve the interpersonal perceptions, feelings, and behaviors of both relationship partners. Closeness is a positive relationship dimension and refers to the degree to which teachers and children interact and communicate in a warm, open, and effective manner. Conflict entails the degree to which student-teacher interactions are experienced as negative and stressful by both relationship partners (Pianta, 2001; Pianta et al., 2003).

School (de)segregation

Minority students in desegregated schools are more likely to have contacts with majority members and this can lead to a more positive attitude toward the majority out-group as a whole (Verkuyten & Thijs, 2010). However, increased out-group presence can also result in negative contact experiences leading to less positive out-group attitudes (Stark, 2011; Vervoort, Scholte, & Scheepers, 2011). Contact opportunity by itself is not sufficient to promote positive relations