Student-teacher relationships and ethnic outgroup attitudes among majority students

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ABSTRACT

Children's ethnic outgroup attitudes are influenced by their teachers' beliefs and multicultural education. However, research has ignored the possible impact of interpersonal relationships with teachers on students' ethnic attitudes. Three studies, using comparable datasets gathered among native Dutch children (8–13 years) attending grades 4 to 6 in elementary schools in the Netherlands, assess the importance of student-teacher relationships. In Study 1 ($N = 389$), student-teacher relationships were found to be associated with more positive outgroup attitudes, independent of factors commonly used to explain children's outgroup attitudes. Study 2 ($N = 334$) replicated these findings and showed that the impact of student-teacher relationships was not a reflection of the perceived teacher norm on multiculturalism. The results of Study 3 ($N = 308$) show that the association between close student-teacher relationships and children's ethnic attitudes is indirectly associated through internal motivations for intercultural openness, but not through external motivations or intergroup anxiety.

Research has established that children's ethnic outgroup attitudes develop and change over time (Feddes, Noack, & Rutland, 2009; Raabe & Beelmann, 2011), and depend on situational and social-contextual influences (Killen, Hitti, & Mulvey, 2015; McGuire, Rutland, & Nesdale, 2015). Some of this work has focused on the school context by examining ethnic attitudes in relation to classroom ethnic composition (see Thijs & Verkuyten, 2014; Tropp & Prenovost, 2008) and multicultural education programs (for reviews, see Aboud et al., 2012; Bigler, 1999; Stephan, Renfo, & Stephan, 2004), and there also is increasing attention for the role of individual teachers. Research has established, for example, that teachers can affect students' attitudes through the expression of their own views and beliefs on cultural diversity (Grütter & Meyer, 2014; Verkuyten & Thijs, 2013).

However, teachers may influence their students' attitudes not only through their expressed beliefs and teachings, but also through the interpersonal relationships they have with their students. A previous study found that ethnic minority students who shared a closer relationship with their ethnic majority teacher had more positive attitudes towards the ethnic majority group in general (Thijs & Verkuyten, 2012). This finding is consistent with intergroup contact theory (Pettigrew, 1998) which states that the experience of positive meaningful interactions with individual outgroup members increase one's positivity to the outgroup as a whole. Yet, even if students have the same ethnicity as their teachers, their relationships with them may be important for their ethnic attitudes. Same-ethnic relationships do not

involve intergroup contact but, as secondary attachment bonds (Ainsworth, 1973), they might provide children with a sense of security that makes them feel more comfortable with ethnic outgroups. We examined this possibility in three studies.

We used data collected among native Dutch primary school students (aged 8–13) and we investigated whether a closer bond with a native Dutch teacher is related to more positive ethnic outgroup attitudes. In the Netherlands, primary school students typically have one or two teachers for the whole year. We examined this bond from the perspective of the children and, to examine the unique association with out-group attitudes, we controlled for ethnic group identification, ethnic classroom composition, gender, age (Studies 1–3), perceived peer acceptance (Study 1), student-parent relationship (Study 2), and perceived teachers' multicultural norms (Studies 2 and 3). To test the robustness of the association, we also explored whether these control variables moderate the expected association between student-teacher relationship and ethnic attitudes. Finally, we investigated the degree to which this association is mediated by interethnic anxiety and the motivation for intercultural openness (Study 3).

1. Student-teacher relationship as secondary attachment

A growing body of research demonstrates the importance of the student-teacher relationship for children's academic engagement and

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achievement, and emotional and social development (Davis, 2003; Hamre & Pianta, 2006). Much of the positive effect of the student-teacher relationship can be explained in terms of a so-called secondary attachment (Ainsworth, 1989). Attachment Theory (Ainsworth, 1973; Bowlby, 1969), describes attachment as a deep and enduring affectionate bond between two persons. In young children, the most prominent attachment figure is usually the mother, but in later childhood, other adults such as teachers serve as attachment figures. However, the relationship between teacher and child is not as enduring or as exclusive as the relationship between parent and child. In most educational systems, children change teachers each year. Moreover students have to 'share' their teacher with their classmates, and some classrooms have more than one teacher (Hamilton & Howes, 1992). Teachers are therefore regarded as 'ad-hoc' or 'secondary' attachment figures, who typically tend to engage in affectionate bonds with their students (Verschueren & Koomen, 2012; Zajac & Kobak, 2006).

The sheer amount of time that teachers spend with their students, especially in elementary school, provides many opportunities for children to become attached to their teacher. This secondary attachment to teachers is more obvious among younger children, but it has been found to be important for preadolescents (9–13 years old) as well (Baker, 2006; Little & Kobak, 2003). This secondary attachment may be particularly important when secure parental attachment is lacking (Mitchell-Copeland, Denham, & Demulder, 1997). Nevertheless, even when parental bonds are secure, secondary attachment to teachers can generate additional positive effects. A strong relationship with the teacher has even been found to outweigh parental support in its influence on academic development (Gregory & Weinstein, 2004), illustrating the considerable formative potential of these student-teacher relationships.

The attachment that teachers provide in the context of the school makes children feel accepted and provides them with a 'secure base' to freely explore their social world (Bergin & Bergin, 2009). Teachers can function as a 'safe haven', a 'place' to return to in times of need and stress (see Verschueren & Koomen, 2012). Knowing there is a significant other who will be there to rely on, provides a sense of confidence and security (Weinfield, Sroufe, Egeland, & Carlson, 2008). This can help children to be less concerned with their personal needs and emotional or physical well-being, and make them more willing to be involved in new and challenging social situations (Bowlby, 1988; Cassidy & Shaver, 2008). Meeting strangers is such a challenging situation, and according to attachment theory (Bowlby, 1982), children have a natural fear of the unknown which can threaten their sense of security. Theoretically, this fear can extend to people from other ethnic groups. Ethnic outgroup members are relatively unfamiliar and most people tend to find (possible) interactions with ethnic outgroup members challenging and discomforting (Davies, Tropp, Aron, Pettigrew, & Wright, 2011; Turner, Hewstone, & Voci, 2007).

To date, there has been a lack of research on relational security and outgroup attitudes in children but research among adults has found that the experience of relational security can improve outgroup attitudes (Boag & Carnelley, 2012; Hofstra, van Oudenhoven, & Buunk, 2005; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2001). Two studies have focused on the underlying mechanisms of this effect. Mikulincer and Shaver (2001) showed that participants who were primed with the sense of a secure base were more positive about ethnic outgroups because the sense of security attenuated participants' appraisals of outgroup threat. More recently, Boag and Carnelley (2015) found that the priming of attachment security diminishes outgroup prejudice by temporarily enhancing empathic concern. Thus, and consistent with attachment theory, a sense of relational security can make ethnic outgroups less threatening, but it may also increase one's openness to and interest in these outgroups. In the school context, children's sense of relatedness to their teacher might have similar effects and thereby improve children's outgroup attitudes. In the present research, we tested this proposition, and in Study 3, we examined the roles of intergroup anxiety and the motivation for intercultural openness.

2. Intergroup anxiety

The relational security provided by attachment figures such as teachers is likely to decrease social anxiety in children which supports their natural tendency to explore their social environment (Cassidy & Shaver, 2008). Research has demonstrated that being securely attached to significant others is related to being less anxious in social encounters with various others (Bohlin, Hagekull, & Rydell, 2000; Brumariu & Kerns, 2008; Kestenbaum, Farber, & Sroufe, 1989), including adults (Hazan & Shaver, 1994; Lopez & Brennan, 2000; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). By contrast, social anxiety causes children to withdraw from interacting with unfamiliar others (Howes & Hamilton, 1993). More anxious children distance themselves from others, which is reflected in more negative attitudes towards these others (Binder et al., 2009). Furthermore, research has shown that anticipating interactions with ethnic outgroup members already can generate so-called intergroup anxiety (Plant & Devine, 2003; Stephan & Stephan, 1985). The extensive literature on intergroup contact has demonstrated that intergroup anxiety is an important reason for negative ethnic attitudes (Riek, Mania, & Gaertner, 2006; Turner et al., 2007; Voci & Hewstone, 2003). Social anxiety is likely to affect these attitudes because anxieties cause children to withdraw from interacting with unfamiliar others (Howes & Hamilton, 1993). This leads us to hypothesize that children who feel closer to their teacher will experience less social anxiety about possible interethnic interactions and therefore will have more positive ethnic outgroup attitudes.

3. Motivation for intercultural openness

A close attachment to their teacher might also affect students' outgroup attitudes by promoting an internal motivation to engage with cultural others. Social psychologists have studied people's motivations to react to ethnic and cultural differences in terms of the regulation of prejudice (Crandall, Eshleman, & O'Brien, 2002; Hughes, Alo, Krieger, & O'Leary, 2016; Legault, Green-Demers, Grant, & Chung, 2007), rather than in terms of the motivation to seek and develop positive interactions with cultural others (Siem, Stürmer, & Pittinsky, 2016). The research on the motivation to regulate prejudice has shown that it is important to make a distinction between an *internal* motivation that springs from personal interest and convictions (e.g., enjoy getting to know new people, belief that one should be nice to everyone), and an *external* motivation (e.g., wanting to be liked by others, fearing social sanction). Theoretically, the former should be stronger and more consistently related to people's expression of outgroup attitudes as it implies that individuals have internalized the social norm to be non-prejudiced (Crandall et al., 2002) and thus personally think it is important to be unbiased and open to other groups. Several studies have supported this claim (e.g., Legault et al., 2007; Plant & Devine, 1998; Thijs, Gharaei, & de Vroome, 2016). In the present research (Study 3), we borrow from this line of work by focusing on children's internal motivation to seek and develop positive interactions with ethnic outgroup peers. We have two reasons to expect that this motivation is affected by the degree of closeness in the student-teacher relationship. First, this motivation includes an intrinsic desire to engage with unfamiliar others, which matches the exploration tendency that is facilitated by a sense of relational security. Second, it involves the basic principle to be prosocial towards out-group members by respecting and accepting them. When people feel securely attached to others they are less focused on their own emotional states and more concerned with the well-being of others (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007; Mikulincer, Shaver, Gillath, & Nitzberg, 2005). A closer student-teacher relationship is thus hypothesized to be related to a stronger internal motivation for intercultural openness, and we test whether this motivation played an intermediate role in the anticipated association between student-teacher relationship and children's ethnic attitudes. To investigate the unique importance of children's internal motivation we also include their external motivation to regulate prejudice. Children can have various