Contextualizing children’s ethnic attitudes:
Classroom norms and social relations

Jochem Thijs
ERCOMER
Utrecht University
Figure 1. Cumulative $d$ values for contrasts between age categories in prejudice toward all out-groups.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. 

Meta-analysis Raabe & Beelmann (2011)
Ethnic Attitudes in Childhood

• Cognitive Developmental Theory (Aboud, 1988)
  • Up to age 7, growing importance of group boundaries
  • After age 7, greater flexibility, multiple classification skills

• Social-motivational and contextual explanations
  • Social Identity Development Theory (Nesdale, 2008)
  • Contact Theory (Allport, 1954; Pettigrew, 1998)
This Presentation

• Focus on middle childhood and beyond
  • → Contextual approach

• Classroom research
• Multilevel approach
  • Variance within versus variance between classrooms
  • Up to 10% of the variance at the classroom level
• Dutch situation: Turkish-, Moroccan-, and native Dutch students

• Interethnic contact
• Peer norms
• Integration
Contact Theory
(Allport, 1954; Pettigrew, 1998)

- Out-group contact can lead to positive out-group attitudes depending on several conditions
  - Equal status; support by authorities; common goals; cooperation
  - >> Quality or friendship potential

- Mediating mechanism is cognitive
  - Learning about the out-group makes “them” more similar to “us”

- Support in both adult- and child populations (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006, 2008; Tropp & Prenovost, 2008)
Contact in Schools

• Increasing trend towards school segregation

• The Netherlands: over 50% of the primary schools in the 4 largest cities is qualified as “black” (> 50% pupils from non-Western backgrounds)

• Problematic
• Most teachers belong to the ethnic majority group

• Teachers may be important contact figures for children
  • Authority figures
  • Friendship potential despite status difference and role division
• Important developmental system with unique effects on children’s academic, social, and psychological adjustment (Roorda, Koomen, Spilt, & Oort, 2011)

• Particularly important for minority students (Burchinal, Peisner-Feinberg, Pianta, & Howes, 2002; Meehan, Hughes, & Cavell, 2003; Murray et al., 2008)
Predictions & Design

• **Main Prediction:** Minority students who share better relationships with their majority teachers will have more positive evaluations of the majority out-group, especially in segregated classrooms.

• **Participants:** 271 grade 4-6 students; 108 Moroccan-Dutch 66 Turkish-Dutch examined in relation to 36 native Dutch teachers.

• **Self-reports** about student-teacher relationship quality (relational closeness) and ethnic attitudes.

• 97 native Dutch children as a control group.
Measures

• Student Perception of Relationship with Teacher Scale (SPRTS; Koomen & Jellesma, 2015).
  • Closeness (6 items; “If I have a problem I can share it with my teacher”)
  • Alpha’s > 0.8; measurement invariance

• Out-group evaluations, ‘seven faces’ response format (Yee & Brown, 1992; Verkuyten & Thijs, 2001)

• Turkish- and Moroccan-Dutch students: Dutch
• Native Dutch students: Turks and Moroccans ($r = 0.63$)
Results

• Positive effect of relational closeness on out-group evaluation

• Not significant among native Dutch students → Contact effect

• Effect qualified by ethnic classroom composition
Effects of Closeness on Out-Group Evaluation of Ethnic Minority Students

\[ b = 0.05, \text{ ns} \]

\[ b = 0.45, p < 0.01 \]
Norms and Ethnic Attitudes

• School norms:
  • Anti-prejudice norms as component of multicultural/intercultural education
  • Moderate effects (Verkuyten & Thijs, 2013)

• Peer norms:
  • Experimental manipulation (e.g., Nesdale, Maass, Durkin, & Griffiths, 2005)
  • Peer norms can override school norms (McGuire, Rutland & Nesdale, 2015)
  • Problem: Ecological validity?
  • Subjective perceptions (e.g., Jugert, Noack, & Rutland, 2011)
  • Problem: Accuracy?
Accuracy of Peer Norm Perceptions

• To what extent are peer norm perceptions the result of social projection?

• “the process, or set of processes, by which people come to expect others to be similar to themselves” (Robbins & Krueger, 2005, p. 32)

Testing Projection
(Thijs & Verkuyten, 2016)

• Multilevel research among two samples of grade 4-6 students in the Netherlands ($n = 342$, and $n = 525$)

• Evaluations of Turks and Moroccans vs Dutch people
• What do most of your classmates think?
• What do you think?
Approach

- “Actual” norm = classroom average of individual scores
- Individual deviation from the norm
- Effect of deviation on norm perception indicates projection (false consensus)
Results

- $\beta$ path $b = 0.55 - 0.58$ ($\beta$ path $a = 0.49 - 0.66$)
- $\rightarrow$ Evidence for projection

- Projection depends on classroom belonging and self-certainty (path $b =$ stronger)
Inferred Normative Influence

- **Friends**: no evidence *(Aboud & Doyle, 1996; Ritchey & Fishbein, 2001)*

- **Peer groups and classmates**: positive evidence *(Kiesner et al., 2003; Poteat, 2007)*
Classmates’ Multicultural Beliefs  
(Thijs & Verkuyten, 2013)

- Classmates are important social reference group in early adolescence (see Leach & Vliek; Thijs, Verkuyten, & Helmond, 2010)

- Not self-chosen, selection or homophily effects (Kandel, 1978) can be ruled out

- Multiculturalism: normative belief stressing appreciation for diversity and respect for minority group identities (Fowers & Richardson, 1996)
**Hypotheses**

- Susceptibility to classmates depends on peer acceptance
  - To be popular, or well accepted, ‘typically means being well adapted to the norms of one’s peer group’ (Allen & Antonishak, 2008, p. 143)

- Students adopt or internalize the beliefs of their classmates to guide their own evaluations (see Deutsch & Gerard, 1955; Turner, 1991)
Design

- 584 native Dutch grade 5-6 students from 38 classrooms
- Multicultural beliefs (adapted from Berry & Kalin, 1995)
  - e.g., ‘Turks and Moroccans should be allowed to maintain their own traditions and culture in the Netherlands’
  - \( \frac{\Sigma \text{class} - \text{personal score}}{\text{Nstudents} - 1} \)
- Evaluation of Turks and Moroccans
  - feeling thermometer (e.g., Wolsko et al., 2006)
  - \( M = 52.78 \) (\( SD = 24.40 \))
- Perceived peer acceptance (Rutland et al, 2011)
  - e.g., ‘Do you ever feel excluded at school?’
Effects of Classmates’ Beliefs on Out-group Attitude

Weak Classmates’ Beliefs (-1SD < M)  Strong Classmates’ Beliefs (+1SD > M)

$\beta = 22.28, p < 0.01$

$\beta = 4.93, ns$
Figure 1. Summary of hypotheses
Integrating Norms and Contact Research

• Negative contact: threat and power struggles
• Imbalance of power thesis (Graham, 2006; Juvonen, Nishina, & Graham, 2006)
  • Local minority groups are more likely to be victimized by local majority groups
  • Stronger exposure to outgroups leads to negative interethnic encounters

• …… Doesn’t this depend on norms?
Ethnic Composition, Classroom Norms, & Peer Victimization
(Thijs, Verkuyten, Grundel, 2014)

- Study among Turkish-Dutch and native Dutch children in grades 5-6

- Variables
  - Proportion of out-group students
  - Peer victimization
  - “Actual” biased norms of the out-group
Effects on Peer Victimization

% outgroup low  % outgroup high

Strong bias  Weak bias
Conclusion

• Importance of taking a contextual approach
  • Little variance between classrooms?
  • Interventions

• School-based research should focus on
  • Teachers as contact figures
  • Normative influence of peers
  • Interaction between factors
Thank you

Contact: j.t.thijs@uu.nl