Children’s ethnic prejudice: A comparison of approaches

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Abstract

Two studies assessed predictions from sociocognitive theory (SCT, Aboud, 1988) and social identity development theory (SIDT, Nesdale, 1999a) concerning the development of children’s ethnic prejudice, with 8, 10 and 12 year old Anglo-Australian children participating in the first study, and 6, 9 and 12 year olds participating in the second study. In both studies, the children listened to a story about an ingroup Australian boy and an outgroup Vietnamese (Study 1)/Chinese boy (Study 2) who displayed equal numbers of stereotype-consistent (Study 1)/positive traits (Study 2) and stereotype-inconsistent (Study 1)/negative traits (Study 2). The results of the two studies revealed that, as they increased in age, the children remembered more of the ingroup character’s stereotype-inconsistent/negative traits versus stereotype-consistent/positive traits, and they liked him less. In contrast, with increasing age, the children remembered more of the outgroup character’s stereotype-consistent/positive traits versus stereotype-inconsistent/negative traits and they liked him more. The results are discussed in terms of their greater support for SIDT versus SCT.

Keywords

Children; Prejudice; Stereotypes; Attitudes

Introduction

Ethnic 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 (e.g. 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 (Aboud, 1988), 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, and may prove to be long lasting (Durkin, 1995).

The aim of this paper is to briefly outline the main theoretical approaches to accounting for children’s ethnic prejudice and the extent to which each is supported by research findings. Two studies are then outlined which were designed to test the main theoretical approaches to the development of children’s prejudice.

Approaches to the Development of Children’s Prejudice

Three main approaches to accounting for children’s ethnic prejudice have been proposed. The social reflectance approach contends that ethnic prejudice, when it does appear in children, does not actually emerge until they are well into middle childhood, around 9 or 10 years of age (e.g., Proshansky, 1966). By this time it is considered that the process of ethnic attitude differentiation, integration and consolidation has been progressed by the child’s attainment of ethnic constancy and the child’s adoption of the language of racism. The most widely accepted version of this approach places considerable emphasis on the influence of the child’s social environment, particularly the impact of the child’s parents and peers. It is assumed that children simply learn their ethnic attitudes from these sources in the same way that they learn other social behaviours (e.g., Allport, 1954).

In stark contrast to the preceding approach, sociocognitive theory (SCT, Aboud, 1988, Aboud & Doyle, 1996a,b), contends that most, if not all, children display ethnic prejudice by 5-7 years of age and that there is no strong evidence that children’s prejudice is influenced by the attitudes of parents or peers. Instead, Aboud argues that children’s prejudice reflects their developing perceptual-cognitive processes. Initially, children are considered to be dominated by affective-perceptual processes associated with fear of the unknown and attachment to the familiar. Perceptual processes subsequently dominate, increasing to a peak between 5-7 years, with preference for the (similar) ingroup and rejection of the (different) outgroup being
determined primarily by the outgroup’s physical attributes (e.g., skin colour, language, body size). Thereafter, cognitive processes take ascendancy with the advent of the concrete operational stage of cognitive development and, later, formal operational thinking, the effect being that the child is increasingly able to understand the individual rather than the group-based qualities of people, which thereby results in a reduction in their ethnic prejudice.

Compared with SCT, the more recently developed social identity development theory (SIDT, Nesdale, 1999a) proposes that children who display ethnic prejudice pass through four sequential phases (undifferentiated, ethnic awareness, ethnic preference, ethnic prejudice) which vary in terms of the social motivations and behaviours which characterise them, and the events which precipitate changes from one phase to the next. Of central importance is the assumption that by 4 or 5 years of age, children in multi-ethnic communities who are typically in the ethnic preference phase are aware that the members of some ethnic groups are better off and more highly regarded than others and that they make comparisons between their standing as a member of one ethnic group and the members of other groups. SIDT also assumes that by this age children prefer to be members of high rather than low status groups because they derive social self-esteem from the former but not the latter. The implication for children is that membership of the dominant cultural group prompts a focus on, and preference for that group.

Importantly, rather than ethnic prejudice diminishing from 7 years onwards, SIDT proposes that it is precisely in this period that ethnic prejudice actually emerges and crystallises in those children who come to hold such attitudes. According to SIDT, the transition from ingroup preference to outgroup prejudice depends upon the strength of social identity processes which motivate the child to adopt the negative ethnic attitudes prevailing in his/her social group. SIDT proposes that the probability of children adopting their social group’s ethnic prejudice as their own will increase as (1) that prejudice is increasingly shared and expressed by (i.e., is normative to) members of the social group, and (2) members of the dominant group increasingly feel their well-being is threatened in some way by members of the ethnic outgroup(s).

In sum, although the preceding treatment is necessarily abbreviated, it is clear that markedly different theoretical accounts of the development of children’s ethnic prejudice have been proposed. The accounts differ in terms of both the age sequence and the importance accorded to sources such as parents and peers, as well as the mechanism through which prejudice is acquired.

**Research Findings**

Although there has been an extensive amount of research which has addressed the development of ethnic prejudice in children, it is fair to say that empirical support for each of the preceding models is currently mixed.

In relation to the social reflectance approach, for example, although significant correlations between the ethnic attitudes of parents and children have been reported, other studies have reported low or non-existent correlations (e.g., Mosher & Scodel, 1960; Frenkel-Brunswik & Havel, 1953; Aboud & Doyle, 1996b). Similarly, Aboud & Doyle (1996a) reported a significant peer effect in one study, but not in another (Aboud & Doyle, 1996b, Study 2).

In relation to sociocognitive theory, research has revealed evidence of apparent linkages between the development of children’s cognitive abilities from 3 to 12 years of age and several types of ethnic cognitions such as ethnic flexibility and ethnic constancy (Aboud, 1984), that the acquisition of concrete operational thinking coincided with a decrease in ingroup prejudice, and that the mastery of conservation preceded the reduction in prejudice (e.g., Doyle, Beaudet & Aboud, 1988); Doyle & Aboud, 1995). At the same time, however, although Doyle & Aboud (1995), for example, found a linkage between children’s conservation and prejudice, up to 50% of the children who could conserve, still displayed prejudice.

Further, although there are certainly a number of studies which have reported an unambiguous decrease in prejudice after 7 years, as sociocognitive theory would predict, others have reported not only that ingroup prejudice remained at the same level from 7 to 12 years, but that ingroup prejudice actually increased during these years (see Nesdale, in press, for a review). Perhaps more importantly, however, there are good reasons for questioning whether the data which sociocognitive theory is founded seeks to explain actually comprises ethnic prejudice. In short, much of the extant children’s “prejudice” data has been obtained in studies in which researchers have typically used a variation of the doll preference technique in which children indicate a preference for, or assign positive or negative traits to, ethnically differentiated dolls or photos. In view of the transparency of this measure, it is arguable that the decline in ingroup preference by dominant group children after 7 years of age which has been reported in some studies may simply be a social desirability response (e.g., Katz, 1976). In addition, given that children’s doll preferences are

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unrelated to their friendship and play preferences, there are strong grounds for concluding that children’s doll preferences reflect their ingroup preference rather than their outgroup prejudice. Less explicit measures of prejudice suggest that real racial cleavage, as well as racial tension and epithets, do not occur until children are at least 8 or 9 years of age (Nesdale, in press).

Finally, in relation to social identity development theory, research has indicated that children as young as 5 years of age are sensitive to the status of their social group, that they like their group more, and see themselves as being more similar to the ingroup members, when they have high versus low status (e.g., Bigler & Lieben, 1992, 1993; Nesdale & Flesser, in press). Low versus high status group members also seek to change their group membership and, like adults, their liking and similarity ratings of ingroup and outgroup members are influenced by whether they can change groups (e.g., Nesdale & Flesser, in press). Finally, there is some evidence that, in the absence of outgroup threat, children in the middle childhood period remain primarily focused on the ingroup and its members, rather than feeling prejudice towards members of ethnic outgroups who happen to be in the vicinity (e.g., Nesdale, 1999a). However, there is currently no evidence relating to the self-esteem effects of ingroup versus outgroup membership, or of the effects of outgroup threat on children’s tendency to display outgroup prejudice.

In sum, the current situation is that there are several competing accounts of the development of ethnic prejudice in children, and there are research findings which are consistent, and sometimes inconsistent, with each approach. The present paper describes two studies which were designed to shed some further light on these competing claims, particularly those of SCT and SIDT. Central to this objective was the use of a technique which tackled the transparency issue by seeking to reduce the salience of ethnicity and the focus on prejudice. This was accomplished by utilising a paradigm familiar to children which provided a range of additional and more realistic information concerning the target stimuli and by seeking responses on a number of other context-relevant but prejudice-irrelevant, measures. This technique – the intercultural narrative test (INT) - involves children reading (or being read) a short story involving two characters, one being of the same, and the other different, ethnicity to the subject (e.g., Nesdale & McLaughlin, 1987). The story is thematic (e.g., “a day at the zoo”) and each character reveals a mixture of positive and negative traits and behaviours as the story unfolds. Thus, the salience of ethnicity, as well as the focus on prejudice, are both de-emphasised and the task is made more familiar and realistic because of the array of information presented, as well as the other issues which can be addressed (e.g., what did the characters wear, what did they do, etc.).

Study One

Introduction and Method

Two hundred and seventy Anglo-Australian children participated in the first study (Nesdale, 1999b) with equal numbers of eight, ten and twelve year old children. The children listened to a story about an ingroup Anglo-Australian boy and an outgroup Vietnamese boy, each of whom displayed equal numbers of ethnic stereotype-consistent and –inconsistent traits and behaviours. The children’s memories for the stereotype-consistent and inconsistent traits were then assessed, together with their liking ratings (on bi-polar scales) of each of the story characters.

The first question of interest concerned whether there would be age-related changes in memory for stereotype-consistent versus -inconsistent information, and whether those changes would be interactively influenced by the ethnicity of the story character (i.e., Anglo-Australian versus Vietnamese). Research to date with adults has revealed a response bias for stereotype-inconsistent versus -consistent information, particularly when a recognition rather than a recall measure of memory is utilised and there are memory capacity constraints (see Hamilton & Sherman, 1994, for a review). Bearing in mind the array of information to be presented about the two story characters in the present study, sociocognitive theory would predict that as children become older, they would increasingly individualise both story characters and hence would remember more of the stereotype-inconsistent versus -consistent information for both story characters. In contrast, SIDT would predict that more stereotype-inconsistent information would be remembered, but more so in relation to the ingroup story character whose stereotype-inconsistent traits would attract the children’s attention because they would be surprising and would violate an expectancy of the traits likely to be displayed by ingroup members.

The second question centred on the children’s liking for the two story characters. Consistent with sociocognitive theory, it would be predicted that the youngest children would prefer the ingroup character but that this ingroup preference would systematically decrease with age, as the children increasingly took into account the individual and stereotype-inconsistent qualities of both story characters. In contrast, consistent with SIDT, it would be predicted that, regardless of age, the
children would prefer their ingroup to the outgroup but that if, with increasing age, the older children did become increasingly sensitised to the ingroup story character’s stereotype-inconsistent traits, as predicted above, the ingroup story character would actually be liked increasingly less than the outgroup story character. That is, whereas the liking of younger children would simply be influenced by group membership information (see Nesdale & McLaughlin, 1987), older children would increasingly take account of person information, particularly information indicating that another child was unworthy or unrepresentative of ingroup membership. This prediction is reminiscent of the “black sheep” effect identified by Marques and his colleagues (e.g., Marques, Yzerbyt & Leyens, 1988; Marques, Robalo & Rocha, 1992); that is, the tendency to derogate an unlikable ingrouper more than a similarly unlikable outgrouper.

**Results and Discussion**

Analysis of the children’s recognition memory scores revealed main effects for age, story character and information consistency. Of particular interest to the present study, however, were the interactions involving age. Thus, the age x story character interaction indicated that the children remembered more about the ingroup Australian story character with increasing age, and that at each age level they remembered more about the ingroup character than the outgroup Vietnamese character, although the difference tended to diminish with increasing age.

In addition, the findings revealed a significant age x information consistency interaction. As the children’s age increased, they remembered more of the inconsistent information relating to the story characters, whereas their memory for the consistent information was unaffected by their age. Finally, a significant story character ethnicity x information consistency interaction indicated that the children remembered more of the ingroup Australian character’s stereotype-inconsistent versus -consistent traits whereas there was no difference in their memories of the outgroup Vietnamese character’s stereotype-inconsistent versus -consistent traits.

In sum, the results indicated that the children responded differently to the stereotype-consistent versus -inconsistent information relating to the ingroup versus outgroup story characters, and that their responses changed with increasing age; specifically, the children remembered more of the ingroup Australian character’s stereotype-inconsistent traits as they increased in age. Apparently, the stereotype-inconsistent information concerning the ingroup Australian versus outgroup Vietnamese story character was simply more salient or attention-grabbing to the participants, presumably because they revealed the Australian character to be an unrepresentative member of the Australian ingroup; that is, one who displayed negative traits. Such an interpretation is, of course, consistent with SIDT, which argues that the groups or categories which are important to individuals, and to which individuals see themselves as belonging, are those which maintain and enhance their self-esteem.

Further, this interpretation is entirely consistent with the liking results which also revealed age and story character main effects which, once again, were qualified by a significant age x story character interaction. This result (see Figure 1) indicated that the 8 year old children preferred the Australian to the Vietnamese story character but that by 10 and 12 years of age the situation had reversed and the children expressed greater liking for the Vietnamese than the Australian character. Indeed, liking for the Australian significantly decreased from 8 to 10 to 12 years of age.

While the 8 year old children’s preference for the ingroup story character over the outgroup story character is consistent with both sociocognitive theory and SIDT, the results for the 10 and 12 year olds are. However, what is of special note in relation to the present findings, is the fact that the effect was absent in 8 year olds, appeared in 10 year olds and was strengthened by 12 years of age. And, once again, this finding tended to be paralleled by the causal attribution results.

![Figure 1](image-url)

*Figure 1* Age x Story Character Effect on Children’s Liking – Study 1

In sum, the findings from the first study appear to provide greater support for SIDT (Nesdale, 1999a) than for SCT (Aboud, 1988). Contrary to the latter, when the total pattern of findings is considered, it is clear that the children’s changing responses as they increased in age were not merely dependent upon their expanding abilities to differentiate individuals, for their attention was seemingly not equally shared between the ingroup and outgroup story characters.
Of particular significance to the children as they increased in age was the stereotype inconsistency of the ingroup story character. It was this information which was most remembered and which appeared to have the greatest impact on their liking for the story characters. Seemingly, the children’s responses were increasingly motivated by their concerns regarding the ingroup story character’s worthiness to be a member of their ingroup. While this response is consistent with SIDT, and has been revealed as the “black sheep” effect in adults (e.g., Marques et al., 1988; Marques et al., 1992), the real importance of the findings concerns the fact that the children at all ages were much more concerned about the ingroup member (i.e., ingroup preference) than they were about the ethnic outgroup member (i.e., outgroup prejudice).

**Study Two**

**Introduction and Method**

While the first study garnered some valuable findings concerning the development of children’s ethnic attitudes, several issues which required further attention were addressed in a second study (Nesdale & Brown, 2000). First, this study included 6, 9 and 12 year old children, so as to span the critical seventh year specified by SCT, as well as enabling children’s responses to be followed to the upper end of childhood.

Second, given that the first study manipulated the stereotype-consistency of the story characters’ traits, it meant that the Australian story character displayed half positive and half negative traits, compared with the standard, unambiguously, positive ingroup stereotype which is held by Australian children (Nesdale & McLaughlin, 1987). The effect of this may have been that the Australian character was simply seen to be a less favourable person than the Vietnamese character, with the resulting impact on the children’s memories and liking ratings. Accordingly, in the second study, each character displayed four positive and four negative traits such that the positive traits in the two sets, and the negative traits in the two sets were matched for degree of positivity and negativity, respectively.

Third, in addition to allowing for the children to identify with the story character from their ethnic ingroup, if they so chose, the study also assessed whether any such tendencies would be influenced by the relationship between the two story characters. Thus, for half the children, the story characters were revealed to be the best of friends who shared lots of activities. For the remaining children, the story characters were described as being bad friends whose relationship had been characterised by lots of disputes.

In sum, 6, 9 and 12 year old Anglo-Australian children in the present study were asked to listen to a story about an Australian and a Chinese boy who were portrayed as good friends or bad enemies. Each of the boys displayed equal numbers of positive and negative traits, and each boy also displayed a positive and negative behavior. Again, of particular interest were the possible age-related changes in the memories of the children of the traits and behaviours displayed by the ingroup versus outgroup story characters, as well as their feelings of like or dislike directed towards the ingroup versus outgroup story characters.

In relation to the children’s memories of the story characters’ positive and negative traits, it was assumed that Study 2 would reveal a similar pattern of findings to Study 1 when the two story characters had a positive relationship. However, when the relationship between the story characters was negative, the reverse findings might be expected if the effect of the negative relationship was to enhance the children’s identification with the ingroup versus outgroup story character. That is, more of the ingroup character’s positive versus negative traits would be remembered, whereas more of the outgroup character’s negative versus positive traits would be remembered.

Similarly, it was expected that the same pattern of liking responses, as were revealed in Study 1, would be revealed, when the two characters had a positive relationship. However, when the two characters had a negative relationship, it was expected that the ingroup character would be liked more, and the outgroup character less – that is, the “black sheep” effect would be reversed.

**Results and Discussion**

Consistent with Study 1, and with SIDT, the memory results again revealed differences in the children’s responses between ages which was interactively influenced by the story character’s ethnic group. Thus, the 6 and 9 year old participants remembered more of the ingroup characters’ positive versus negative traits and more of the outgroup characters’ negative versus positive traits. However, sometime between 9 and 12 years of age, there was a dramatic change in the children’s responses to the two story characters such that the 12 year old children remembered more of the ingroup character’s negative versus positive traits, and the outgroup characters’ positive versus negative traits. Similarly, analysis of the children’s liking responses revealed that whereas the 6 and 9 year old children liked the ingroup character more than the outgroup character, the 12 year olds displayed the “black

Several important conclusions follow from these two studies. First, even children as young as 6 years apparently quite straightforwardly and naturally categorise themselves or identify with the ingroup (Anglo-Australian) versus the outgroup (Vietnamese or Chinese) character in the story, without any cuing or prompting by the researchers. This finding is consistent with other research indicating that preschool children actively and spontaneously engage in intergroup categorisations and comparisons (e.g., Nesdale & Flesser, in press).

Second, given that the stimulus material remained constant over the different age groups, it is clear that older children view the material through ‘different eyes’. Importantly, the findings suggest that older children do not listen to, and process, information (in this case, a story) in a less biased, more impartial way, as SCT would argue. Rather, the findings are more consistent with the SIDT position that the older children remained as focused on the ingroup story character as the younger children, but placed different weights on the information, with differing effects. Specifically, whereas the younger children seemingly focused on and/or remembered the stereotype-consistent/positive versus stereotype-inconsistent/negative trait information about the ingroup character, the older children focused on and/or remembered the stereotype-inconsistent/ negative versus stereotype-consistent/ positive information about this character. That is, rather than children’s ingroup preferences decreasing with increasing age, as SCT claims, the reverse is actually the case – children are actually even more concerned about the standing of their group, as they increase in age. Moreover, the ingroup preference interpretation is entirely consistent with the fact that the children’s liking responses paralleled their memories. As the children increased in age, they revealed themselves to be less positive towards the ingroup character and more positive towards the outgroup character, even to the extent that, at 12 years, they actually liked the outgroup character more than the ingroup character.

Of course, the latter point also gives emphasis to the SIDT view that the striking ingroup orientation and preference revealed by children does not necessarily lead them to reject, dislike or express prejudice towards all outgroup members as a matter of course. As several other researchers have also found (e.g., Aboud & Mitchell, 1977; Nesdale & Flesser, in press), even the youngest children in the present study did not rate the outgroup character negatively. Instead, they tended to rate the outgroup member less positively than the ingroup member, and generally no lower than the mid-point of the scale. These findings reinforce the SIDT position that, in the absence of considerations such as threat or conflict, young children are more concerned with ingroup preference than outgroup prejudice and discrimination (Nesdale & Flesser, in press).

It was partly in an attempt to assess the latter proposition that the second study sought to manipulate the relationship between the two story characters – for half the children, the story characters were good friends, while for the remaining children, they were bad enemies. As it happened, however, the results revealed that regardless of the story characters’ relationship, the youngest children favoured the ingroup character while the oldest children favoured the outgroup character. While it might be suggested that the children simply did not register the relationship between the story characters, a more plausible interpretation is that the story characters’ relationship was simply not seen as being greatly relevant to the children’s primary focus on the ingroup. Indeed, somewhat ironically, the liking data indicated that the children actually liked both story characters more when they had a good versus a bad relationship. Consistent with SIDT, the implication of the preceding interpretation is that the “black sheep” effect displayed by the older children is unlikely to be reversed unless the situation is such that the participants identify with the group of which the ingroup character is a member and that group is really threatened by the outgroup character’s group.

In conclusion, the findings from the present studies revealed that children’s ethnic attitudes and cognitions vary as the children increase from 6 to 12 years of age. Moreover, consistent with social identity development theory (Nesdale, 1999a), the
findings indicated that children’s changing responses as they increase in age are not merely dependent on their expanding abilities to differentiate individuals, as claimed by sociocognitive theory (Aboud, 1988). Instead, the findings suggested that, other things being equal, children in this age range tend to focus upon the ingroup and its members, rather than automatically displaying ethnic prejudice towards members of ethnic outgroups.

References


