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Leiden
The Netherlands

Child interethnic prejudice in the Netherlands: social learning from parents and picture books

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Citation

Bruijn, Y. de. (2022, January 11). *Child interethnic prejudice in the Netherlands: social learning from parents and picture books*. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/3249963>

Version: Publisher's Version

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Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

Chapter 7

General Discussion

The aim of this dissertation was to provide insight in interethnic prejudice of children in the Netherlands and attitudes and ideologies that they are exposed to through two socialization agents (parents and children's books). Specifically attitudes and ideologies based on intergroup contact theories and diversity ideologies were of interest. Results from Chapter 2 showed interethnic prejudice among White Dutch children (6-to 8-years old) in the form of ingroup favoritism and outgroup rejection, with children of Middle Eastern descent evaluated least positively. Maternal attitudes toward child interethnic relations in general were related to child outgroup prejudice in White Dutch families (Chapter 2), but not when maternal attitudes were measured towards specific outgroups in White Dutch, Turkish-Dutch, and Afro-Dutch families (Chapter 3). Furthermore, maternal attitudes toward child relations with specific ethnic outgroups were relatively positive, but results suggested that ethnic groups that (predominantly) identify as Muslim are specifically at risk of being isolated from interethnic contact (Chapter 3). Results from Chapter 4 suggested that opportunities for indirect contact through books for young children are limited, as an underrepresentation of characters of color, as compared to the target population, was found. Moreover, results from Chapter 5 showed that maternal endorsement of multiculturalism, rather than colorblindness, was positively related to child interethnic attitudes in White Dutch families, and suggested that endorsement of colorblindness can have negative effects. Colorblindness was commonly identified in popular books for young children analyzed in Chapter 6, as cultural details were generally lacking. In addition, some examples of White supremacy, eurocentrism, and stereotypes, and a lot of examples of positive interethnic relations were found (Chapter 6). In the current chapter, the main findings are reviewed and elaborated upon, and limitations, future directions, and implications are discussed.

Child Interethnic Prejudice in the Netherlands

Definitions of interethnic prejudice differ in whether they focus on negative evaluations only (i.e., Nesdale, 2004), or whether they also include less positive evaluations based on ingroup favoritism (Hewstone et al., 2002). Results in this dissertation showed both forms of prejudice in young (6-to 8-years old) White children in the Netherlands (Chapter 2): participating children preferred the White children depicted in the pictures the most, and rejected the Black and Middle Eastern children more often. These results mirror earlier findings among young White children in the U.S. (Katz, 2003; Ramsey, 1991). In addition, prejudice in terms of a relative devaluation (less preference) was stronger towards children of Middle Eastern descent than towards Black children, mirroring the ethnic hierarchy as previously rated by older White Dutch children (Verkuyten & Kinket, 2000). In Chapter 3, however, prejudice in terms of negative evaluations among White Dutch children (6-to 10-years old) was higher towards Black children than towards children of Middle Eastern descent.

Some notable differences between procedures and measures might explain these conflicting patterns. Data presented in Chapter 2 were collected in April and May 2016, whereas data presented in Chapter 3 were collected from April 2018 to January

2020. The period in which data from Chapter 2 was collected was just following the peak of migration by refugees, mostly from Syria in the Middle East, to the Netherlands in 2015. In this year, European media coverage of the refugee 'crisis' shifted from a more sympathetic frame to a frame of suspicion or even threat (Georgiou & Zaborowksi, 2016). Threat perception increases intergroup prejudice in children (Nesdale et al., 2005), and might have elevated White children's prejudice toward people of Middle Eastern descent during the collection of data described in Chapter 2. During the collection of data described in Chapter 3, this media storm had mostly passed, but the increasingly hostile and violent debate on the anti-Black racist nature of Black Pete was widely covered (Bahara & Ezzerioli, 2019; Soetenhorst, 2019), also by the news broadcast specifically aimed at youth (NOS Jeugdjournaal, 2019).

In addition, the pictures used in the social preference task were different. Pictures used in Chapter 2 were selected from materials freely available online, and thus not standardized, whereas pictures used in Chapter 3 were standardized in the sense that all children wore similar t-shirts, were placed against a similar background, and were instructed to smile similarly. In pilot studies reported in Chapter 2 and 3 differences between the ethnic groups represented in the pictures were found in terms of rated attractiveness and cuteness. However, in both studies, the patterns of attractiveness and cuteness did not coincide with the patterns of prejudice of children, suggesting that attractiveness was not the most important factor determining social preferences and rejection. Another important difference in the pictures is that girls of Middle Eastern descent wore headscarves in the pictures used for Chapter 2, but not in those used for Chapter 3. In general, reactions towards Muslim women with headscarves are more negative than towards Muslim women without headscarves (Everett et al., 2015). Although children evaluated Middle Eastern boys just as negatively as Middle Eastern girls in Chapter 2, which suggests that the headscarves were not the driving force behind evaluations, future research among children is needed to examine their responses to different aspects of appearances of ethnic outgroups.

Chapters 3 and 5 report on levels of outgroup rejection among children (6-to 10-years old) of other ethnic backgrounds: Turkish-Dutch and Afro-Dutch. Although some research has included Turkish-Dutch youth before (e.g., Verkuyten, 2007), to our knowledge this is the first study to include young Turkish- and Afro-Dutch children simultaneously. Afro-Dutch children showed more prejudice towards the dominant ethnic group than Turkish-Dutch children (Chapter 3), but Turkish-Dutch children showed more prejudice toward an underrepresented outgroup than Afro-Dutch children (Chapter 5). Although a focus on prejudice among members from the dominant ethnic group is very logical and also deserves attention, given that members from their outgroups experience most discrimination, these results imply that research on interethnic attitudes and prejudice among members from underrepresented ethnic groups is also worthwhile in order to improve intergroup relations and decrease intergroup tension.

Intergroup Contact

Chapters 2 to 4 were inspired by intergroup contact theory (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006) and theories on indirect contact such as the extended contact hypothesis (Wright et al., 1997), vicarious contact (Vezzali et al., 2012), and the parasocial contact hypothesis (Schiappa et al., 2005). These theories propose that exposure to direct and indirect contact with outgroup members benefits children's interethnic attitudes, and thus decreases their prejudice. In light of these assumptions, attitudes of mothers with different ethnic backgrounds (White Dutch, Turkish-Dutch, and Afro-Dutch) towards child interethnic relations with specific outgroups were explored (Chapter 3). Results show that maternal attitudes were relatively positive, but that attitudes of Turkish-Dutch mothers were more negative than those of Afro-Dutch and White Dutch mothers. In these latter two groups, in addition, attitudes towards interethnic contact with Muslims were more negative as compared to contact with the other outgroup. These findings suggest that specifically the Turkish-Dutch community and other ethnic groups that predominantly identify as Muslim risk being isolated from intergroup contact. Previous research has indeed demonstrated that Turkish-Dutch people are engaged in fewer intergroup contact than other underrepresented groups in the Netherlands (Martinović, 2013; Koops et al., 2017). Considering the more general trends of Islamophobia in Europe (Abdelkader, 2017), these findings highlight the need for more research on how to improve relations with groups that identify as Muslim.

Relations between maternal attitudes toward child interethnic relations and child prejudice appear to be complex. Whereas White children of mothers who did not object to interethnic relations in general (i.e., with someone with a non-Dutch background) showed less rejection towards the Middle Eastern group (Chapter 2), maternal attitudes toward child relations with specific outgroups were not related to child rejection towards the same outgroup (Chapter 3). Parent-child similarity in interethnic attitudes is more pronounced for generalized or common components of prejudice, related to similarity in broader ideological values like right-wing authoritarianism and social dominance orientation (Meeusen & Dhont, 2015). Perhaps more general forms of parental interethnic attitudes therefore also more strongly predict specific child outcomes, but more research is needed to explore this hypothesis and examine underlying mechanisms. In addition, maternal attitudes toward child interethnic relations were unrelated to child actual outgroup contact. The present study, however, does not elucidate whether attitudes were not translated into strategies or roles that parents tend to use (Ladd & Parke, 2021), or not effective. Future research is thus needed to examine the role that parents have in facilitating interethnic contact in more detail.

Results from the present study furthermore exemplify that intergroup contact effects in young children with different ethnic backgrounds are complex (Chapter 3). Although the prejudice-reducing effect of intergroup contact has received meta-analytic support in general (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006), and in children specifically (Tropp & Prenovost, 2008), these effects were not replicated in the sample of 6-to

10-year old White Dutch, Turkish-Dutch, and Afro-Dutch children. In fact, child contact with outgroup friends and outgroup rejection were not related among White Dutch and Turkish-Dutch children, but there was a positive association between contact with friends from the White outgroup and White rejection among Afro-Dutch children. Therefore, whereas promoting intergroup contact is a common suggestion on how to improve interethnic attitudes (Scott et al., 2020), research must not lose sight of the potential negative consequences. Negative contact, for example, is found to be a stronger predictor of prejudice than positive contact (Barlow et al., 2012). Friendships are expected to meet all conditions under which intergroup contact was originally hypothesized to reduce prejudice (i.e., equal group status, common goals, cooperation, support of authorities; Pettigrew, 1997), and specifically behavioral engagement and time spent with outgroup friends seem important for reducing prejudice (Davies et al., 2011). The present research suggests, however, that even in friendships situational aspects or conditions could result in undesired intergroup contact effects. Future research should look into interethnic contact within friendships among young children more closely to examine what aspects elicit positive and negative effects on interethnic attitudes, for example by combining information from multiple informants (e.g., self-report, parent-report, teacher-report).

Several theories propose that different forms of indirect contact also have positive effects on intergroup attitudes, such as examples of an ingroup member engaging in positive contact with an outgroup member (extended contact; Wright et al., 1997), observing positive interactions between an ingroup and outgroup member (vicarious contact; Vezzali et al., 2012), and exposure to positive portrayals of outgroup members (parasocial contact; Schiappa et al., 2005). To elicit these indirect contact effects in terms of improved interethnic attitudes through books, ethnic diversity among characters is a prerequisite. Characters of color, however, are underrepresented as compared to population statistics in popular children's books (i.e., those most sold, most borrowed from libraries, and awarded between 2009 and 2018) in the Netherlands (Chapter 4). Most characters were White (84%), and most of the books (56%) did not include any character of color. Books that did include (a) character(s) of color, always also included (a) White character(s). These findings are in line with studies reporting on underrepresentation of characters of color in other countries (e.g., Koss, 2015; Koss et al., 2017; Lee, 2017), and suggest that opportunities for indirect contact may be limited. In a subset of the books including a character of color as protagonist or supportive character, nevertheless, these characters were not described explicitly negatively and most books did include examples of interethnic friendships and ethnically mixed families with positive relations (Chapter 6). Thus, whenever books are ethnically diverse, they seem to provide opportunities for children to be exposed to extended contact. Again, however, parents can play an important role in facilitating these forms of indirect contact, and we do not know to what degree parents take advantage from what is on offer. Similarly, other book-providers in the environment of young children, such as teachers and schools, can impact the extent to which children are actually exposed to these examples. To illustrate, about half the children in Dutch primary schools read non-school books at school almost daily (DUO Onderwijsonderzoek, 2017).

Diversity Ideologies

Multiculturalism and colorblindness are two commonly distinguished diversity ideologies that advocate a different approach to demographic differences such as ethnicity (Rattan & Amady, 2013). Based on social learning theory, both the colorblind and multicultural diversity approach are argued to reduce prejudice: either through not emphasizing racial or ethnic differences (colorblindness) or through emphasizing and valuing ethnic differences (multiculturalism, Rosenthal & Levy, 2010). Although within adults both ideologies have been associated with reduced levels of prejudice, multiculturalism is demonstrated to be more beneficial (Leslie et al., 2020; Whitley & Webster, 2019). In line with this notion, overall correlational results in Chapter 5 show that child prejudice was negatively related to maternal multiculturalism, but positively related to maternal colorblindness. These results are consistent with research demonstrating that a multiculturalism-based ideology at school has more beneficial results than a colorblind-based ideology (Apfelbaum et al., 2010), and with research showing that ethnicity- or race-related conversations between parents and children (i.e., not colorblind parenting) can have positive impacts on children's interethnic attitudes (Perry et al., 2020; Vittrup & Holden, 2011). Given that children can perceive racial differences and are aware of societal inequalities from a young age (e.g., Bar-Haim et al., 2006; Olson et al., 2012), colorblindness might teach children that inequalities can be attributed to people themselves, leading to more negative perceptions of people and ethnic groups that are structurally disadvantaged.

However, associations between diversity ideologies and child prejudice differ between ethnic groups. Whereas maternal multiculturalism was related to lower levels of child prejudice in White Dutch families, these associations were not found in the Turkish- and Afro-Dutch families (Chapter 5). Although multiculturalism thus seems beneficial for interethnic attitudes of children in the dominant ethnic group, it is less clear what diversity approach 'works' for the interethnic attitudes of children in underrepresented ethnic groups. Group differences in maternal endorsement of multiculturalism, in addition, were in line with previous research in the Netherlands (e.g., Arends-Tóth & Van de Vijver, 2003; Verkuyten, 2005) and other countries (e.g., Ryan et al., 2010; Wolsko et al., 2006), showing that endorsement of multiculturalism is higher among members from underrepresented ethnic groups than members from the dominant ethnic group. This pattern could be explained by the different proposed consequences of multiculturalism: a possible threat to the status of the dominant ethnic group, and a possible rise in status for underrepresented ethnic groups (Berry & Kalin, 1995). Afro-Dutch mothers in contrast were less likely to endorse colorblindness, in the form of unawareness of racism and racial inequalities than White Dutch and Turkish-Dutch mothers (Chapter 5). For the Turkish-Dutch mothers this result was unexpected, given that discrimination experiences based on ethnicity and religion are common among Turkish-Dutch people (Sociaal Cultureel Planbureau, 2020). Future research on colorblindness among various ethnic groups in the Netherlands is needed to exclude the possibility that recruitment methods have influenced the present results, and to explore what drives and explains this

endorsement. Together, these group differences in maternal endorsement of diversity ideologies suggest that particularly White Dutch children, whose interethnic attitudes can benefit from a multiculturalist approach the most, are less likely to be exposed to multiculturalism at home as compared to children from other ethnic backgrounds.

Although it should be noted that multiculturalism is not synonymous with anti-racism, our findings support scholars' increasing advocacy for parents (Perry, Skinner-Dorkenoo et al., 2021) and teachers (Boutte et al., 2011) to move away from colorblind approaches and towards engaging in discussions about ethnicity, race, and racism with children. White parents seem reluctant to engage in such conversations, even when asked to do so (Pahlke et al., 2012; Vittrup, 2018), although exceptions are also illustrated (Hagermann, 2017). One strategy that is suggested to increase discussions about diversity with young children is shared-book reading (Kemple et al., 2016). Colorblindness, however, prevailed in the popular children's books that were analyzed in Chapter 6, as very few references to cultural or ethnic backgrounds of characters of color were made and books thus mostly stayed clear of the topic of ethnicity, mirroring earlier results on children's literature (Winograd, 2011). These results suggest that the books do not provide openings that parents who themselves are reluctant to initiate conversations might benefit from. Moreover, in some of the books (implicit) examples of stereotypes, White supremacy, or eurocentrism were found (Chapter 6), and results on the prominence of characters were mixed: some factors suggest that White characters and characters of color played equally important roles in the books, but other factors suggest that characters of color were less prominent (Chapter 4). Intersectionality, referring to the importance to take into account the interaction between dimensions of identity such as ethnicity and gender (Crenshaw, 1989) showed to be important in the analyses of the books: most stereotypes concerned male characters of color (Chapter 6), but especially female characters of color were less prominent (Chapter 4). In addition, most stereotypes about values and settings were found for Middle Eastern cultures (Chapter 6), possibly reinforcing the large perceived cultural distance by the White dominant ethnic group (Schalk-Soekar et al., 2004) and Islamophobic attitudes in the Netherlands (Adbelkader, 2017). Taken together, these results suggest that books that Dutch children are likely to be exposed to, might unintentionally convey messages and ideologies that negatively impact readers intergroup attitudes.

Limitations and Future Directions

The studies presented in the current dissertation have some limitations. Firstly, the studies on families in the Netherlands (Chapters 2, 3, and 5) were correlational, limiting any inferences about causality. In addition, although fathers were invited to participate, and some did, numbers were too small to include them in the analyses. Therefore, this dissertation only takes into account associations between mothers and children, and potentially misses links between paternal and child attitudes. Moreover, the participating mothers were highly educated, limiting generalizability to the entire Dutch population. This was particularly true for the White Dutch mothers

(Chapters 2, 3, and 5) and the Afro-Dutch mothers (Chapters 3 and 5). Given that level of education is an important factor related to diversity ideologies (Van de Vijver et al., 2008), as well as interethnic prejudice (Carvacho et al., 2013), future research should ideally include a sample with a more representative distribution of level of education. Recruitment methods may have additionally attracted mothers with an interest in the topic of diversity in the context of children. Such self-selection might have led to an overly optimistic picture regarding maternal interethnic attitudes in the present dissertation. Moreover, although the inclusion of families of different ethnic backgrounds is definitely a strength of this dissertation, recruitment proved to be more challenging than expected. This resulted in various recruitment approaches, differing in effectiveness per ethnic group, and relatively small sample sizes for the Turkish- and Afro-Dutch families in particular, hampering power to find statistically significant effects (Chapter 3 and 5).

Limitations to the studies on popular children's books (Chapter 4 and 6) include the fact that most of the (initial) coding was done by a White researcher. Although an ethnically diverse team was occasionally consulted, the perspective of the White researcher may have influenced the work. An additional limitation to Chapter 4 specifically is that ethnicity of the characters could only broadly be categorized into White characters and characters of color, due to a common lack of detail in drawings and story lines. It therefore remains unclear to what degree specific ethnic groups in the Netherlands are (under)represented in popular children's books. In addition, the present studies did not examine the actual degree to which children are exposed to the books included in the study, what messages adult readers additionally provide, nor the direct effect that reading these books has on their interethnic attitudes or prejudice. The results do provide an initial insight in opportunities for indirect contact and messages that children may come across.

The research field could therefore benefit from longitudinal studies examining associations between parental attitudes or ideologies and child outcomes over time to further explore whether and when associations are unidirectional (Rodríguez-García & Wagner, 2009) or bidirectional (Vollebergh et al., 2001). Moreover, observational research on how parents put their attitudes (e.g., toward child interethnic contact) and diversity ideologies (such as multiculturalism and colorblindness) into practice, and how these concrete parenting practices relate to child interethnic prejudice, is needed. Innovative research methods and approaches need to be developed to examine parents' ethnic-racial socialization practices (Hughes et al., 2006), as previous research has demonstrated how difficult it can be to elicit parent-child discussions about race or ethnicity, especially in White families (Pahlke et al., 2012; Vittrup & Holden, 2011). Future work can build on examples of books and videos aimed to elicit such conversations with varying success rates (Pahlke et al., 2012; Perry et al., 2020; Vittrup & Holden, 2011). It should be explored how laboratory procedures that seem successful (Perry, Abaied et al., 2021) can be adapted to facilitate and elicit ethnic-racial socialization at home and in daily life. Another promising development is that the Observational Measure of Ethnic-Racial Socialization (OMERS) task and coding system (Yasui, 2008), was recently adapted

for school-aged children (Aguayo et al., 2021). Future work in this area can help substantiate recommendations for parent-child discussions about race and ethnicity and make them more concrete (Scott et al., 2020). In addition, to complement existing intervention research on indirect contact effects through books, which has mostly been conducted in schools and included post-reading group discussions led by researchers (e.g., Cameron et al. 2006; Cameron et al., 2007), intervention research in families is needed to examine whether similar effects can be accomplished by parents. However, parental compliance to engage in discussions about race and ethnicity with their children might hamper such studies, highlighting the need for qualitative approaches to explore reasons and motivations for specific parental ethnic-racial socialization strategies like applied by Abaied and Perry (2021).

Future studies should moreover ideally include multiple socialization agents that can impact children's learning, such as parents and media but also peers and school environments, simultaneously, in order to disentangle various influences and their interactions, as hypothesized in the ecological model of development (Bronfenbrenner, 1977). Some work with adolescents, for example, shows that peer attitudes are more important for within-person fluctuations in prejudice, but that parental attitudes are more important for between-person differences, partly because parental attitudes predicted the type of peers their children befriended (Miklikowska et al., 2019). At the same time, the effect of parental attitudes is weaker when children are in ethnically diverse classrooms (Miklikowska et al., 2019). Similar research in earlier developmental stages is needed to tailor interventions aimed to reduce prejudice. In this future work, it remains important to pay attention to the specific populations and contexts included, so that concrete and tailored suggestions can be formed.

Implications

The studies presented in this dissertation provide some initial suggestions for implications, taking into account the limitations described. Firstly, the results in this dissertation suggest that policies, programs, or interventions aimed to improve interethnic attitudes should already start at an early age, and focus on attitudes of and towards various ethnic groups. A systematic review describes interventions based on both intergroup contact and media/instruction aimed at children of 8 years and younger and their effectiveness (Aboud et al., 2012), providing a basis for intervention development. Interventions, which have mostly been researched in the U.S. (74%, Beelmann & Heinemann, 2014), should be tailored to the Dutch context, and be kept up to date and tailored to patterns emerging in society, as societal developments may play a role in shaping child prejudice against specific outgroups.

Secondly, programs promoting intergroup contact among children of various ethnic groups should closely monitor the nature of this contact and its effects, as results from the present study suggest that even interethnic friendships can have undesired effects. Results from the present study suggest that there is most room for improvement in interethnic contact in ethnic groups that predominantly identify as

Muslim. Interventions using indirect contact measures through books like procedures by Cameron et al. (2006; 2007) could therefore aim specifically at contact between a character from an underrepresented ethnic group that identifies as Muslim and characters from other ethnic backgrounds.

Thirdly, this dissertation supports the idea that multiculturalism is more beneficial for children's interethnic attitudes than colorblindness, especially in White families. Although suggestions and practical guidelines on how to engage in discussions about the topic of ethnicity or racism unquestionably need further concretization and elaboration, avoiding the topic is not recommended. In addition, materials to help parents engage in such conversations, such as books and video's (Pahlke et al., 2012; Perry et al., 2020; Vittrup & Holden, 2011), need further development to effectively overcome parents' reservations and need to be tailored to the specific context in which they are used.

Fourthly, the studies in this dissertation imply that there is room for improvement in terms of quantitative and qualitative representation of ethnic diversity and characters of color in children's books. Authors, illustrators, and publishers should take into account not only how much ethnic diversity they portray in their books, but also how culturally specific and authentic the stories are, and what ideological viewpoints and messages concerning ethnic diversity are conveyed. Diagnostic tools to evaluate representation such as proposed by Van de Rozenberg and Van Veen for school book publishers (Universiteit Leiden, 2020) could also help publishers of children's literature. Furthermore, guidelines such as provided by Derman-Sparks (2013) can be applied by publishers and authors to evaluate diversity-related messages in books. Additionally, parents can pay attention to similar criteria when selecting books and when providing extra information while reading with their child. They should be aware that books can unintentionally transfer messages that might at first not stand out.

Conclusions

Overall, this dissertation shows that interethnic prejudice is found in various forms among young children in the Netherlands. In addition, it provides an insight in the attitudes and ideologies they are exposed to through two socialization agents: parents and books. This dissertation is an important first step in examining the basis for applying prejudice reducing theories based on social learning theory to the specific multi-ethnic Dutch context. It shows that intergroup contact approaches to improve children's interethnic attitudes may face some obstacles, as parents might be more or less willing to facilitate interethnic contact with different ethnic groups, intergroup contact effects are not always positive, and ethnic diversity and thus indirect contact opportunities in popular books for young children are somewhat limited. Furthermore, it shows that multiculturalist rather than colorblind diversity approaches can benefit interethnic attitudes of children in dominant ethnic groups, but that the latter is prevailing in popular books for young children. The results from this dissertation can help move both research and the development of practical

programs on improving interethnic attitudes among children in the Netherlands forward.

