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Who's to blame? How subtle negative messages about outgroups contribute to ethnic prejudice development in middle to late childhood

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ABSTRACT

Studies have repeatedly demonstrated that parents' and children's ethnic prejudice are related to one another. However, little is known about the specific parental practices that facilitate the intergenerational transmission of prejudice. Using a novel measure, we examined how everyday parent-child conversations about the ambiguous behaviors of others (e.g. behaviors open to multiple interpretations) may contribute to children's ethnic prejudice development. The sample consisted of 249 pairs of mothers and children (aged 6 to 10 years) from the Netherlands with ethnically diverse backgrounds. In line with previous developmental findings, our results reveal that older children exhibit lower ethnic prejudice. Noticeably, however, we find that higher mothers' subtle negative messages about outgroup members' behaviors are significantly related to children's higher ethnic prejudice. These findings did not differ by ethnic background. These results highlight the importance of examining how seemingly innocuous conversations may contribute to children's ethnic prejudice development.

Studies have repeatedly demonstrated that parents' and children's ethnic prejudice are related to one another throughout childhood and adolescence (Degner & Dalege, 2013). However, little is known about the specific parental practices that contribute to the development of prejudice in childhood (Aral et al., 2022). In this study, we focus on an underexplored aspect of parenting relevant to prejudice research: parent-child conversations about the behaviors of others. Starting in early childhood, children try to understand the behaviors of others by reasoning about their mental states (Wellman & Gelman, 1992). To help children navigate such ambiguities, parents often use conversations where they try to guide the children toward a shared understanding (Grusec & Davidov, 2010). We argue that when discussing the behaviors of outgroup members in particular, parents' may convey subtle negative messages that contribute to the development of ethnic prejudice. In this study, we will use a novel method to code the frequency of mothers' subtle negative messages about outgroups in parent-child conversations about the behaviors of others.

Subsequently, we will test to what extent mothers' subtle negative messages about outgroups are related to children's ethnic prejudice and examine if these relations differ depending on age and the ethnic background of the mother-child dyad.

Development of children's ethnic attitudes

Various theoretical perspectives describe the development of children's ingroup preference (i.e. positivity toward the ingroup) and outgroup prejudice (i.e. negativity toward the outgroup; Nesdale, 2004). One such theoretical perspective is Social Identity Developmental Theory (SIDT; Nesdale, 2004), which describes the development of children's intergroup attitudes in relation to their developing cognitive abilities and social knowledge. According to SIDT, children's ability to socially categorize others as belonging to different groups, or social group awareness, lays the foundation for the development of ingroup preference and outgroup prejudice. Around the ages of 6 and 7 years, children start internalizing information that emphasizes the distinctiveness of their ingroup from

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outgroups, which forms a central piece of a child's social identity and self-esteem and often leads to ingroup ethnic preference (Nesdale, 2004). For some children, this emphasis on group distinctiveness sets the stage for the development of outgroup prejudice, especially when learning that one's group is somehow perceived as better than another (Nesdale, 2004). Prejudice in childhood is theorized to decrease as children approach adolescence and their social acumen increases (e.g. understanding that prejudice is not considered socially desirable; Nesdale, 2004). Increased perspective-taking abilities may also explain why children's prejudice tends to decrease as they approach adolescence (Quintana, 2008). The developmental stages as described in SIDT have found strong support from developmental studies on ethnic relations across cultural contexts, including Europe (e.g. De Bruijn et al., 2022; Neto, 2016; Pektas et al., 2023). Additionally, a meta-analysis suggests that contextual factors play a stronger role in shaping children's ethnic prejudice as they approach adolescence (Raabe & Beelmann, 2011). More studies are needed to understand how contextual factors shape children's ethnic prejudice during this developmental phase. Our study focuses on socialization processes within families in particular.

Socialization of children's ethnic attitudes

During childhood, the family context plays an essential role in shaping how children learn about and interact with the social world (Grusec & Davidov, 2010). The importance of the family context is also reflected in developmental intergroup research. A meta-analysis of 131 studies (and over 45000 parent-child dyads) demonstrates that parents' and children's intergroup prejudice are related to one another throughout childhood and adolescence (medium effect size; Degner & Dalege, 2013). In other words, there is robust evidence that children's and adolescents' intergroup prejudice tends to mirror the intergroup prejudice of their parents. Although there is some debate on whether these parent-child similarities reflects the role of socialization or is due to shared genetics (i.e. learning vs inheriting a predisposition to be prejudiced), the literature currently favors the likelihood of socialization playing a greater role than genetic factors (Degner & Dalege, 2013).

Still, little is known about the specific parental practices that facilitate the intergenerational transmission of ethnic prejudice within families. Although theories on prejudice development do not specifically address the role of the family context, they do argue that a critical contributor to prejudice development is the information about outgroups that children are

exposed to in their direct environment (Bigler & Liben, 2007; Nesdale, 2004). For example, Developmental Intergroup Theory (DIT) posits that children form their attitudes toward outgroups by reflecting on the information they receive regarding the attributes of outgroups, such as their behaviors and perceived intentions (Bigler & Liben, 2007). We focus specifically on an everyday parental practice that allows parents to convey such information about in- and outgroups to their children: parent-child conversations. Developmental scientists have long emphasized that parent-child conversations play a fundamental role in how children learn about the social world (Vygotsky, 1978), because conversations allow parents to function as *teachers* and guide children's perceptions to come to a shared understanding (Grusec & Davidov, 2010).

Socialization of children's ethnic attitudes: Parent-child conversations

In the last fifteen years, a growing number of developmental intergroup studies have examined parent-child conversations relevant to the development of intergroup attitudes. Methodologically, these studies have used discussion tasks (e.g. picture book reading) to evoke parent-child conversations about novel (i.e. fictional) and ethnicity- or race-related topics, which are subsequently coded and quantitatively analyzed. One branch of studies has focused on how parent-child conversations about novel groups (i.e. fictional groups such as "Flurps") contribute to the development of children's social cognitions relevant to intergroup relations. For example, parents messages about novel groups directly influence children's essentialist beliefs about these groups (Rhodes et al., 2012) and their expectations of how ingroup and outgroup members are likely to treat each other (Chalik & Rhodes, 2015). These studies highlight that through conversations, children's can rapidly internalize parents messages about outgroups.

Another branch of developmental intergroup studies examining parent-child conversations about real life social groups have found that parents' color-conscious messages (openly talking about ethnicity and race) are related to children's lower ethnic prejudice in ethnic majority families from the Netherlands (Mesman et al., 2022) and the U.S. (Pahlke et al., 2012; Perry et al., 2024; Vittrup & Holden, 2011). In other words, these studies suggest that parent-child conversations can suppress the development of ethnic prejudice in childhood. As illuminating as these

studies are, these studies do not directly test how parent-child conversations may facilitate the intergenerational transmission of ethnic prejudice. Additionally, many (ethnic majority) parents avoid mentioning ethnicity or race in conversations with children, an approach commonly referred to as color-evasive parenting (Mesman et al., 2022; Vittrup, 2018). Considering the prevalence of color-evasive parenting and the robust finding that parents' and children's intergroup prejudice are related to one another (see Degner & Dalege, 2013 for a meta-analysis), the intergenerational transmission of ethnic prejudice seems to be quite subtle or indirect (Hughes et al., 2017).

Previous studies provide some insight into the subtle ways in which parents may contribute to the development of ethnic prejudice. For example, one study demonstrates that parents' implicit (but not explicit) ethnic prejudice is related to ethnic prejudice in children as young as three years (Castelli et al., 2009). This finding suggests that young children may be sensitive to and internalize expressions of parents' unconscious ethnic prejudice. One way parents may unconsciously express their prejudice is through nonverbal behavior. For example, an experimental study demonstrated that adult ingroup members' uneasy nonverbal behavior while interacting with an adult outgroup member influenced children's negative attitudes toward that person and other adult outgroup members (Castelli et al., 2008). Taken together, parents may unconsciously shape children's ethnic prejudice through subtle cues that indicate how they think or feel about an outgroup.

We are particularly interested in examining how parents *subtle* negative messages about outgroups (e.g. negative messages that do not directly refer to ethnicity or race) may contribute to the development of ethnic prejudice. The literature on the development of children's other social cognitions highlights the prevalence of parents' subtle messages. Studies on the socialization of gender stereotypes indicate that although explicit gender talk during parent-child conversations is quite rare in countries with high gender equality, subtle gender talk is relatively common (Mesman & Groeneveld, 2018). For example, parents often use subtle gendered language when talking to children by labeling stereotypical activities as either masculine or feminine (Endendijk et al., 2014). Similarly, we suggest that parents may (unconsciously) convey subtle, rather than explicit, negative messages about outgroups to children. In addition, a meta-analysis suggests that contextual factors play a stronger role in shaping children's ethnic prejudice as they

approach adolescence (Raabe & Beelmann, 2011). Differences in how often parents convey subtle negative messages about outgroups with children may also explain why prejudice development tends to vary more with age. For this reason, we posit that parents' subtle negative messages about outgroups may be one of the underexplored contextual factors contributing to prejudice development as children approach adolescence (Bigler & Liben, 2007; Nesdale, 2004).

One avenue through which parents may convey subtle negative messages about outgroups is when discussing the behaviors of others. Children try to understand the behaviors of others by reasoning about their intentions (Wellman & Gelman, 1992). Throughout their everyday experiences, children will encounter behaviors that are open to multiple interpretations. Parent-child conversations can help children navigate such ambiguities and come to a shared understanding (Grusec & Davidov, 2010). For example, research in the adjacent field of moral development has highlighted how parent-child conversations allow parents to guide children's perceptions of morally ambiguous behavior (e.g. when lying or harming can be considered wrong or justifiably; Wainryb & Rechia, 2014).

Similarly, we argue that parents may contribute to their children's ethnic prejudice development through how they describe the ambiguous behaviors of outgroup members. Especially in a sociopolitical context of racism where its manifestations are common, parents (unconscious) prejudices may seep through in seemingly innocuous conversations (Rogers et al., 2021). To illustrate, imagine a parent-child conversation in a White family about two talkative classmates, a White child named Tommy and a Black child named Jamal. A parent may positively describe Tommy's talkative behavior (an ingroup member) by saying, "he talks so much; he likes to have a good time". In contrast, a parent may describe the talkative behavior of Jamal (an outgroup member) negatively by saying, "he talks so much; he is always disrupting class". We reason that if parents consistently describe children like Jamal negatively, children may develop ethnic prejudice toward others like him. Thus, the fictional parent in this scenario would, inadvertently, be contributing to the development of their child's anti-Blackness. Following this line of reasoning, we will examine to what extent subtle negative messages about outgroups (i.e. measured with a novel discussion task) play a role in shaping children's ethnic prejudice within the Dutch context.

The Dutch context

The Netherlands is a particularly relevant cultural context to examine how socialization processes shape children's ethnic prejudice in ethnic majority and ethnic minoritized¹ groups. Since 1945, the Netherlands has attracted many migrants for various socio-economic, postcolonial, and political reasons (Van Amersfoort & Van Niekerk, 2006). Prejudice against these migrants and their descendants is common. For example, according to a 2018 survey, approximately half of Turkish- and Moroccan-Dutch and approximately half of Surinamese- and Antillean-Dutch people report experiencing discrimination in the last 12 months (Andriessen et al., 2020). The main reasons they were targeted with discrimination were religion, ethnic background (for the Turkish- and Moroccan-Dutch), and skin color (for the Surinamese and Antillean-Dutch; Andriessen et al., 2020). In the Netherlands, the Afro-Surinamese-, Antillean-Dutch, and other Dutch people of African descent tend to be racialized (i.e. perceived as a homogenous group with certain essential qualities; Gans, 2017) as Black due to their skin color. The Turkish-, Moroccan-Dutch, and other Dutch people from the Southwest Asian and North Africa (SWANA) region also tend to be grouped together in Dutch public discourse as a homogenous group. For readers outside of the Netherlands or Western Europe, it may seem odd to think of this as a form of racialization because Muslims are an ethnically diverse religious group found all over the world. However, many Dutch Muslims are of SWANA descent and came to the Netherlands as labor migrants. For this reason, people of SWANA descent (regardless of their religious background) are often essentialized in Dutch public discourse as a homogenous "Muslim" group (Garner & Selod, 2015). Taking the Dutch sociohistorical context into consideration, we will examine subtle negative messages and children's prejudice among the White Dutch and the aforementioned minoritized groups, as well as directed toward these groups.

The current study

This study will investigate to what extent mothers' subtle messages about outgroups during parent-child conversations about the behaviors of others contribute to the development of children's ethnic prejudice in

middle to late childhood. Using an ethnically diverse sample of mother-child dyads from the Netherlands, we test the following three hypotheses (1) older children will have lower prejudice than younger children; (2) higher mothers' subtle negative messages about outgroups is related to higher children's ethnic prejudice (3) the association between mothers' subtle negative messages and children's ethnic prejudice will be stronger in older children vs younger children. Although not the focus of the study, we will explore if the association between mothers' subtle negative messages and children's ethnic prejudice differs for ethnic majority vs. ethnic minoritized families. Considering that ethnic minoritized parents generally have a more color-conscious approach to parenting (Hughes et al., 2017), we explore if mothers' subtle negative messages have a stronger effect in ethnic majority families, who tend to have a more color-evasive approach to parenting.

Methods

Participants

The sample ($N=273$) consisted of an ethnically diverse group of mothers ($Age = 38.83$, $SD = 5.01$) and their children ($Age = 7.51$, $SD = 0.97$, 55% girls). Parents and their children were recruited through child-focused and cultural events, markets in ethnically diverse neighborhoods, social media, snowball sampling, and the personal networks of the research team. Parents who were interested in the study received flyers, filled in a screening form, and shared their contact information. Our main inclusion criteria were that parents: a) reside in or close to the Randstad area (a large, urban conglomeration of towns and cities) in the Netherlands, b) had a child between 6-10 years old, c) were the biological parents of the child, d) lived with the child, e) did not suffer severe physical nor mental illness, f) had children that did not have severe developmental disorders or were neurodivergent (i.e. autism). See [Appendix A](#) for a detailed explanation of our criteria in terms of ethnicity.

For the current analyses, we excluded mother-child dyads if we were missing data on the important constructs in this study (e.g. did not participate in the picture book task). This leaves us with 249 mother-child dyads (girls; 56%) with ethnic majority ($n = 134$) and ethnic minoritized background ($n = 115$) to test our hypotheses. There were no significant differences in the sociodemographic characteristics (mothers' age, mothers' educational level and civic status, child age

¹We use the term "minoritized" instead of "minority" to highlight that systemic inequalities lead to people with a "minority" status being marginalized.

Table 1. Demographic information regarding the sample.

	Total	Ethnic majority mothers (<i>n</i> = 134)	Ethnic minoritized mothers (<i>n</i> = 115)	Between-group differences
Children				
% of girls	56	55	57	$\chi^2(2, N = 249) = 0.118, p = .731$
Age child <i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	7.52 (0.99)	7.35 (0.90)	7.70 (1.05)	$t(247) = -2.83, p = .005, d = -0.36$
Mothers				
Age mother <i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	38.70 (5.07)	39.60 (4.29)	37.92 (5.62)	$t(247) = 2.62, p = .009, d = -0.34$
% of single mothers	13	9	17	$\chi^2(2, N = 249) = 3.93, p = .047$
% of highly educated mothers	65	77	45	$\chi^2(2, N = 249) = 58.08, p < .001$
% of POC in neighborhood	30	17	53	$t(247) = -11.27, p < .001, d = -1.48$
% of children attending a predominantly White school	55	77	32	$\chi^2(2, N = 249) = 50.22, p < .001$

& gender, ethnic diversity of the neighborhood and child's school) for the dyads with complete data ($N = 249$), versus those with missing data ($n = 24$), indicating that we had no response bias. See [Appendix B](#) and [Table 1](#) for our sample demographics.

Procedure

The data was collected as part of the first wave (that ran from May 2018 till January 2020) of a three-wave longitudinal study that examined the parenting origins of prejudice in the Netherlands. The study was approved by an ethics committee of the project's host university. Families were visited at their homes for data collection during the first wave. Home visits consisted of parent-child interaction tasks, computerized tasks for parents, and computerized and non-computerized tasks for children. Home visits were conducted by two trained visitors (bachelor, master's, and PhD students, and research assistants) and lasted approximately two hours. In total, there were 27 trained home visitors in the first wave of various ethnic backgrounds (18 ethnic majority home visitors, nine home visitors with an ethnic minoritized background). At the end of the visit, the children received a small age-appropriate toy worth approximately €3. The parents filled in one questionnaire during the home visit and one online questionnaire after the home visit. The participating parents received gift cards worth €20 per participating parent after completing the online questionnaire. All parents signed consent forms for their own as well as their children's participation.

Measures

Children's ethnic prejudice

Children's ethnic prejudice was measured with an adapted version of the Multi-response Racial Attitude measure (MRA; Doyle & Aboud, 1995; Aboud, 2003). During the home visit, trained researchers presented

seven envelopes with pictures. Six envelopes featured pictures of a White, Black, and SWANA (i.e. dark-haired olive toned children of Turkish or Moroccan heritage) boy and girl, and one envelope with a trash-can. Children depicted in the pictures were wearing a white T-shirt, smiling, and were approximately aged 6-10 years. The background in the pictures was white. Children were given cards with five positive (i.e. nice, sweet, smart, funny, kind) and five negative (i.e. naughty, stupid, annoying, mean, dumb) traits. They were then asked to put cards with traits in the envelopes of the children whom they believed to have that trait. The children received six cards per trait, so that they could choose to give all the cards to all children if they wanted to. To avoid inflated scores (Aboud, 2003), the children were instructed that they did not have to assign the traits to one or multiple children depicted on the pictures. Children were also allowed to put the trait cards in an envelope with the trash can. Descriptions of a pilot study with adults on the ethnic categorization, attractiveness, and cuteness ratings of these children can be found in [Appendix C](#).

In order to create our ethnic prejudice score, we first subtracted the number of positive traits from the number of negative traits attributed toward each group (i.e. Black, White and SWANA). Next, an average score was created to capture children's ethnic prejudice toward outgroups. For children where both parents had an ethnic Dutch or West-European background (i.e. German), outgroup prejudice consisted of the Black and SWANA prejudice scores; for children where at least one parent had a West-African or Caribbean background, outgroup prejudice consisted of the White and SWANA prejudice scores; for children where both parents had a Turkish background, prejudice scores consisted of White and Black prejudice scores. This procedure is similar to those used in previous studies (De Bruijn et al., 2022; Rutland et al., 2015). Scores ranged from -10 (very favorable) to +10 (very unfavorable). Additionally, we calculated the internal reliability

separately for the positive and negative traits attributed toward each outgroup, similarly to the developers of the MRA measure (e.g. Doyle & Aboud, 1995; Aboud, 2003). The Cronbach alpha scores were high overall, ranging from .79 to .91.

Mothers' subtle negative messages about outgroups

Mothers' subtle negative messages about outgroups were measured with a picture book task aimed at eliciting discussions about various ethnic groups in the Netherlands (Mesman et al., 2022) and is inspired by the work of Margie et al. (2005). The book contains ten pictures with drawings of two White, two Black and two SWANA children (a boy and girl; the SWANA girl was depicted with a headscarf). Mothers were instructed to lead and tell a story about the pictures. The videotaped statements were transcribed verbatim. Next, a research team (including the authors and a graduate student) developed a reliability set of 24 videos and derived consensus scores. They then trained three (under)graduate students who coded the reliability set. Inter-coder reliability for all variables was adequate, with kappa values exceeding .80. The trained coders then coded the videos for the rest of the sample.

This measure focuses on discussions elicited by six drawings of children in situations where their intentional or unintentional behavior may have led to an undesirable circumstance. For example, in one picture, a fictional child was standing next to a broken vase. In another, a fictional child was holding a tennis racket standing next to a broken window). The pictures were counterbalanced to avoid order effects (i.e. which child appeared in which picture differed). For the current analyses, two scores were created. Firstly, a score representing subtle negative messages about outgroup members was constructed based on the number of times mothers told children that members of outgroups had intentionally performed a certain act (e.g. purposefully broke a vase or purposefully shot a tennis ball through a window) or not (e.g. accidentally broke a vase or accidentally shot a tennis ball through a window). Secondly, as a control variable, we constructed a score reflecting whether mothers told children that ingroup members had intentionally performed a certain act or not. The outgroups and ingroups were defined identically to the outgroups in our children's ethnic prejudice measure. The scores for subtle negative messages about outgroups ranged from 0 (no outgroup members were blamed) to 4 (all outgroup members were blamed). The scores for subtle negative messages about the ingroup ranged from

0 (no ingroup members were blamed) to 2 (both ingroup members were blamed).

Demographic characteristics

Mothers reported on a number of their family's demographic characteristics in the screening questionnaires. Mothers reported what cultural heritage they identified with. Mothers who only identified as Dutch were classified as ethnic majority mothers (0), and those who identified with a non-Dutch cultural heritage were classified as mothers with an ethnic minoritized background (1). Civil status was measured as (0) not living with (1) or living with a partner. Mothers' educational level was categorized as (0) lower and (1) higher level (a bachelor's degree or higher at an applied or research university). Schools were defined as having a (0) low level of ethnic diversity if less than half of the children had an ethnic minoritized background or a (1) high level of diversity if an equal proportion or higher number of children had an ethnic minoritized background. Our neighborhood diversity variable indicating the proportion of people of color that reside in the neighborhood of a participating family was based on publicly available data from Statistics Netherlands (CBS) (2015).

Analysis plan

Prior to performing the analyses all binary variables were dummy coded and continuous variables were centered and standardized (to facilitate interpretation of possible moderation effects). We ran a three-step hierarchical multiple regression analysis with children's ethnic prejudice as the dependent variable. Children's gender and mothers' ethnicity was entered as covariates in the first block. Our main variables of interest, children's age and mothers' subtle negative messages about outgroups, were entered in the second block. Additionally, mothers' subtle negative messages about the ingroup was entered as a covariate in the second block as well. In the third block, two interaction terms were added: one between age and subtle negative messages about outgroups, and mothers' ethnicity and subtle negative messages about outgroups. We report the standardized coefficients as a measure of effect size.

To examine the reliability of our findings, we used three robustness checks. As our first robustness check, we ran an alternative model in which we replaced the two variables representing mothers' subtle negative messages about the outgroup and ingroup with a single difference score. This difference score represented

the frequency of mothers' subtle negative messages about the outgroup minus the frequency of mothers' subtle negative messages about the ingroup. The rest of our robustness checks are inspired by critical approaches to quantitative research that highlight that quantitative researchers should reflect on how they approach categorizing social groups when testing their models, and evaluate whether categorization choices made by the researchers influence the results (Quantcrit; Garcia et al., 2018; Jugert et al., 2022).

Our correlational and main analyses (Tables 1 and 2) report the results when ethnicity is defined as mothers' self-identification as Dutch (0) or not (1). However, we recognize that the sample may arguably be categorized across three broad (pan) ethnic categories based on where the mothers or their parents were born (see Appendix A): West-European (e.g. Dutch, German), Turkish, and West-African or Caribbean (e.g. Cape-Verdean, Surinamese). Therefore, our second robustness check will consist of a model using two dummy variables indicating if mothers were categorized as a having a Turkish background (1) or a not (0), or a West-African or Caribbean background (1) or not (0). The reference group consisted of mothers categorized as having a West-European background.

We also recognize that measuring prejudice and subtle negative messages toward outgroups who differ in societal status obscures the fact that individuals tend to be more biased toward ethnic minoritized outgroups than the ethnic majority outgroup (Raabe & Beelmann, 2011). Therefore, for the third robustness check, we ran a model in which a) the outcome variable consisted of children's ethnic prejudice toward minoritized outgroups solely, and b) in which mothers' subtle negative messages were focused on minoritized outgroups only. This entails that for children whose parents both had an ethnic Dutch or West-European background (i.e. German), ethnic prejudice consisted of the Black and SWANA prejudice scores; for children where at least one parent had a West-African or Caribbean background, ethnic prejudice consisted of the SWANA prejudice scores; for

children whose parents both had a Turkish background, ethnic prejudice consisted of the Black prejudice scores. The alternative variable for mothers' subtle negative messages about ethnic minoritized outgroups was computed in a similar fashion.

Results

Data-inspection

G*Power calculations indicated that the hierarchical multiple regression model with was sufficiently powered (.95) to detect relations with medium effect sizes (Faul et al., 2009). Relations with medium effect sizes are common in a similar domain of developmental research, namely, studies on parent-child similarity in outgroup prejudice (Degner & Dalege, 2013). Next, we inspected our data. Standardized z-scores greater than 3.29 above and below the mean were defined as outliers (Kim, 2013). An outlier was detected for children's age. This item was winsorized. No multivariate outliers were detected. Further, the distribution of all the key variables in the main regression analysis and the follow-up robustness checks were approximately normal.

Preliminary Analyses

Prior to performing our main analysis, we performed bivariate correlational analyses (see Table 2). The correlational analyses revealed that two variables were significantly associated with less children's ethnic prejudice. Older children and girls showed less ethnic prejudice. Additionally, higher mothers' subtle negative messages about the outgroup were associated with higher children's ethnic prejudice. Notably, children's gender was also associated with less mothers' subtle negative messages about the ingroup, with mothers of girls describing the behavior of ingroup members less negatively than mothers of boys.

Next, we examined the descriptives of mothers' subtle negative messages about the ingroup and

Table 2. Correlations between children's gender and age, mothers' ethnicity, subtle negative messages about ingroups and outgroups and children's ethnic prejudice.

Variable	<i>M (SD)</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Children's gender	—	—					
2. Mothers' ethnicity	—	.02					
3. Children's age	7.51 (0.98)	−0.08	.18*				
4. Mothers' SNM-ingroup	1.37 (0.68)	−0.17**	.07	−0.01	—		
5. Mothers' SNM-outgroup	2.63 (1.10)	.04	−0.02	.05	.30**	—	
6. Children's ethnic prejudice	−1.33 (3.91)	−0.14*	−0.04	−0.16*	.08	.18**	—

Note. *M* and *SD* represent the mean and standard deviation. Mothers' ethnicity was a binary variable, representing if mothers identified as Dutch (0) or not (1). Mothers' ethnicity SNM-ingroup and -outgroup respectively refer to subtle negative messages toward the ingroup and outgroup. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

Table 3. The descriptives of the subtle negative messages toward the ingroup and outgroup.

Group Variables	Min.	Max.	M (SD)
Total			
Mothers' SNM-ingroup	0	2	1.37 (0.68)
Mothers' SNM-outgroup	0	4	2.63 (1.10)
Ethnic majority group			
Mothers' SNM-ingroup	0	2	1.33 (0.69)
Mothers' SNM-outgroup	0	4	2.65 (1.10)
Ethnic minoritized group			
Mothers' SNM-ingroup	0	2	1.43 (0.68)
Mothers' SNM-outgroup	0	4	2.61 (1.11)
West-European group			
Mothers' SNM-ingroup	0	2	1.43 ^a (0.69)
Mothers' SNM-outgroup	0	4	2.62 (1.12)
Turkish group			
Mothers' SNM-ingroup	0	2	1.37 (0.64)
Mothers' SNM-outgroup	0	4	2.61 (1.19)
West-African or Caribbean group			
Mothers' SNM-ingroup	0	2	1.15 ^a (0.70)
Mothers' SNM-outgroup	0	4	2.65 (0.92)

Note. SNM-ingroup and -outgroup respectively refer to subtle negative messages about the ingroup and outgroup. The same superscript letters refer to significant between-group contrasts.

outgroup across the social groups we categorized (see analysis plan and Table 3). T-tests revealed only one significant difference between groups, namely, mothers with a West-African or Caribbean background conveyed significantly fewer negative messages about the ingroup than mothers with a West-European background. There were no significant differences between groups in the degree to which mothers conveyed subtle negative messages about outgroups. Noticeably, subtle negative messages were relatively common. On average, mothers conveyed between one to two subtle negative messages about ingroups, and two to three subtle negative messages about outgroups.

Main analyses

First we ran a hierarchical multiple regression model with children's ethnic prejudice as the dependent variable (Table 4). In the first block there was a significant association between children's gender and children's ethnic prejudice but no significant association between mothers' ethnicity and children's ethnic prejudice. In the second block ($\Delta R^2 = .06$, $p = .008$), higher children's age was significantly associated with less children's ethnic prejudice, and higher mothers' subtle negative messages about outgroups were significantly associated with more children's ethnic prejudice. There was no significant association between subtle negative messages about ingroups and children's ethnic prejudice. In the third block ($\Delta R^2 = .007$, $p = .159$), the interaction term between children's age and mothers' subtle negative messages about

Table 4. Hierarchical regression model discussed in the main analysis predicting children's ethnic prejudice toward outgroups.

Variable	Block 1 β	Block 2 β	Block 3 β
Children's gender	−0.14*	−0.16*	−0.15*
Mothers' ethnicity	−0.04	.002	.003
Children's age	—	−0.18**	−0.18**
Mothers' SNM-ingroup	—	−0.004	−0.06
Mothers' SNM-outgroup	—	.19**	.24**
Children's age*SNM-ingroup	—	—	−0.02
Mothers' ethnicity*SNM-ingroup	—	—	−0.05
R^2	.02	.08	.09
F change for R^2	2.53	5.60***	0.24

Note. β refers to standardized regression coefficients. Mothers' ethnicity was a binary variable, representing if mothers identified as Dutch (0) or not (1). SNM-ingroup and -outgroup respectively refer to subtle negative messages toward the ingroup and outgroup. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

outgroups was not significant. Similarly, the interaction term between mothers' ethnicity and mothers' subtle negative messages about outgroups was not significant. Overall, the model tested in the second block (excluding the interaction terms) significantly predicted children's ethnic prejudice ($R^2 = .08$, $F(5, 243) = 4.43$, $p < .001$).

Robustness checks

After our main analysis, we performed three robustness checks, as reported in Tables 5–7. Our first robustness check revealed similar results when we included a difference score representing mothers' subtle negative messages about the outgroup vs. the ingroup as a predictor (Table 5). Our second robustness check revealed that the results were broadly similar when we categorized the families into using (pan) ethnic categories (Table 6). Our third robustness check revealed that the results were broadly similar even when measuring children's ethnic prejudice toward minoritized outgroups and mothers' subtle negative messages about minoritized outgroups only (Table 7). The only difference in this model was that mothers' ethnicity (coded as identifying as Dutch or not) was also related to children's ethnic prejudice. Most importantly, the main variables of interest, children's age and mothers' subtle negative messages about outgroups, were consistently related to children's ethnic prejudice across all analyses.

Discussion

The current study investigated how mothers' subtle negative messages about outgroups in conversations about the behaviors of others may contribute to children's ethnic prejudice development in middle to late

Table 5. Alternative hierarchical regression model ran as the first robustness check predicting children's ethnic prejudice toward outgroups.

Variable	Block 1 β	Block 2 β	Block 3 β
Children's gender	−0.14*	−0.17*	−0.17*
Mothers' ethnicity	−0.04	.004	.005
Children's age	—	−0.18**	−0.18**
Mothers' SNM-difference	—	.16**	.21*
Children's age*SNM-difference	—	—	−0.04
Mother's ethnicity*SNM-difference	—	—	−0.08
R^2	.02	.07	.08
F change for R^2	2.53	6.81***	.73

Note. β refers to standardized regression coefficients. Mothers' ethnicity was a binary variable, representing if mothers identified as Dutch (0) or not (1). SNM-difference refers to a difference score representing the frequency of mother's subtle negative messages toward the ingroup vs. outgroup. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

Table 6. Alternative hierarchical regression model ran as the second robustness check predicting children's ethnic prejudice toward outgroups.

Variable	Block 1 β	Block 2 β	Block 3 β
Children's gender	−0.12	−0.14*	−0.14*
Mothers' ethnicity TURK	.02	.04	.04
Mothers' ethnicity AFRO	−0.12	−0.09	−0.09
Children's age	—	−0.17**	−0.17**
Mothers' SNM-ingroup	—	.004	−0.01
Mothers' SNM-outgroup	—	.19**	.24**
Children's age*SNM-ingroup	—	—	−0.03
Mothers' ethnicity TURK*SNM-outgroup	—	—	−0.02
Mothers' ethnicity AFRO*SNM-outgroup	—	—	−0.08
R^2	.03	.10	.10
F change for R^2	2.87*	5.44***	0.47

Note. β refers to standardized regression coefficients. TURK refers to Turkish heritage and AFRO refers to West-African or Caribbean heritage. SNM-ingroup and -outgroup respectively refer to subtle negative messages toward the ingroup and outgroup. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

Table 7. Alternative hierarchical regression model ran as the third robustness check predicting children's ethnic prejudice toward minoritized outgroups.

Variable	Block 1 β	Block 2 β	Block 3 β
Children's gender	−0.17**	−0.18**	−0.18**
Mothers' ethnicity	.17**	.28***	.28***
Children's age	—	−0.21***	−0.18***
Mothers' SNM-ingroup	—	−0.02	−0.06
Mothers' SNM-M-outgroup	—	.15*	.17
Children's age*SNM-ingroup	—	—	.02
Mothers' ethnicity*SNM-ingroup	—	—	−0.05
R^2	.06	.11	.12
F change for R^2	7.48***	5.24**	0.24

Note. β refers to standardized regression coefficients. Mothers' ethnicity was a binary variable, representing if mothers identified as Dutch (0) or not (1). SNM-ingroup refers to subtle negative messages toward the ingroup. SNM-M-outgroup refers to subtle negative messages toward minoritized outgroups. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

childhood. We found that older children have less ethnic prejudice than younger children, and that mothers' subtle negative messages about outgroups were related to children's ethnic prejudice. The association between mothers' subtle negative messages about

outgroups and children's ethnic prejudice did not differ for older vs younger children, nor for ethnic majority vs ethnic minoritized groups. These findings were quite robust. The effect sizes of these associations were small.

We found support for our first hypothesis that older children would have lower ethnic prejudice than younger children. This finding confirms the general pattern of age-related changes in outgroup prejudice found in many other studies (Raabe & Beelmann, 2011; Pektas et al., 2023) and aligns with Social Identity Developmental Theory (SIDT; Nesdale, 2004; 2007). We also found full support for our second hypothesis that higher mothers' subtle negative messages about outgroups is related to higher ethnic prejudice in their children. This finding highlights one of the subtle ways in which parents contribute to children's ethnic prejudice development. Parents may be less aware of the subtle negative messages about outgroups that they convey when talking about children's everyday experiences (i.e. talking about their children's friends or classmates) since these messages are not explicitly prejudiced. Our findings suggest that these seemingly harmless messages still inform children's perceptions of outgroups.

We did not find support for our hypothesis that the association between mothers' subtle negative messages and children's ethnic prejudice will be stronger in older vs younger children. There are various reasonable explanations for the lack of such an interaction. In terms of our methodology, our cross-sectional design may not have been sensitive enough to detect age-related differences. Instead, a longitudinal analysis would be more attuned to detecting if within-person fluctuations in children's ethnic prejudice over time are related to parents' subtle negative messages about outgroups. Developmentally, we speculate that children's increasing perspective taking skills as they approach adolescence may lead to more reflection on parents' subtle negative messages about outgroups (Quintana, 2008).

Lastly, our explorative analysis indicated that the association between mothers' subtle negative messages and children's ethnic prejudice did not differ between families with an ethnic majority vs ethnic minoritized background. This aligns with our descriptive results which indicate that across groups, mothers convey negative messages about outgroups to a similar degree (Table 3). Taken together, our findings suggest that hearing even subtle negative messages about outgroups contributes to children's ethnic prejudice development.

These findings do not preclude the chance that these findings depend on the content of the subtle negative messages and the target group in question. For example, subtle negative messages about outgroups that align with salient stereotypical beliefs such as describing a young Black child as dumb, which aligns with stereotypical beliefs of Black people as less intelligent, may contribute more strongly toward the development of anti-Black prejudice specifically. Therefore, future studies should use discussions tasks that can elicit stereotype salient subtle negative messages toward specific outgroups.

There are a few limitations to keep in mind. Firstly, the families we recruited lived in large urban areas in the Netherlands and therefore may hold more positive views of intergroup relations than the general Dutch population, which could have limited the number of mothers that explicitly convey negative messages about outgroups. Secondly, our findings are specific to mother-child dyads, and the sample included many single parent households. However, many children grow up in two parent households and may receive subtle negative messages about outgroups from both parents. Two parent households may be particularly conducive for the intergenerational transmission of ethnic prejudice (Jugert et al., 2016). Additionally, our study was sufficiently powered to detect associations with medium effect sizes but too small to effectively test more complex models. Our hard-to-reach ethnically diverse sample is a clear strength of the study. To our knowledge, this is the first research project to study how subtle negative messages about outgroups shape ethnic prejudice in children.

The study contributes to understanding which socialization processes shape children's ethnic prejudice across ethnic groups in middle to late childhood. Our findings suggest that parents seem to unknowingly contribute to prejudice development in childhood by describing the intentions behind the behaviors of outgroup children negatively. This finding highlights that even parents' who may use a color-evasive approach to parenting can still convey subtle negative messages about outgroups that contribute to prejudice development. Our study uniquely contributes to the literature by uncovering one of the subtle socialization processes that shape children's ethnic prejudice within families. In other words, let us as adults remain keenly aware that our seemingly innocuous conversations with children can negatively affect their perceptions of others and pass on (possibly unconscious) prejudiced views to the next generation.

Data deposition

The data is available upon request.

Disclosure statement

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Appendices

Appendix A

As part of the requirements of the larger, study, there were a number specific criteria for the ethnic groups allowed to participate. To help in our goals of recruiting an ethnically diverse sample, we actively recruited mother-child dyads. Fathers did not have to participate in the study. In order to recruit a large sample of White mother-child dyads (as part of the larger study’s goals), we only allowed White mother-child dyads to participate if the biological mother, father, and grandparents of the child were born in the Netherlands or in a North-Western European country (e.g. Belgium, Germany). We also actively recruited mother-child dyads of Turkish descent, and required that all four biological grandparents of the child were born in Turkey. For the families of West-African or Caribbean descent, we required that the participating mother or one of her parents had to be born in Surinam, the Dutch Antilles, Cape

Verde, or Ghana. For the mothers of Surinamese descent, we additionally required that they self-identify (or indicate that one of their parents identified) as being Afro-Surinamese. Because a relatively large proportion of mothers with West-African and Caribbean heritage have children with fathers who have a different ethnic background than their own (Kalmijn & Van Tubergen, 2006), we did not require these fathers to have the same background as the mothers.

Appendix B

The vast majority of ethnic majority mothers were born in the Netherlands (97%). The largest proportion of mothers with an ethnic minoritized background were born in the Netherlands (38%), followed by Turkey (35%), Suriname (13%), the Dutch Caribbean (7%), various West-European countries (6%) and the Cape-Verdean Islands (1%). Mothers in this subsample ranged in age from 25 to 52 years ($M = 38.70$, $SD = 5.07$) and children from 6 to 10 years ($M = 7.52$, $SD = 0.99$). There were few single-parent households (13%), and most mothers had a bachelor’s degree or higher (65%). We also found between-group differences for a number of sociodemographic characteristics between ethnic majority mother-child dyads and mother-child dyads from ethnic minoritized groups, namely mother and child’s age, mothers’ educational level, and the ethnic diversity of the neighborhood and of the child’s school (Table 1).

Appendix C

A pilot study among adults ($n = 74$, 39% male), aged 18 to 53 ($M = 26.96$, $SD = 6.91$) of diverse ethnic backgrounds (31 ethnic majority, 43 with an ethnic minoritized background), found that the vast majority (92%–96%) classified the Black children in the pictures as Surinamese or Caribbean. Similarly, the vast majority (95%–96%) classified the SWANA children as Turkish or Moroccan. Lastly, all participants classified the White children as Dutch. No differences between the ethnic groups of the children in the pictures were found in terms of rated attractiveness ($p > .05$), but the SWANA children were rated less cute ($M = 6.09$, $SD = 1.70$) than the Black ($M = 6.51$, $SD = 1.39$, $t(72) = 3.56$, $p = .001$) and White children ($M = 6.72$, $SD = 1.38$, $t(72) = -4.42$, $p < .001$).