

The development of children's meta-perceptions towards the out-group and their association with intergroup attitudes

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Abstract

Meta-perceptions in the intergroup context are one's beliefs regarding the views the out-group holds about his/her in-group or its members. Previous studies found a correlation between meta-perceptions and intergroup relations. For example, among adults, it was found that negative meta-stereotypes towards the out-group were correlated to negative feelings towards the out-group members and towards the interaction with them. In addition, it was found that negative meta-stereotypes predicted intergroup anxiety. Among adolescents, it was found that positive meta-stereotypes were correlated to positive feelings towards the out-group members and towards the interaction with them. However, intergroup meta-perceptions and their effects have not yet been studied among children. This study examines for the first time in a novel way meta-perceptions in the intergroup context among children.

It is already well established that young children have intergroup biases that are manifested in their preference of the in-group over the out-group. In societies involved in intergroup conflicts, these intergroup biases and attitudes develop earlier than in societies not involved in conflicts, and they often remain stable throughout life. It is of great importance to examine the development of intergroup meta-perceptions from a young age because meta-perceptions affect the attitudes and the behaviors towards the other, and consequently the intergroup relations in the society. Exploring children's meta-perceptions will allow to examine whether there are biases and inaccuracies in children's meta-perceptions, or misperceptions and distorted perceptions regarding the out-group's perceptions about the in-group. Exposing these biases and misperceptions at a young age will allow to intervene early in order to improve and correct meta-perceptions which in turn will improve intergroup attitudes. This is especially important in a context of conflict where perceptions and attitudes towards the conflict out-group are negative.

Therefore, the goal of the present study was to examine the development of Jewish-Israeli children's intergroup meta-perceptions in the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The focus of the study was on children's meta-perceptions about Arabs, as a conflict out-group

that is relatively familiar, as well as examining their meta-perceptions about Scots, as a neutral and unfamiliar out-group. The study also examined the association between meta-perceptions about the out-group and intergroup attitudes.

Participants were 108 Jewish-Israeli children (40 kindergarteners, $M_{\text{age}}=5.18$, 35 2nd graders, $M_{\text{age}}=7.64$, and 33 5th graders, $M_{\text{age}}=10.73$; 46% female). The participants were asked open-ended questions about meta-perceptions toward these out-groups (e.g., "What do you think Arabs/Scots think about Jews?"). They were also asked forced-choice questions about their meta-stereotypes towards the out-groups (e.g., "Do you think Arabs/Scots think that Jews are good?"). Finally, children's intergroup attitudes were assessed (by measures of willingness to contact, physical proximity, and feelings towards meeting an out-group member).

Children's content of meta-perceptions was transcribed and analyzed based on qualitative content analysis. The analysis revealed that children's meta-perceptions are classified into four main categories: meta-prejudices (feelings that out-group members have towards the in-group), meta-stereotypes (traits that out-group members attribute to the in-group), meta-perceptions regarding relationship between the groups, and meta-perceptions regarding the territory. Then, the meta-perceptions were classified according to their valence: positive/negative/neutral/complex.

It was found that already at a young age of five, Jewish-Israeli children hold meta-perceptions towards out-groups, and with age, the amount and the complexity of their meta-perceptions increased. In addition, there were differences in the types of the meta-perceptions between the age groups towards the target groups. Specifically, kindergarteners expressed more meta-stereotypes towards Arabs than 2nd graders and 5th graders. In addition, 5th graders expressed more meta-stereotypes towards Scots than towards Arabs, and they expressed more meta-perceptions about relationships between the groups towards Arabs than towards Scots. Moreover, it was found that overall, children had more negative meta-stereotypes and attitudes towards Arabs than towards Scots. Finally, it was found that, overall, meta-stereotypes towards out-groups were correlated with intergroup attitudes. Meaning, the more children had negative meta-stereotypes towards the out-group, the less they felt positive feelings towards meeting the out-group members, and the less they were willing to contact them.

The present study reveals for the first time the repertoire of children's meta-perceptions about out-groups and the negative consequences that negative meta-perceptions have on intergroup attitudes among children. The study emphasizes the importance of exposing children at a young age to complex information about out-group members and to their diverse perceptions about the in-group. This early exposure may shape their perceptions and meta-perceptions in a more complex and neutral manner, and in a less generalized and biased manner, which in turn may promote positive relations between groups.