The Effect of Interpersonal Similarity Between In- and Out-group Members on Intergroup Attitudes Among Young Children

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Abstract

The intergroup bias is one of the most pervasive and stable phenomena in social psychology. It is referring to the tendency of an individual to perceive his/her in-group in a more favorable way than the out-groups. Developmental research reveals that such a bias is already present in young children, and that it can have negative and destructive consequences for group relations, especially when the groups are in conflict. For example, in Israel, the Muslim-Arab group is very salient out-group for Israeli Jews because of the long-lasting conflict between the groups, and therefore suffers from biases. Furthermore, these negative attitudes toward the Arab group can be preserved, and therefore affect the intergroup relation in a more severe ways in the future. Building on this viewpoint, we can see why it is important and critical to understand the origin of the intergroup bias, and the ways by which we can intervene to mitigating it.

One of the main hypotheses that underlie the intergroup bias is the perceptions of intergroup dissimilarity. A possible approach to this challenge has been to induce perceived similarity and to reduce perceived dissimilarity between in-and out-groups. However, this approach has had contradictory success among adults. On the one hand, perceived similarity may lead to attraction (similarity-attraction hypothesis), and on the other hand, it may arouse the need for distinctiveness, and consequently the motivation for differentiation (similarity-differentiation hypothesis). However, scant research has examined how this contradiction plays out in children. In this study I have examined the effect of an intergroup similarity inducing intervention (full similarity, partial similarity, and no similarity) among Jewish children, and its effect on their intergroup attitudes towards Arabs. Additionally, I have examined the perceived similarities and differences in a qualitative method, by conducting an open-ended interviews with the participants. Furthermore, I have examined the differences between two age groups to study the developmental aspect of the intergroup bias more closely, by comparing kindergartners with children in the 2nd grade.

In this study, there were 100 participants from the Jewish group in Israel in ages 5 and 8. The participants were assigned randomly to one of three groups, which was distinguished by the extent of similarity presented to them with a hypothetic out-group member from the Muslim

Arab group. The similarities were based on what the participant had said about himself/herself during the initial stages of the study, in four characteristics: appearance, family composition, interests, and preferences. The attitudes of the participants toward the out-group members were measured before the intervention and after it, and included multiple measures: liking, proximity, positive and negative resource allocation, essentialism, and perceived similarity and differences. Additionally, a qualitative assessment was conducted using interviews to examine the perceived similarity and differences in more detail and in children's own words.

The qualitive findings showed that children from both age groups perceived more differences than similarities between Jews and Arabs. In this regard, the participants specified three main aspects of similarities and dissimilarities between the groups, which included: physical appearance (i.e., body organs and clothing), psychological characteristics (preferences, traits, or behaviors), and social identity (group membership or family structure). The perceptions of intergroup dissimilarity included a partially biased and essentialist differences. Additionally, there were some developmental differences between the age groups. While kindergartners mentioned more differences in physical appearance, the 2nd graders mentioned more internal psychological differences.

When examining the correlation between the baseline attitudes of the participants. There was found that only 2nd graders' perception of intergroup dissimilarity was correlated with negative out-group attitudes, while the perceptions of kindergartners were not. Thus, although perceptions of dissimilarity between groups were present in both age groups, in a high degree, only the 2nd graders showed negative attitudes.

The quantitative findings of the study showed that similarity inducing intervention was effective in improving intergroup attitudes in both age groups, while dissimilarity intervention worsen them. Regarding the effect of partial similarity compared to full similarity on the out-group attitudes, there was no significant findings, and partial similarity was as effective as full similarity on liking, distance, negative resource allocation, essentialism, and similarity-differences perceptions. The only differences between full and partial similarity were in the measure of positive resource allocation. Furthermore, the only age differences found was in the essentialism variable.

The findings of this research indicate that inducing similarity perceptions is effective in changing attitudes towards the out-group to a more positive direction, which in turn can reduce the out-group bias. It is important to use this kind of intervention already in kindergarten because the negative attitudes are not fully developed yet. This research can contribute to the literature on the effect of intergroup similarity and its relation to intergroup attitudes. In the future, I hope the findings from this study can be used to improve intergroup attitudes in the context of the Israel-Palestinian conflict and other contexts.