

Group biases in children's and adults' preference for information about in- and out-group members

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Abstract

The human tendency to evaluate members of in-group more favorably than those associated with out-groups has been termed intergroup bias. Research suggests that such biases develop at a young age and often lead to negative effects on relationships between social groups. Early hypotheses regarding this phenomenon point to intergroup ignorance, that is a lack of knowledge about out-groups, as an important contributing factor fostering the development of negative stereotypes and prejudices. Importantly, direct contact between groups may reduce such biases by providing the opportunity for real interaction, the acquisition of real information and thus a reduction of stereotypes, prejudices, and anxieties about the other. However, direct contact is not always possible between social groups, especially in a context of violent and intractable conflict such as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. In such situations intergroup learning may be made possible indirectly through the provision of information about the out-group, which in turn may reduce stereotypes, prejudices, and biased attitudes.

Such indirect learning, although promising, is challenging with regards to the development of intergroup attitudes in children whose processing of information is generally mediated by adults. In contexts of intergroup conflict, the information provided about out-groups tends to be partial, one-dimensional, and negatively biased. Furthermore, children often do not choose the type or amount of information they process for they are dependent on parents, teachers, and their immediate environment. Therefore, if information is to be effectively used to reduce intergroup biases among children, it is important to understand and track their curiosity and self-generated interest regarding both in-groups and out-groups. This curiosity is manifested in the amount and type of information that children seek to acquire regarding social groups. Through this information, we can examine whether there are biases in the information they want on different groups. The purpose of the current study is to examine the amount and type of information children want to acquire about in- and out-groups. In addition, the study examines the relationship between children's informational preferences and their intergroup attitudes. These questions are examined in three different age groups in the context of three different social groups in order to explore children's developmental trajectory and differences between in-groups and out-groups.

103 Israeli Jewish children and adults from three age groups participated in the study: kindergarteners in personal interviews ($n=33$, 36% female, $M_{age}=5.48$), 2nd graders in personal interviews ($n=35$, 69% female, $M_{age}=7.88$), and adults in online questionnaires ($n=35$, 49% female, $M_{age}=29.6$). The participants were shown three pictures of three different characters

described only by their group membership (in-group: Jew; “conflict” out-group: Arab and “neutral” out-group: Scot), and asked what they would like to know about each character. They were asked: "What would you like to know about this Jew/Scot/Arab boy/girl?". Participants spontaneously produced questions about each character until they ran out of questions. Based on previous research, the content of the questions was qualitatively analyzed to reveal what the participants perceived as essential in a particular category. Following this, the questions were classified into four content categories: psychological characteristics, appearance, personal identity, and group identity. The participants also answered a series of questionnaires, regarding their knowledge of- and familiarity with the in- and out-groups, and about their willingness to interact with the members of the different groups.

The results regarding the type of information showed that across ages, participants asked about the out-group members more questions regarding their group identity, compared to the group identity questions asked about the in-group members. In addition, kindergarteners asked more questions about the in-group appearance, compared to the out-group. Finally, while 2nd graders asked more questions about the psychological characteristics of all targets, adults asked more questions about the personal identity of all targets. Regarding the amount of information, no differences were found between the number of questions asked by the different age groups and no differences were found in the number of questions asked about the different target groups. Regarding intergroup attitudes, a positive correlation was found between the number of questions asked by the 2nd graders towards the Arab or Jewish character and their willingness to interact with them, meaning that a 2nd grader who asks more questions about the Arab/Jewish character, will also have a stronger willingness to interact with him/her. Among adults, this correlation was found only regarding the in-group.

There are several conclusions from this research regarding the type of information. The finding that children and adults asked more questions about the group identity of out-group than in-group members may be indicative of their differential construal of in and out-groups, viewing out-group members more than in-group members as homogeneous category exemplars. Moreover, children and adults are interested in information that matches their interests and they show curiosity by asking questions that suit their developmental stage. Regarding the amount of information, the absence of differences in the number of questions might imply there is no difference in the level of their curiosity towards different groups, and there is no difference in the level of curiosity of participants from different age groups. The motivation for acquiring information may stem from different sources, but it was not manifested in the differences in the average number of questions asked by the participants across all ages and all target groups. Regarding the correlation between informational preferences and intergroup attitudes, it can be concluded that children's curiosity about out-group members, which manifested in their number of questions, was associated with their willingness to interact with them, suggesting that encouraging curiosity can contribute to positive relations between groups.

This study may provide guidelines for interventions, allowing us to assess how the provision of requested information affects children's and adults' attitudes toward out-groups. These programs can use the research findings to learn the amount of information, and the type of information that children of different ages want to acquire, thus using information as an indirect mediator in order to reduce intergroup biases. These programs can be a significant tool for improving intergroup relations in societies in general and especially in a society in conflict like Israeli society.