

CHAPTER 3

Racial and Ethnic Prejudice among Children

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Racism appears among children as young as five, suggesting that children often enter school with prejudiced views. With increases in the racial and ethnic diversity of youth in the United States, understanding how prejudice develops and can be changed is urgent. Researchers, educators, parents, and other concerned individuals have long tried to understand the atrocious acts of racism that capture headlines and also those that do not make headlines, for example, when a five-year-old girl refuses to work on a puzzle with a new classmate of a different racial or ethnic group, or when an eight-year-old boy mutters a racial slur under his breath.

Some suggest that these acts do not represent the children's true attitudes, but, rather, simply reflect mimicry of others' behavior. Thus, there is no prejudice to reduce and the acts should be ignored. In contrast, these behaviors may reflect children's true attitudes; consequently, children could be taught new, tolerant attitudes. An additional interpretation is that children's attitudes and behaviors in part reflect their lack of social sophistication; thus, reducing their prejudice requires developmentally appropriate training in more sophisticated thought processes. These interpretations reflect some of the main theories on prejudice among children.

In this chapter, we review some of the main theories of the origins of prejudice among children and discuss the prejudice-reduction interventions growing out of these theories. We conclude with advice for parents, teachers, policymakers, and others interested in promoting tolerance among youth.

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THEORIES OF THE ORIGINS OF PREJUDICE AMONG CHILDREN

Why are children prejudiced? “Prejudice” is defined as the holding of negative beliefs and feelings toward a group and its members or the exhibition of hostile or negative treatment directed at a group and its members. Although there are distinctions between race and ethnicity (Quintana, 1998), racial and ethnic group memberships appear to have similar implications for prejudice; therefore, we will discuss research findings on these identities together. We focus on ethnic and racial prejudice because of the combined set of features differentiating it from other prejudices: the category of race is less malleable (for example, people may move in and out of the category of overweight), more visible (for example, people’s sexual orientation is not visible), and allows for social separation more readily (for example, people may be biased toward members of the other gender, while having close relationships with them) than other prejudices.

The Authoritarian Personality

An early theory suggested that prejudice in children was an outgrowth of abnormal development and thus rare. This idea evolved from a psychodynamic framework articulated by Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswick, Levinson, and Sanford (1950) in their classic book *The Authoritarian Personality*. The term *authoritarian* describes a personality type characterized by excessive conformity, submission to authority, and hostility toward social deviants. In an environment that forcefully promotes conventionalism and submission to authority, it was thought that children would need to release their aggressive impulses. Not able to aggress against authority figures (parents), children were thought to project their anger onto social deviants (racial or ethnic minorities in certain contexts) as defined by authority figures. This process was thought to lead to prejudice toward “social deviants.” However, prejudice is pervasive worldwide, thus prejudiced beliefs are no longer considered an abnormal occurrence (although acts of discrimination are illegal).

Social Learning Theory

Another traditional approach to prejudice is social learning theory, which suggests that children learn prejudice by observing and imitating important others (such as parents and teachers), becoming gradually more prejudiced with age. Gordon Allport originally proposed this theory in 1954 in his classic work *The Nature of Prejudice*. Allport suggested that children mimic, and then come to believe, what they are exposed to in their environments. A child who overhears a racial slur from a valued adult will likely repeat it, and to the extent that the

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child understands the meaning behind it, will come to hold the associated negative belief about the group. Evidence supports social learning theory more generally (Bandura, 1977), and few individuals claim that we are not influenced by our environment. Research, however, has provided inconsistent evidence regarding the relationship between children's racial attitudes and the racial attitudes of others in their environment, such as parents.

Evidence suggests that parents, particularly of race-majority groups, rarely discuss prejudice with their children (see Aboud & Amato, 2001). Ironically, more racially tolerant parents may not discuss racial issues with their children for fear of bringing attention to race. Yet, research shows that when adults and peers address prejudice, it decreases (Aboud & Doyle, 1996). Thus, it seems that the lack of a strong relationship between the attitudes of children and their valued adult figures may stem from a lack of discussion.

Intergroup Contact Theory

A variant of social learning theory is intergroup contact theory, which was also proposed by Gordon Allport (1954). According to intergroup contact theory, prejudice partially grows out of a lack of personal, positive contact among members of different groups. In contrast, intergroup harmony can result from increased positive intergroup contact. After the initial desegregation of American schools, it became clear that simply providing the opportunity for intergroup contact did not always lead to improved intergroup relations. Even though schools were integrated, students of the same race tended to choose to sit together. Unfortunately, schools help create "resegregation" by "tracking" children according to ability. This tracking tends to occur in discriminatory ways, separating children across race lines; this reduces opportunities for positive contact in the classroom, which then transfers to the lunchroom and schoolyard (Khelmhov & Hallinan, 1999).

Cognitive-Developmental Theory

The cognitive-developmental theory of prejudice is relatively new, starting from the assumption that prejudice is not a minor problem among children and does not necessarily increase with age. Cognitive-developmental theory was originally articulated by Jean Piaget (Piaget & Weil, 1951) and was applied to prejudice by Phyllis Katz, Frances Aboud, and Rebecca Bigler, among others. According to cognitive-developmental theorizing, prejudice is inevitable among young children because they lack the skills necessary to view people as individuals. Children tend to focus on surface features and exaggerate differences between groups (such as assuming that all members of group A do X and all members

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of group A do Y); only later, as their cognitive systems mature, do they become capable of recognizing similarities across groups (for example, some members of both groups A and B do X) and differences within the same group (some members of group A do X, and some members of group A do Y). As early as preschool and kindergarten, race-majority group children exhibit prejudice. Young children typically assign more positive and fewer negative attributes to their own groups (*ingroups*) than to other groups (*outgroups*), but show declining prejudice around age seven (Doyle & Aboud, 1995). Research shows that shifts toward reduced prejudice levels are explained in part by acquisition of the social cognitive skills thought to enable prejudice reduction, such as the ability to classify others based on multiple dimensions (e.g., Bigler & Liben, 1993), the ability to perceive similarities between members of different groups (e.g., Doyle & Aboud, 1995), and the ability to perceive differences within the same group (e.g., Doyle & Aboud, 1995; Katz, Sohn, & Zalk, 1975). There is evidence that these age-related differences cannot be easily explained by increased concerns over appearing prejudiced (Doyle & Aboud, 1995).

Cognitive-developmental theory, despite an impressive body of supportive evidence, does not explain individual differences in prejudice among children exhibiting similar cognitive skill levels. One line of research attempting to address this issue has examined children's differing "lay theories" of prejudice (Levy & Dweck, 1999). Like scientists, lay people have theories about how the world works and how people should behave. Lay theories are often captured in everyday sayings, such as "It's never too late to turn over a new leaf" and "A leopard never changes its spots." These are examples of lay theories that contradict each other. This may partially explain individual differences in social judgment and behavior. For example, children who hold the lay theory that people can change harbor less prejudice and are more willing to help disadvantaged others than children who hold the lay theory that people cannot change their ways (Karafantis & Levy, 2004; Levy & Dweck, 1999).

Evolutionary Theory

Evolutionary perspectives claim that prejudice and discrimination are nearly inevitable. Fishbein (1996) argues that the roots of prejudice began in hunter-gatherer tribes and continue universally today because of their success in that period of human evolution. For example, tribe members who showed greater preference for each other than for unrelated people helped and protected each other, which maximized their gene transmission to successive generations. Thus,

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Another evolutionary perspective suggests that children's thinking about social groups is organized according to inherent theories about humans, which help children attend to important group information and ignore unimportant information (Hirschfeld, 2001). According to this perspective, because the concept of race resonates well with children's pre-existing cognitive structures for differentiating social groups, race becomes a powerful organizing factor for humans.

Evolutionary approaches have been criticized for suggesting that prejudice is natural and thus should be condoned. Still, it seems that certain aspects of evolutionary thought overlap with other approaches to prejudice. For instance, like the evolutionary mechanism that favors categorization according to others' similarities to oneself, the aforementioned cognitive theories propose that such categorization helps individuals simplify the wealth of information that they encounter. Evolutionary approaches may best explain the roots of the mechanisms currently facilitating prejudice (such as the methods humans that use to categorize groups of people), whereas approaches focusing directly on the current mechanisms, such as the social learning theory or cognitive-developmental models, best explain the more immediate, more relevant (for our purposes) causes of prejudice.

Summary

Research suggests that being raised in a prejudiced environment does not necessarily translate into developing prejudiced attitudes, nor does a tolerant environment necessarily lead to tolerant attitudes. It also suggests that prejudice is not exclusively a problem concerning adult populations. Recent approaches emphasize the importance of integrating research and theorizing from cognitive, developmental, and social perspectives on prejudice to understand its development (see Levy & Killen, 2008; Rutland, Abrams, & Levy, 2007).

REDUCING PREJUDICE IN CHILDREN

Interventions to combat prejudice among children have taken many forms. Typically, they are conducted during school and are sometimes integrated into the children's curricula. At times, entire schools or districts have adopted interventions as a matter of practice, while others have been the choices of individual teachers. Generally, in the United States, prejudice-reducing interventions have focused on reducing European American children's racial prejudice, given that they have been the dominant majority in society. Although researchers, practitioners, and educators have developed various intervention strategies, we limit our discussion to interventions that have been evaluated using quantitative data. We organize our review around the theoretical approaches discussed in the previous section.

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As noted, the early tendency to explain prejudice as an outgrowth of abnormal development has not proven tenable. Interventions based on this theory suggest therapy as the appropriate treatment for children exhibiting prejudice. Therapeutic techniques have been used to “treat” prejudice (Cotharin & Mikulas, 1975), but are rarely used today. Relative to other types of intervention strategies, such one-on-one strategies are not optimal due to the widespread nature of prejudice.

Another core traditional theory is social learning theory—the idea that children learn, and therefore unlearn, prejudice from their social environment. Intergroup contact theory, originally proposed by Allport, has received much attention in the intervention literature. Intergroup contact that is individualized, cooperative, maintains equal status between individuals, and is sanctioned by authorities appears to be most likely to break down interracial barriers and promote intergroup understanding and friendships (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). Researchers have successfully shown that intergroup harmony can be promoted by altering features of the classroom environment in accordance with these principles. For instance, Aronson and Gonzalez (1988) designed the *jigsaw classroom* in which students work cooperatively to learn and teach each other components of an academic lesson. This technique replaces competitive aspects of the classroom with cooperative ones. For example, students in a classroom are divided into six racially and academically mixed groups comprised of six students per group. Each group learns one-sixth of the information that is unique, valuable, and necessary to understand the full lesson. Then, participants in each of the original groups are divided so that new groups are composed of one member of each of the original groups, allowing them to teach one another the entire lesson. The jigsaw technique promotes interdependence and cooperation, as opposed to competition. This technique has been successful in improving children’s relationships with each other and increasing self-esteem in addition to enhancing students’ academic success.

One weakness of the cooperative learning strategy is that cross-race friendships may not persist after cooperative learning ends. In general, cross-race friendships tend to decrease with age, which may arise because these friendships are generally more fragile, leaving them more likely to end when peer groups shrink and dating begins (Khelmlhov & Hallinan, 1999). Research on social reasoning by Melanie Killen and colleagues (Killen, Lee-Kim, McGlothlin, & Stangor, 2002) suggests that shifts in children’s reasoning may in part account for why cross-race friendships decline. Killen’s work has shown that with increasing age, children think that it is more acceptable to exclude other race peers from friendships because they believe that groups function better when everyone is of the same race (presuming that they share interests). Younger children tend to reason that exclusion based on race is morally wrong; thus, reasoning-based interventions might prove fruitful for them.

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Another promising and related avenue from social learning theory is the “extended contact effect” or “indirect cross friendship hypothesis” (e.g., Cameron & Rutland, 2006), which suggests that knowing that ingroup members are friends with outgroup members leads to more positive attitudes toward the outgroup. Support for the extended contact hypothesis is widespread, with applications across development from childhood to adulthood.

Multicultural education (teaching about the histories of cultural groups) and anti-racist teaching (teaching about historical and contemporary racial/ethnic injustices) represent two anti-bias messages deriving from social learning theorizing, and neither requires that children in the classroom be racially diverse. Multiculturalism suggests that through learning about cultural groups (for example, being exposed to information about cross-cultural holidays and celebrations), individuals will come to understand and respect different cultures, thereby reducing negative attitudes (Banks, 1995). A criticism of multiculturalism is that celebrating differences may increase the likelihood that children will place individuals into rigid categories, thereby increasing racial and/or ethnic stereotyping. This is especially true among children who lack the cognitive sophistication to recognize that individuals fit into multiple categories based on, for example, age, race, or gender. Rebecca Bigler and colleagues (e.g., Bigler, Jones, & Libliner, 1997) have demonstrated that using perceptually salient social categories (such as gender) results in the development of biased attitudes. This occurs, for instance, when a teacher uses that group category to differentiate people. Educational curricula focusing specifically on the history of certain racial groups (e.g., Black History Month) by highlighting race and racial differences inadvertently increase children’s racial biases. Children exposed to this information may conclude that race is an important dimension along which individuals differ—thus, stereotyping will increase rather than decrease. This work highlights the importance of limiting the use of race as a differentiating characteristic in the classroom, or, when discussing race, the necessity of emphasizing similarities across racial groups and differences within groups.

Banks (1995) further suggests that effective multicultural education requires that the total school environment be transformed to reflect the racial and cultural diversity of American society and to help all children experience educational equality. This would allay concerns raised about proposals with minimal additions to school curricula (such as the inclusion of race-related material only as part of a month-to-month recognition of non-majority groups).

Often going hand-in-hand with multicultural education efforts, anti-racist education seeks to provide an in-depth awareness of the history and roots of inequality (Fine, 1995). Anti-racist teaching confronts racism head-on with descriptions of past and contemporary discrimination and inequalities, pointing out the forces that maintain racism. This may

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increase empathy and, at the same time, discourage future racism. For example, Hughes, Bigler, and Levy (2007) examined the effects of learning about historical racism on the racial attitudes of European American and African American children. Children received history lessons including information about racism (the experimental condition) or identical lessons omitting this information (the control condition). Less biased attitudes toward African Americans were reported by European American children in the experimental condition than in the control condition. However, if not undertaken carefully, such teaching could lead to ingroup feelings of anger or self-righteousness and could be threatening or humiliating to outgroup members (e.g., McGregor, 1993). Therefore, although this is perhaps a powerful intervention, it is necessary that steps be taken to minimize the potentially negative side effects of anti-racist education by, for example, providing examples of majority-group members who are working to end racism and by pointing out similarities between groups to avoid stereotyping.

Although relatively modern, cognitive-developmental theory has served as the basis for several interventions, which generally involve skill training. Aboud and Fenwick (1999), for instance, found that 10-year-old European Canadian children who participated (versus those who did not participate) in an 11-week school-based program that trained them to focus on people's internal attributes demonstrated a decrease in prejudice toward Black Canadians. One activity in the program presented participants with photographs of different children and then provided them with those children's names and individualized trait descriptions, such as the children's likes, dislikes, and unique personality traits.

Similar to interventions based on cognitive-developmental theory, empathy training relies on age-related cognitive skills, but also focuses on the understanding and experience of emotions. Presumably, through empathy training, children can place themselves in the shoes of outgroup members who are faced with discrimination, and thus be motivated to alleviate the others' distress as if it were their own—that is, by acting in a less biased way (Underwood & Moore, 1982). An early example of an empathy-inducing intervention was the classroom demonstration devised by Jane Elliot, a third-grade teacher in a predominately European American rural town. Elliot told students on one day that blue-eyed children were superior, and, on the next day, that brown-eyed children were superior. She showed preferential treatment to the "superior" group for the entire day, and pointed out the successes and failures of group members as evidence of the group's superior or inferior position. For one day, each group of children had a first-hand experience with discrimination on the basis of an arbitrary characteristic. Weiner and Wright (1973) tested the blue-eyes/brown eyes simulation with European American third-

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of prejudice on subsequent intergroup behavior. It should be noted that older, more cognitively sophisticated children are more able to empathize (McGregor, 1993); thus, this type of training may be more successful with older children.

Summary

It is clear from this selective review that researchers have made tremendous gains in understanding how to reduce prejudice. In racially diverse environments, implementing a cooperative learning technique is an effective vehicle for reducing prejudice and also for enhancing academic success for all students. Regardless of the racial composition of the environment, other interventions based on social learning theory, such as multicultural education and anti-racist teaching, have much to offer. However, as mentioned, there are some counterintuitive traps in these interventions that could actually increase prejudice.

Despite impressive progress, there is much still to be tested and integrated. It is clear that prejudice is multifaceted and is more likely to be reduced with multiple approaches. For example, it seems worthwhile for schools to consider implementing programs that draw on elements of multicultural education (appreciating the richness and varying experiences of people from different cultures) and anti-racist education (highlighting that racism is still a problem).

It is also important that researchers expand intervention efforts and theorizing. Most research has focused on European Americans or relationships between African and European Americans while ignoring other racial and ethnic intergroup relations. Children's ages, or social-cognitive skill levels, also need to be taken into account rather than employing a "one size fits all" approach.

In addition to directly intervening with children to reduce their prejudice, we might consider intervening on other levels, as well (Banks, 1995). We have seen that children's prejudiced attitudes arise from a variety of sources. Thus, we ought to consider a variety of sources through which to counter this prejudice.

Research should also examine students at schools with race problems. Not surprisingly, many of the schools most willing to participate in interventions are schools that are already implementing prejudice-reducing strategies and, relative to other schools, have fewer race problems. Children at participating schools tend to have relatively low prejudice scores even before the intervention. This limits the conclusions we can draw from the study and fails to accomplish the goal—to reduce prejudice. Researchers have lamented the difficulty of securing participation from schools, an obstacle made even more prevalent by the recent emphasis on standardized testing, which has reduced the time available for non-academic, school-based activities. Thus, future interventions may need

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to be integrated into regular lessons. The key to success in the design and implementation of interventions is a strong partnership among researchers, educators, and parents.

CONCLUSION

Children exhibit racial and ethnic prejudice from a young age. Prejudice has multifaceted origins; therefore, a multifaceted approach to reducing prejudice is optimal. Drawing on the research reviewed, we offer suggestions for parents, teachers, policymakers, and others interested in promoting tolerance, as summarized in the “toolbox for change” below.

Parents, educators, and other important figures in a child’s life need to be actively engaged in monitoring and modifying children’s exposure to race information (including exposure to negative influences, such as particular movies or television shows). As noted, some evidence suggests that parents (including open-minded, tolerant ones) are not discussing race issues with their children; however, discussions about race issues, with an emphasis on anti-bias messages, can reduce children’s prejudice levels.

Research on the social-cognitive development of prejudice suggests that children’s cognitive skill levels and readiness for learning new skills (such as perspective-taking) influence their interpretations of race-related information. Thus, educators and parents must determine a child’s level of social-cognitive development and meet the child at this level with anti-bias messages. Some techniques may be more suitable than others to be modified to meet the cognitive needs and limitations of children. However, inducing cooperative and interdependent, as opposed to competitive, learning environments involving children from different racial backgrounds appears to be beneficial regardless of age.

Educators and policymakers must make a true commitment to promoting racial tolerance in schools. This can be accomplished by integrating racial tolerance into school curricula, assessment and testing procedures, teaching styles, and norms sanctioned by the schools. Care needs to be taken that methods do not set other groups apart by, for example, devoting each month to celebrating a different racial or ethnic group, as research has shown that this technique can actually increase prejudice.

Prejudice continues to create barriers for the learning and development of children from all racial and ethnic groups. With the increasing diversity of youth in the United States, it is particularly timely and important to continue making progress toward understanding and reducing racial and ethnic prejudice among children.

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TOOLBOX FOR CHANGE

<i>For</i>	<i>Problematic perceptions of current society</i>	<i>Strategies for change</i>
Individuals	Discussions of race are not needed and could increase prejudice.	Discuss race openly with children and honestly at home and elsewhere at a developmentally appropriate cognitive level. Promote interracial relations and learning about other groups, but be careful not to overemphasize differences among groups.
Community	Communities are already doing enough to encourage open discussion about race, and racism is not a problem among children.	Provide forums in the community where racism among all age groups is discussed. Institutionalize approval for non-prejudiced attitudes through policies that involve every part of the community.
Practitioners/Educators	School is not the place for prejudice-reduction interventions because the time spent on interventions takes away valuable time from fostering academic success.	Integrate multicultural and anti-racist teaching into the basic academic curricula (such as social studies and reading). At racially and/or ethnically diverse schools, utilize cooperative learning strategies, which also foster academic success.

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