

BRIEF REPORT

Intergroup contact buffers against the intergenerational transmission of authoritarianism and racial prejudice

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Abstract

The present study focused on the buffering role of positive intergroup contact in the intergenerational transmission of authoritarianism and racial prejudice in a sample of adolescents and one of their parents. In accordance with our expectations, adolescents' intergroup contact experiences moderated the mediated relationships between parental authoritarianism and adolescents' prejudice, both via adolescents' authoritarianism and via parental prejudice. These relationships were stronger among adolescents with lower, rather than higher, levels of intergroup contact. We conclude that intergroup contact buffers the indirect relationship between parents' authoritarianism and adolescents' racial prejudice and therefore constitutes a promising means of reducing the intergenerational transmission of prejudice.

Key words: prejudice; intergenerational transmission; intergroup contact; authoritarianism; racism; attitudes

1. Introduction

Multiple studies on racism have reported a significant correspondence in racial prejudice between parents and their children, indicating that prejudice is transmitted from one generation to the next (see Rodríguez-García & Wagner, 2009). This intergenerational similarity in racial prejudice appears to be most pronounced between parents and adolescent children (e.g., Carlson & Iovini, 1985; Duriez & Soenens, 2009), whereas weaker or non-significant relationships emerge for pre-adolescents (particularly young pre-school children, e.g., Branch & Newcombe, 1986). Nonetheless, the overall empirical evidence supports classical prejudice theories that highlight the role of parents as important socializing agents in the acquisition of racial prejudice in their children (e.g., Allport, 1954; Altemeyer, 1981).

Other studies have demonstrated that, in addition to exhibiting similar levels of prejudice, parents and children also exhibit similar levels of authoritarianism (e.g., Duriez, Soenens, & Vansteenkiste, 2008; Peterson & Duncan, 1999). Originally, authoritarianism has been proposed as a deeply ingrained and fixed personality trait, but recently it has been reconceptualized as a malleable social-attitudinal variable of broad ideological nature that is driven by core personality traits, i.e., by low Openness and high Conscientiousness (Sibley & Duckitt, 2008).

Given that authoritarianism is often considered an ideological basis of prejudice (Sibley & Duckitt, 2008), it is not surprising that the intergenerational transmission of racial prejudice is partly rooted in the more fundamental transmission of authoritarianism. Indeed, Duriez and Soenens (2009) have demonstrated that parent-adolescent similarity in authoritarianism accounts for a considerable part of the parent-adolescent similarity in racial prejudice. More specifically, they showed that parental authoritarianism is related to adolescents' racial prejudice via two pathways (see Figure 1). One pathway is via adolescents' authoritarianism, which includes the parent-adolescent similarity in

authoritarianism (Path A), whereas the other, albeit weaker, pathway is via parental racial prejudice, which includes the parent-adolescent similarity in racial prejudice (Path D). As such, Duriez and Soenens (2009) provided the first empirical evidence for an integrative mediation model of the intergenerational transmission of authoritarianism and racial prejudice.

Obviously, adolescents' racial prejudice is shaped by a multitude of factors and a relevant, yet unaddressed question is whether adolescents' own experiences, particularly positive intergroup contact experiences, can buffer against the influence of parental authoritarianism and racial prejudice. Intergroup contact is considered a highly effective means of reducing negative outgroup attitudes and prejudice (Allport, 1954) as has been demonstrated in many empirical studies (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). In the present research, we argue that positive intergroup contact significantly weakens the overall relationship between parental authoritarianism and adolescents' racial prejudice, because intergroup contact is likely to play a buffering role in two ways (see Figure 1).

In particular, recent studies have demonstrated that intergroup contact is especially effective in reducing prejudice among high authoritarians (Dhont & Van Hiel, 2009; Hodson, Harry, & Mitchell, 2009; for a review, see Hodson, 2011). This prejudice-reducing effect of contact has been attributed to its potential to alter the motivational processes involved in authoritarianism-based prejudice, i.e., by lowering perceived outgroup threat and by establishing trust in the outgroup (Dhont & Van Hiel, 2011; Hodson, et al., 2009). As a straightforward consequence of this finding, a first moderation effect of intergroup contact was expected to operate on the path between adolescents' authoritarianism and adolescents' racial prejudice (Figure 1, Path C). Accordingly, we hypothesized that the authoritarianism-prejudice relationship would be significantly weaker among adolescents with high rather than with low levels of intergroup contact.

We expected a second moderation effect of intergroup contact to occur in the relationship between parental racial prejudice and adolescents' racial prejudice (Figure 1, Path D). Rodríguez-García and Wagner (2009) have shown that parent-adolescent similarity in racial prejudice is significantly reduced in adolescents who ascribe high importance to intergroup contact. According to these authors, this finding may indirectly indicate that children with firsthand positive contact experiences, who thus consider contact to be important (van Dick et al., 2004), rely more on these experiences than on their parents' attitudes to shape their own attitudes. As such, intergroup contact is likely to function as a buffering mechanism against the influence of parental prejudice on adolescents' prejudice (Rodríguez-García & Wagner, 2009). Following this rationale, we also hypothesized that the relationship between parental racial prejudice and adolescents' racial prejudice would be significantly weaker among adolescents with high levels of intergroup contact compared to those with low levels of intergroup contact.

In summary, we expected that the paths from both mediators to adolescents' racial prejudice would be moderated by intergroup contact. Specifically, we predicted that the two indirect pathways between parental authoritarianism and adolescents' racial prejudice, i.e., one via adolescents' authoritarianism and one via parental racial prejudice, would be buffered by intergroup contact. To test our hypotheses, we conducted a questionnaire study in a sample of Belgian adolescents and one of their parents. We focused on positive contact with and prejudice towards immigrants from the Turkish and Moroccan populations, the two largest Muslim communities in Belgium.

2. Method

2.1. *Participants and procedure*

A sample of 99 dyads of Belgian students (62% female, $M_{\text{age}} = 16.65$, $SD_{\text{age}} = 0.85$) without migration background and one of their parents (73% mothers, $M_{\text{age}} = 46.87$, $SD_{\text{age}} =$

3.60) was recruited by two research students in secondary schools in the Dutch-speaking region of Belgium. Students and parents who verbally agreed to participate both received an envelope including a questionnaire and a letter of informed consent explaining the survey procedure and the participants' rights. The study was introduced as an investigation of attitudes and beliefs about societal topics. Participants were instructed to complete the questionnaire individually and not to communicate with each other about the content of the questionnaire. They did not receive any incentive for participation. To assure confidentiality of the answers, questionnaires were returned in a closed envelope.

The majority of the students (81%) followed a general educational track, whereas 16% and 3% followed a technical and vocational educational track, respectively. With respect to parents' educational level, 9% had attended university, 51% had completed non-university higher education (e.g., post-secondary vocational or technical education), 31% had completed secondary school, and 9% had earned lower scholarly degrees.

2.2. Measures

To measure authoritarianism, adolescents and parents completed a shortened 11-item Right-Wing Authoritarianism (RWA) scale (Altemeyer, 1981) on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly disagree; 5 = Strongly agree). A sample item is 'Obedience and respect for authority are the most important virtues children should learn'. This version of the scale has been successfully used in several previous studies conducted in Flanders (e.g., Roets, Van Hiel, & Cornelis, 2006).

Adolescents' and parents' prejudices towards immigrants were measured with an adapted 9-item modern racism scale (McConahay, 1986; adapted by Dhont, Cornelis, & Van Hiel, 2010) rated on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly disagree; 7 = Strongly agree). Dhont, Cornelis, and Van Hiel (2010) first translated the original items into Dutch and then adjusted the items to the Belgian context and the specific outgroup (immigrants instead of Blacks). The

scale measures three aspects of modern racial prejudice: the denial of continuing discrimination, e.g. ‘Discrimination against immigrants is no longer a problem in Belgium’, antagonism toward immigrants’ demands, e.g., ‘Immigrants are getting too demanding in their push for equal rights’, and resentment about special favors for immigrants, e.g., ‘Immigrants are receiving too little attention in the media’ (reverse scored).

Adolescents’ level of positive intergroup contact was assessed with four questions about the amount of positive contact with immigrants (see Dhont, Roets, & Van Hiel, 2011), which were rated using 7-point Likert scales (1 = Never; 7 = Very frequently). The items asked the participants how often they have (1) friendly contact, (2) pleasant contact, (3) constructive contact, and (4) positive experiences with immigrants.

3. Results

3.1. Preliminary analyses

Descriptive statistics and scale reliabilities for all variables, as well as their intercorrelations, are presented in Table 1. Parental and adolescents’ authoritarianism, as well as parental and adolescents’ racial prejudice, were significantly and positively interrelated, confirming the intergenerational similarity in authoritarianism and racial prejudice. Furthermore, parental and adolescents’ authoritarianism were significantly and positively correlated with adolescents’ racial prejudice, and parental authoritarianism was also significantly and positively correlated with parental racial prejudice.¹

3.2. Moderated mediation analyses

To test the hypothesized double moderated mediation hypothesis, we conducted a regression analysis with adolescents’ racial prejudice as the dependent variable. In the first step, we investigated whether the overall relationship between parental authoritarianism and adolescents’ racial prejudice is moderated by intergroup contact. Therefore, we included the

centered scores of parental authoritarianism and intergroup contact, as well as their interaction term, as predictors of adolescents' racial prejudice (Aiken & West, 1991). In the second step, we included the centered scores of parental racial prejudice and adolescents' authoritarianism and the moderation effects on the level of these mediating variables, i.e., the two-way interaction terms between parental racial prejudice and intergroup contact and between adolescents' authoritarianism and intergroup contact (see Preacher, Rucker, & Hayes, 2007). To demonstrate the double moderated mediation hypothesis, the two-way interactions between intergroup contact and both mediators should be significant, whereas the interaction effect between intergroup contact and parental authoritarianism from the first step of the regression analysis should decrease.

Table 2 presents the results of this regression analysis. The results of the first step of the analysis showed significant main effects of parental authoritarianism and intergroup contact on adolescents' racial prejudice ($b = .50, p < .001$ and $b = -.35, p < .001$, respectively). More importantly, the hypothesized interaction term was also significant ($b = -.20, p = .016$). In accordance with our expectations, simple slope analysis revealed a strong relationship between parental authoritarianism and adolescents' racial prejudice among adolescents with low levels of intergroup contact (1 *SD* below the mean; $b = .70, p < .001$). Alternatively, this relationship was weaker among adolescents with high levels of intergroup contact (1 *SD* above the mean; $b = .29, p = .014$).

Inclusion of adolescents' authoritarianism, parental racial prejudice, and the two-way interactions between these variables and intergroup contact in the second step of the model (see Table 2) revealed significant positive effects of adolescents' authoritarianism and parental racial prejudice ($b = .27, p = .003$ and $b = .22, p = .008$, respectively). The significant negative effect of intergroup contact on adolescents' prejudice remained virtually unchanged compared to that observed in the first step ($b = -.36, p < .001$).

As hypothesized, the interactions between adolescents' authoritarianism and intergroup contact and between parental racial prejudice and intergroup contact were both significant ($b = -.19, p = .034$ and $b = -.17, p = .024$, respectively), whereas the interaction between parental authoritarianism and intergroup contact was no longer significant ($b = -.03, p = .76$). Simple slope analyses indicated that adolescents' authoritarianism and parental racial prejudice were significantly related to adolescents' prejudice among adolescent with low levels of intergroup contact (1 *SD* below the mean; $b = .47, p < .001$ and $b = .39, p < .001$ respectively), but not among adolescents with high levels of contact (1 *SD* above the mean; $b = .07, p = .57$ and $b = .04, p = .71$, respectively).

Following the recommendations of Preacher et al. (2007), we also estimated the conditional indirect effects (based on 5000 bootstrap samples) of parental authoritarianism on adolescents' racial prejudice through adolescents' authoritarianism and parental racial prejudice at low (1 *SD* below the mean) and high (1 *SD* above the mean) levels of intergroup contact and calculated 95% bias-corrected and accelerated bootstrap confidence intervals for these conditional indirect effects. These indirect relationships via adolescents' authoritarianism and parental racial prejudice were significant among adolescents with low levels of intergroup contact ($IE = .34, SE = .11, CI_{95\%} = .16/.61$ and $IE = .20, SE = .08, CI_{95\%} = .07/.40$, respectively) but not among those with high levels of contact ($IE = .01, SE = .06, CI_{95\%} = -.14/.12$ and $IE = -.01, SE = .05, CI_{95\%} = -.12/.09$, respectively).

4. Discussion

The goal of the current study was to investigate the role of intergroup contact in the intergenerational transmission of authoritarianism and racial prejudice. In particular, we aimed to demonstrate the moderating effects of adolescents' intergroup contact experiences in the mediation model of Duriez and Soenens (2009), which posits that parental

authoritarianism and adolescents' racial prejudice are positively interrelated via two paths, one proceeding through higher levels of adolescents' authoritarianism, and one proceeding through higher levels of parental racial prejudice. Our results revealed that intergroup contact moderates the overall relationship between parental authoritarianism and adolescents' racial prejudice, with significantly stronger relationships for adolescents with low levels of intergroup contact than for those with high levels of contact. Moreover, this moderation effect could be explained by the moderating effects of intergroup contact on the two indirect paths from parental authoritarianism to adolescents' racial prejudice.

With respect to the first path, the results demonstrated that intergroup contact functions as a buffer mechanism between adolescents' authoritarianism and adolescents' racial prejudice. This finding is consistent with previous work showing that intergroup contact is highly effective in reducing prejudice among high authoritarians (Dhont & Van Hiel, 2009; 2011; Hodson et al., 2009). The current study, however, extends this research line by integrating these previous findings within a broader, intergenerational framework. As such, we demonstrated that adolescents' positive experiences with outgroup members not only weaken the impact of adolescents' own authoritarian attitudes on their racial attitudes but, in doing so, also weaken the impact of their parents' authoritarianism levels on adolescents' racial attitudes.

With respect to the second path, another buffer effect of intergroup contact has been demonstrated. This second moderation effect simultaneously operated with the first moderation effect, revealing a marked positive relationship between parental and adolescents' racial prejudice levels for adolescents with low levels of intergroup contact. This relationship, however, was non-significant for adolescents with high levels of intergroup contact. This finding moves beyond previous work and corroborates the idea that when adolescents can rely on their personal experiences with ethnic outgroup members, these experiences represent a

superior basis for shaping their racial attitudes compared to their parents' racial attitudes (Rodríguez-García & Wagner, 2009). Therefore, we can conclude that the parent-adolescent similarity in racial prejudice diminishes with higher levels of intergroup contact.

Finally, moderated mediation analysis allowed us to consider both moderation effects in the mediation model of the effect of parental authoritarianism on adolescents' racial prejudice. An integrative picture of dynamic interactions emerged, demonstrating that, among adolescents with low levels of intergroup contact, parental authoritarianism has a pronounced indirect impact on adolescents' racial prejudice via adolescents' authoritarianism and parental racial prejudice, whereas this is not the case for adolescents with high levels of intergroup contact.

The present study contributes to the literature by providing new insights into the relative impact of parents' socializing influence and adolescents' own experiences in the development of racial prejudice among adolescents. However, we acknowledge that the cross-sectional nature of our data does not allow us to draw causal inferences about the direction of the relationships. Longitudinal research investigating the developmental patterns of authoritarianism and prejudice across adolescents' teenage years would be highly informative in this respect. Furthermore, the generalizability of our findings may be restricted because of the overrepresentation of female respondents, highly educated parents and adolescents following a general educational track in the current sample as compared to the general population. To address this issue, future studies should try to fill this void by recruiting more members of the underrepresented categories.

From a theoretical angle, further research is needed to expand the investigated model, for example, by also including social dominance orientation (SDO; Pratto, Sidanius, Stallworth & Malle, 1994). Indeed, both RWA and SDO have been shown to underpin the intergenerational transmission of racial prejudice (Duriez & Soenens, 2009) and intergroup

contact has also been found to moderate the relationship between SDO and prejudice (e.g., Dhont & Van Hiel, 2009). Also the processes that can explain how parental influence is buffered by intergroup contact requires further research attention. It may be interesting, for instance, to observe the convergence of norms about outgroups between parents and the adolescents' friendship network, and how these norms may mutually reinforce or weaken each other. Finally, because indirect contact (i.e., knowing or observing ingroup members who have intergroup contact) has been shown to reduce racial prejudice, especially among high-scoring authoritarians (Dhont & Van Hiel, 2011; Hodson et al., 2009), future research may also investigate the role of parental intergroup contact in reducing adolescents' racial prejudice.

Notes

1. Parental and adolescents' gender were not significantly related to any of the variables under study and did not significantly moderate the relationships between the variables.

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Figure Caption

Figure 1. Theoretical model presenting the intergenerational transmission of authoritarianism and racial prejudice (based on Duriez & Soenens, 2009) and the hypothesized moderating effects of intergroup contact (dashed arrows).

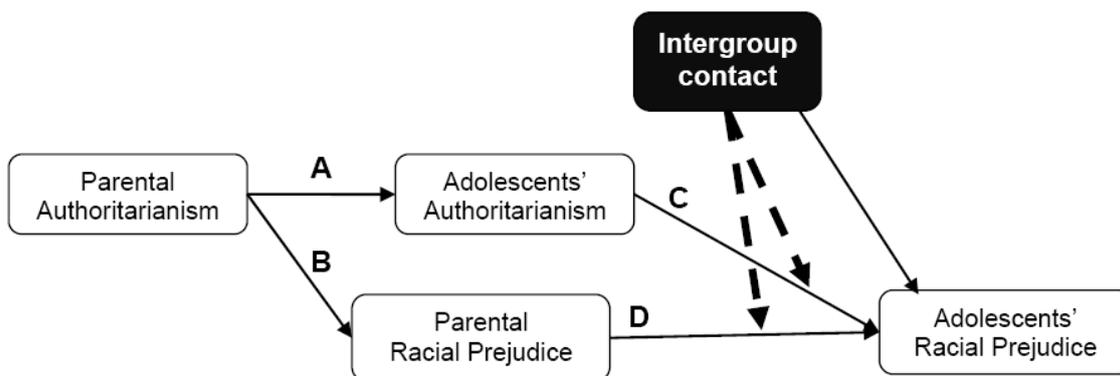


Table 1. Means, standard deviations, reliabilities, and correlations

| | Mean | SD | α | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
|------------------------------------|------|------|----------|--------|--------|--------|--------|
| 1. Parental authoritarianism | 3.15 | .70 | .81 | | | | |
| 2. Adolescents' authoritarianism | 3.06 | .52 | .69 | .54*** | | | |
| 3. Parental racial prejudice | 3.86 | .94 | .81 | .38*** | .15 | | |
| 4. Adolescents' racial prejudice | 3.54 | .80 | .79 | .46*** | .39*** | .43*** | |
| 5. Adolescents' intergroup contact | 3.42 | 1.34 | .92 | .09 | .23* | -.07 | -.31** |

Note. * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

Table 2. Results of the regression analysis (standardized coefficients) testing the interaction effects of Adolescents' intergroup contact with Parental authoritarianism in Step 1 and with Adolescents' authoritarianism and Parental racial prejudice in Step 2 on Adolescents' racial prejudice.

| | Adolescents' prejudice | |
|--|------------------------|---------|
| | Step 1 | Step 2 |
| Parental authoritarianism | .50*** | .24** |
| Intergroup contact | -.35*** | -.36*** |
| Parental authoritarianism x Intergroup contact | -.20* | -.03 |
| Adolescents' authoritarianism | | .27** |
| Parental prejudice | | .22** |
| Adolescents' authoritarianism x Intergroup contact | | -.19* |
| Parental prejudice x Intergroup contact | | -.17* |

Note. * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$