

A social perspective on the outgroup attitude formation of youth

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This article is based on my doctoral dissertation (Mähönen 2011) on the role of personal contact experiences and perceived social norms in the outgroup attitude formation of youth. As research on qualitatively different forms of outgroup attitudes improves our opportunities to predict intergroup behaviour and improve intergroup relations, the predictors of both explicit (i.e. deliberate, consciously controlled) and implicit (i.e. spontaneous, automatically activated) outgroup attitudes of youth were addressed. In the study, the outgroup attitudes and their predictors of 14-17 year old Finnish majority youth and Russian-speaking minority youth living in Finland were examined. In the article, I discuss the Finnish attitude climate, present the main findings and contributions of the study, and offer some research ethical considerations related to the studying of ethnic intergroup relations among youth.

Key words: outgroup attitudes, intergroup contact, social norms

Avainsanat: ulkoryhmäasenteet, ryhmienvälinen kontakti, sosiaaliset normit

Introduction

Like most things in the lives of children and youth, also attitudes towards ethnic outgroups, ‘them’, are internalized as a part of the learning process of being a member of the ingroup, ‘us’ (e.g. Dunham & Degner

2010; Stangor & Leary 2006). However, unlike many other things in the lives of youth, outgroup attitudes are often seen by adults as something private and sensitive – something so controversial that it is tempting just to ignore the whole business and shove the responsibility of dealing with cultural diversity to the shoulders of future generations. Also previous social psychological research on intergroup relations has inadequately taken into account the social nature of the outgroup attitude formation of youth. For example, research on Gordon Allport’s (1954) influential theory on the prejudice reductive effects of cooperative and equal intergroup contact has largely neglected the role of normative influences affecting attitude formation simultaneously with personal contact experiences (e.g. Pettigrew 2008; see also Dixon, Durrheim & Tredoux 2005). Nevertheless, research conducted along other lines of theorization has been indicative of the effects of the social and political situation (Verkuyten and Zaremba 2005) and societal discourses (Mole 2007; Suurpää 2001) on the outgroup attitudes of youth and young adults.

The social context an individual lives in requires more attention especially when examining outgroup attitudes among adolescents, as adolescence is a crucial time period for both norm adherence and identity development (Schiefer, Möllering, Daniel, Benish-Weisman & Boehnke 2010; Pettigrew 2008). Moreover, as McGlothlin and Killen (2010, 632) point out, understanding the relationship between intergroup contact and outgroup attitudes in children and youth by examining how social experience shapes these attitudes is essential in order to effectively reduce intergroup bias, as stereotypes among adults are deeply ingrained and often quite difficult to change. To extend previous research with a more social approach to the interplay between contact experiences and outgroup

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attitude formation, I investigated in my recent doctoral dissertation (Mähönen 2011) the direct and interactive effects of perceived social norms and personal experiences of intergroup contact on the explicit (i.e. deliberate) and implicit (i.e. automatically activated) outgroup attitudes of Finnish majority and Russian-speaking minority youth living in Finland. Besides these theoretical objectives, my practical aim was to find ways to promote positive intergroup relations in theory based interventions and in multicultural education.

A glimpse on the Finnish attitude climate

Despite increasing immigration particularly from Russia, people with other than Finnish, Swedish or Sami as their mother tongue constitute only 3.6 % of the total population of Finland, which is one of the lowest proportions of inhabitants with a foreign background in Europe (Statistics Finland, 2008). The Russian-speaking minority is by far the largest ethnic minority group with an immigrant background (40 %) in Finland (Statistics Finland, 2008). Despite their varying ethnic backgrounds, the members of the Russian-speaking minority are typically considered Russians by the Finnish majority (e.g. Jasinskaja-Lahti 2000). Moreover, according to a study by Iskanius (2006), about 70 % of the Russian-speaking youth living in Finland see themselves primarily as Russians. Mainly because of historical reasons (e.g. wars between Finland and Russia in 1939–1940 and 1941–1944), the relationship between the Finnish majority and the Russian-speaking minority has been quite problematic, involving substantial prejudice and discrimination towards the Russian speakers (e.g. EU-MIDIS 2009; Jasinskaja-Lahti, Liebkind, & Perhoniemi 2006). For example, in a recent European survey on minorities and discrimination (EU-MIDIS 2009) one quarter of the Russians in Finland reported being discriminated against in the past 12 months, which was the highest proportion among the four EU member states surveyed with considerable Russian minorities (i.e. Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Finland).

However, according to the longitudinal studies by Jaakkola (2005, 2008), the attitudes of the Finnish majority towards both work-related and humanitarian immigration have developed in a positive direction over the past two decades. Thus, it seems that like in

the case of the European attitude climate (Rother and Díez Medrano 2006), general positive trends in tolerance do not fully correspond to trends in tolerance of and towards specific groups.

It should also be noted that the present study was conducted during the years 2007–2010, when the world economy was suffering from a serious downswing. The often reported negative impact of economic recessions on attitudes towards immigration (see e.g. Heinmueller and Hiscox 2007) seems – at least according to public opinion polls (Elonen 2010; Rantanen 2010) and the recent parliamentary election – to also have affected the attitude climate in Finland. As regards youth, the youth barometer from 2008 indicated that approximately every fifth 15–29 year old majority Finn was worried about increasing immigration to Finland (Myllyniemi 2008). However, importantly for the present study, the recent youth barometer (Myllyniemi 2010) reports a shift in a negative direction in the way the youth perceive their normative environment. While 66 % of the respondents of the survey conducted in 2005 thought that cultural tolerance has increased in Finnish society, only 26 % of the respondents thought so in the recent survey of 2010 (Myllyniemi 2010). Similarly, while 52 % of the respondents of the 2005 survey thought that racism has decreased among Finnish youth, only 28 % thought so in 2010 (Myllyniemi 2010). Thus, on the basis of the picture drawn of the Finnish attitude climate as a whole, studying normative influences on intergroup relations among youth was a timely task.

Participants and procedure of the present study

The data for my doctoral dissertation was collected in three stages in 2007–2009. In total, 974 pupils (833 majority and 141 minority youth) of 20 upper level comprehensive schools (grades 7–9) participated in the study. The first two data sets on the explicit and implicit attitudes of Finnish majority youth towards immigrants living in Finland were collected in Kotka near the Russian border, where the cultural exchange between Finns and Russians is particularly lively. The schools were chosen for the study on the basis of their ethnic composition: as the effects of intergroup contact were the focus of the study, the places chosen for

data collection had to offer opportunities for this contact. In order to find enough Russian-speaking participants belonging to the same age group, the third data set on the explicit attitudes of minority youth towards the Finnish majority was collected in Helsinki. Even though most of Finland's ethnic minority population is concentrated in the Helsinki metropolitan area, as many as 15 schools with the highest percentage of Russian-speaking pupils needed to cooperate in order to ensure that enough pupils represented the same age group. The 15 schools were chosen on the basis of the number of Russian-speaking pupils: data collection was conducted in schools giving courses in Russian as a mother tongue with at least 20 Russian-speaking pupils. In this third stage of the data collection, the participants were chosen on the grounds of the mother tongue of their parents: if at least one of the parents was Russian speaking, the pupil could participate in the study. All three data sets were collected in the schools during lessons. All the participants were told that participation was voluntary and that their anonymity would be secured. The necessary permission for data collection was obtained from the parents, the local boards of education and the school principals.

Reflections on the main results

Put in a nutshell, my study showed that youth do not form their outgroup attitudes solely based on their encounters with outgroup members, but balance their own experiences with and express their opinions in relation to the experiences and opinions of ingroup members. The main results were:

1) Perceived normative pressure to hold positive attitudes towards immigrants was shown to regulate the relationship between the explicit and implicit expression of outgroup attitudes among majority youth: negative implicit attitudes surface on the explicit level only when youth do not perceive a pressure to express positive outgroup attitudes. What makes this result important for interventions aimed at improving intergroup relations is that negative implicit biases may be tackled with the help of explicit information processing (Gawronski and Bodenhausen 2006).

2) Perceived norms concerning outgroup attitudes were found to affect the relationship between intergroup contact and outgroup attitudes differently de-

pending on gender and group status (i.e. cultural majority/minority group). Positive social norms seem to be especially important for majority boys, who need both pleasant contact experiences and normative support to form equally positive outgroup attitudes as those held by girls. The role of social norms is accentuated also among minority youth, who need to relate their attitudes to the experiences and attitudes of their ingroup members to a higher extent than do majority youth, who have a more powerful and independent status position. These research results are useful for developing intervention tools that can take into account the different needs and motivations of specific groups of youth.

3) It was found that youth evaluate intergroup contact from the vantage point of their ingroup and society as a whole and not just based on their own experiences. Importantly, youth were shown to weigh the anticipated consequences for future immigration for the society when forming their opinions about outgroups. Thus, the roles of media and public discussion on immigration in the outgroup attitude formation of youth cannot be ignored.

In all, the study showed that positive normative influences have the potential to break the strong link between rare and/or negative personal contact experiences and negative outgroup attitudes, as well as the link between negative implicit attitudes and explicit attitude expression. Besides having implications for research on the outgroup attitudes of youth, the present study may be of value also for research on intergroup relations among adults. As pointed out by Dunham and Degner (2010, 564), "adult knowledge does not spring into existence, fully formed, at 18". Thus, to truly understand outgroup attitudes in adulthood, we need to first understand the developmental course of these attitudes.

My study focused on the promising role of social norms in improving intergroup relations, but it should be noted that in all societies, both positive and negative social norms co-exist. As pointed out by Rutland (2004, 253), it is fair to say that although prejudice is viewed negatively and seen as unreasonable in most societies, with national prejudice this is not always the case. While social norms regarding the illegitimacy of ethnic prejudice might dampen most blatant expressions of it, social norms surrounding nationalistic ideologies might actually encourage more preju-

dice (Rutland 2004). Thus, it should be remembered that children and youth are affected by the negative as well as the positive normative influences of peers, parents, other adults and the society as a whole. As Perho (2010) points out in her recent PhD thesis on racist group identities among Finnish adolescents, youth make salient the thoughts of adults on multiculturalism. She found that in communities of racist youth there is a simmering revolt against norms of tolerance and multiculturalism on the one hand, and against the demands and pressures put on youth on the other. As a consequence, the youth studied rebelled against all things that were perceived as “different”, not exclusively against other “races”. (Perho 2010.)

In Finland, the recent political debate on immigration and multiculturalism has been characterized by language beyond the rules of convention (see Keskinen, Rastas and Tuori 2009). In the light of the present research results, the effects of public discourses and the use of language in general on attitudes become even more salient. Besides biased content (e.g. Mole 2007), also disclaimers either consciously or unconsciously considered as nothing more than harmless jokes are often more than that. Integral links have been found between extreme hatred and dehumanizing, violent humor (Billig 2001). While it naturally would be against basic human rights to muzzle the critics, more attention should be paid to the way very complex and multifaceted issues of intercultural encounters are debated in public (including schools, workplaces etc.). Normative influences not only mold the attitudes of youth, but also encourage or discourage them to engage in intergroup contact and decide for themselves: as pointed out by Souto (2011), racism substantially limits the intergroup behaviour of both majority and minority youth.

Some research ethical considerations

Some discussion on research ethics is called for. Besides mentioning that the common research ethical guidelines regarding anonymity, voluntariness and research permissions were followed in the present study, I wish to bring forth two additional points: the characteristics of studying adolescents and minority group members with an immigrant background, and the political aspects related to the research topic at

hand. As pointed out by Vehkalahti, Rutanen, Lagström and Pösö (2010), childhood and adolescence are often considered as especially vulnerable developmental periods, and consequently, no harm or distress should be caused to the youth studied. However, this does not mean that youth should not be disturbed with research: children and youth should be considered competent subjects who should be given their own independent voice in research (Rastas 2008; Vehkalahti et al. 2010).

While adolescence presents developmental challenges for all youth, minority adolescents may face an even wider set of stressors and thus need to be approached especially sensitively by researchers (Cauce and Nobles 2006). However, it should be noted that the research design applied in the present study required the categorisation of participants into cultural majority and minority group members. Even though the research questionnaire was, for the most part, identical for the majority and minority youth, for example outgroup attitudes and contact experiences needed to be measured with a specific outgroup in mind (i.e. attitudes towards/contact with Finns or Russian immigrants). In order to give the pupils the right version of the questionnaire, they were asked to indicate if one or both of their parents were born abroad. Even though the way this request was made was carefully considered in beforehand in order to make the situation as equal and considerate as possible, the classification of participants can be understood as questioning the national identification (in this case, the Finnishness) of the minority group members studied (cf. Rastas 2008) and as restricting their options for self-categorisation.

In the feedback collected from the participants of my study, this indeed became evident. Some of the minority youth studied expressed their interest in and even gratitude for the research carried out on their experiences of intergroup encounters. However, some of them were either confused or irritated about being treated as an immigrant in the study, even though they had the opportunity to indicate their ethnic background and the degree of ethnic and national identification freely. The problem of categorisation serves as an example of the ethical challenges faced by researchers on intergroup relations, but also as an example of the broader challenge in the public discourse: in order to build an inclusive immigration context, a common su-

perordinate Finnish identity should be formed without threatening the distinct cultural identities of different groups.

Another research ethical challenge should also be noted: Research on the outgroup attitudes of majority and minority youth carries a certain political baggage. Both internationally and in the Finnish context it is still quite unusual to publicly express that not only majority but also minority group members have prejudice towards other ethnic groups (see Rastas 2008). As Wahlbeck (2006) has pointed out, the researcher's responsibility for the picture that is drawn of minorities – and consequently, of intergroup relations – is substantial. Moreover, researchers have to think about the consequences their research has on the position of the groups studied and how their research results are interpreted (Wahlbeck 2006). Thus, when discussing outgroup attitudes among minority and majority group members, the reciprocity of intergroup relations should be stressed by simultaneously acknowledging the uneven power relations between majority and minority groups. Without denying minority group members' impact on the attitudes of majority group members, it should be kept in mind that the impact of majorities on the lives of minorities is typically stronger than vice versa (e.g. Bourhis, Moïse, Perreault & Sénécal 1997). Furthermore, researchers must remember that not even they are free from prejudice and other distorted social-cognitive processes. Reflecting on one's predispositions, motivations, values and attitudes is a general requirement in the field of qualitative psychology, where research results are understood to be inevitably affected by the researcher (e.g. Yardley 2008). This surely is an effort worth taking by researchers doing quantitative research on intergroup relations as well.

Concluding remarks

Some suggestions and recommendations for multicultural education and interventions aimed at improving intergroup relations among youth can be made on the basis of my dissertation. Obviously, measures should be taken to offer youth opportunities for both positive experiences of intergroup contact and positive role models. The awareness of social norms can take the form of compliance, but norms can also be interna-

lised as personal beliefs (Verkuyten 2008), thus becoming a part of one's self-image. Accordingly, I am not suggesting that the existence of intergroup discord should be denied or that negative expressions of attitudes should be totally repressed. As pointed out already by Allport (1954, 339), "*There are such things as realistic opponents in our quest for our values. But what vanishes in an integrated personality are the racial bogies and traditional scapegoats who have nothing, really, to do with life's woes*".

Based on this study and also previous research on, for example, multiculturalism (e.g. Verkuyten 2008) and the formation of explicit and implicit attitudes (e.g. Fiske, Harris, Russell & Shelton 2009), a balance should be reached between discussing intergroup relations with youth in a multifaceted manner and promoting norms that stress the equality of all people as the basis of positive outgroup attitudes. Most importantly, it should be noted that pleasant experiences of intergroup contact are not enough for youth to develop positive intergroup relations. Instead of pushing the responsibility of forming a functional multicultural society to future generations, adults must (1) become aware of their own biased attitudes, (2) actively support the positive attitude formation of youth by sharing positive experiences and accurate information with them, (3) keep themselves informed about the media consumption of youth and monitor it, and (4) acknowledge the different needs and motivations of girls and boys on the one hand, and of majority and minority group members, on the other, while being involved in their outgroup attitude development.

As a more general point I would like to raise the issue of society's attitude climate as an antecedent of youth's outgroup attitudes, as the present study was indirectly indicative of the importance of societal influences for attitude formation. If social norms are negative, the attitudes of individuals will also correspond to them (e.g. FitzRoy and Rutland 2010). As discussed by Liebkind, Nyström, Honkanummi and Lange (2004), the Finnish majority is – at least to some degree – characterized by a defensive stance towards immigrants: discussion on the potential economical, political and cultural threats immigration is assumed to cause are not hard to find in the media, blogs and everyday discussions. Related to this, the different viewpoints and motivations of majority and minority groups should be kept in mind.

For minority groups, the reduction of intergroup conflict is not always desirable: for disadvantaged groups being prejudiced may be the one possibility to promote social change (Kessler and Mummendey 2009). However, in insecure majorities (see Moscovici and Paicheler 1978), perceived deprivation and feelings of intergroup threat may possibly induce a similar reaction and partly explain the increased levels of prejudice and the rise of anti-immigrant movements during the recent recession. Interestingly, in uncertain situations where outcomes are not totally fixed, powerless groups are found to challenge the powerful in a constructive manner, whereas the powerful respond with less constructive behaviour (Kamans 2010). Thus, on a larger scale it would be worth considering what could increase feelings of security among both majority and minority groups in order to support immigrant integration and mutually positive outgroup attitudes in Finland as well as in other culturally diverse societies. The normative example set by a secure ingroup that treats outgroups in a constructive manner would be the best possible environment for the outgroup attitude development of majority and minority youth alike. However, as pointed out by Tropp (2008), it is rather the ingroup members' histories of prior intergroup experiences and their beliefs about the outgroup than very broad social norms that truly contribute to reducing suspicion and increasing interest in intergroup contact. Thus, it must be acknowledged that norms regarding outgroup attitudes and intergroup contact are not independent of the historical context in which the groups live. For example, in the case of Finland's neighbouring country, Estonia, the historical intergroup tensions and the strong ethnic connotation of the current nation-state model hinders the integration of the considerable Russian minority (Kruusvall, Vetik, & Berry 2009). Also in the light of the present study on the intergroup relations between the Finnish majority and the Russian-speaking minority, work still needs to be done to reconcile past conflicts with the culturally diverse future.

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Tämä teos vie lukijansa Jäämeren rantamille. Kirja kertoo sinne muuttaneiden suomalaisten ja heidän jälkeläistensä elämästä.

läsnä. Kirjassa on runsaasti tietoa, jota ei ole aiemmin julkaistu. Sisukkaat suomalaiset rakensivat Jäämeren rannoille omaleimaisia kalastajakylä, esim. Pykei- Vesisaaren asukkaista yli puolet oli suomalaisia. He olivat tuoneet mukanaan omat tapansa ja kulttuurinsa. Myös Paatsjoelle muutettiin 1800-luvulla. Seutu oli maisemaltaan kaikkein suomalaisin. Yhteydet rajan molemmiin puolin olivat vilkkaat niin kauan, kunnes raja v. 1944 suljettiin, ja Suomi joutui luovuttamaan Petsamon Neuvostoliitolle.

Teos kuvaa yksityiskohtaisesti ruijansuomalaisten vaihteita. Se osoittaa elävin esimerkein, ettei Jäämeren kansa ole unohtanut myöskään omaa kieltään, suomea. Murre, jota nykyisin kutsutaan myös kveenin kieleksi, taipuu vivahteikkaasti vanhojen ruijansuomalaisten puheessa. Haastattelut ja värikkäät tarinat, joita kirjassa on runsaasti, elävöittävät kerrontaa. Tekstiä tukee ainutlaatuinen, laaja valokuva-aineisto. Jokaiselle Euroopan pohjoisalueista kiinnostuneelle kirja tarjoaa avartavan lukuelämyksen.

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