

More than Comparing with Majorities: The Importance of Alternative Comparisons Between Children from Different Minority Groups

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ABSTRACT

Using a social identity perspective as the guiding framework, this article examines how children of minorities use alternative comparisons to achieve positive distinctiveness of their minority group. We conducted a quasi-experimental study with 60 Portuguese children (Black, White and Gypsy) who were asked for their group preferences and attributions towards their own and other groups. Majority children showed in-group favoritism on both preference and attribution measures, but members of both minorities showed greater preference for majority members as well as for members of the in-group than for members of the other minority group. We concluded that, as predicted by social identity theory, one creative identity management strategy is that minorities emphasize their similarity with the high status majority while downgrading another minority.

Key words: Social Identity, Intergroup Comparisons, Intergroup Attitudes, Minorities.

RESUMEN

Este artículo utiliza la perspectiva de la identidad social como marco teórico para examinar cómo los niños de las minorías recurren al uso de comparaciones diferentes para obtener la distintividad positiva de su grupo minoritario. Se realizó un estudio cuasi-experimental con 60 niños portugueses (negros, blancos y gitanos), a los que se pedía que manifestasen sus preferencias grupales así como sus atribuciones hacia su propio grupo y hacia los otros dos grupos. Los niños de la mayoría mostraban favoritismo endogrupal en las dos medidas, es decir, tanto en las preferencias como en las atribuciones, mientras que los miembros de los dos grupos minoritarios mostraban una preferencia por los miembros de la mayoría y por los de su endogrupo mayor que por los miembros del otro grupo minoritario. Se concluye que, de acuerdo con lo pronosticado por la teoría de la identidad social, una estrategia creativa de manejo de la identidad consiste en que las minorías enfatizan su similitud con la mayoría de status alto a la vez que menosprecian a la otra minoría.

Palabras clave: actitudes intergrupales, comparaciones intergrupo, identidad social, minorías.

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The research reported in this paper studies the importance of intergroup comparisons, and specifically the comparison between minority groups, for intergroup attitudes. People are fundamentally social and they organize their social life in terms of their relations with other people. According to the Social Identity Theory (SIT; Tajfel & Turner, 1979, 1986), individuals are motivated to establish a positive social identity. Social identity can be enhanced by a positive evaluation of one's own group, which is mainly achieved by comparisons with relevant out-groups. The first aim of the current research was to demonstrate such identity-relevant social comparison processes in children, which lead to positive distinctiveness of their group.

A second goal of this research was to test whether minorities, when confronted with the superiority of the majority, achieve positive distinctiveness through comparisons with third groups that are not the majority. Traditionally, the process of social comparison has been mainly examined in studies that emphasized the classic majority-minority relation¹, because for a long time majorities were thought to be the only reference group for minorities (Allport, 1954). Following this tradition, research has shown that social comparisons between high and low status groups enhance or maintain positive feelings for members of higher status groups, which is related to in-group bias, whereas this does not occur for members of lower status groups. In fact, lower status groups usually recognize the relative superiority of out-group members, due to the perception of social constraints, which can lead to 'reverse ethnocentrism'. These tendencies have been demonstrated for adults (e.g., Rudman, Feinberg, & Fairchild, 2002) and for children. Research with children, which is most relevant to the current study, has found ever since the first classic studies using the doll preference paradigm (Clark & Clark, 1939, 1947; Clark & Cook, 1988; Katz & Braly, 1933) that minority children express greater liking for children from a dominant group than for children from their own group. More recently, Corenblum and Annis (1993, 1996) found the same pattern of results in a study with White-Canadian and Indian-Canadian children: children from the dominant group preferred contacts with in-group members to those with out-group members, whereas children from the minority group showed out-group preferences. Although many other studies have supported these findings (Aboud, 2003, 1987; França & Monteiro, 2002; Aboud & Doyle, 1995; Yee & Brown, 1992; Tyson, 1985; Katz, 1982; Milner, 1973; Asher & Allen, 1969; Greenwald & Oppenheim, 1968), this does not mean that this is a universal phenomenon (e.g., Verkuyten & Kinket, 2000). A different pattern of results has also been found where minority children expressed in-group favoritism. Vaughan (1987), for example, found with children older than nine years from groups with different status that age increases ethnocentric preferences for low status children and decreases them for high status children (see also Gregor, & McPherson, 1966). Thus, there is evidence that children from lower status groups develop a sense of a positive social identity from a certain age. In our research, we wanted to study how children from minorities manage to achieve a positive distinctiveness while at the same time taking into account the socially dominating position of the higher status majority.

In our study we also go beyond previous research on social identity of children by using attribution measures. Group members can achieve or enhance positive social

identity by attributing positive in-group or negative out-group acts to internal stable or/and controllable causes, or to protect that identity by attributing negative in-group or positive out-group acts to external, unstable and/or uncontrollable causes. Pettigrew (1979) called this tendency ironically the “ultimate attribution error” as persiflage to the label of the well-known fundamental attribution error (for a review see Hewstone, 1990). He defines it as “a systematic patterning of intergroup misattributions shaped in part by prejudice” (Pettigrew, 1974, p.464). Hewstone, Jaspars and Lalljee (1982), for example, found that schoolboys from a private school attributed the failure of an in-group member more to lack of effort than they did with the failure of an out-group boy (from a public school). Recently researchers found similar results supporting intergroup attribution bias with children (see Johnston & Lee, 2005; Rutland, Cameron, Bennett, & Ferrell, 2005). In this study, we chose the internal/external dimension to measure in-group favoring attributions, since it allows children most easily to differentiate group evaluations.

STRATEGIES TO ACHIEVE A POSITIVE SOCIAL IDENTITY

According to SIT, one of the strategies that lower status groups may use to achieve a positive social identity might be what Tajfel (1978) called *social creativity*, which can involve altering the positions of the groups on the dimension on which the intergroup comparison is made, comparing the in-group to the out-group on some new dimensions, or changing the values assigned to the attributes, so that comparisons which were previously negative can be perceived as positive. Moreover, this strategy can also imply changing the out-group with which the in-group is compared; thus, an out-group that is more similar to the in-group can be used as a comparative frame of reference, which, in turn, can lead to positive comparisons.

Regarding this last social creativity possibility, we consider it important to examine intergroup settings that allow for such a strategy. Until now, when studying intergroup relations researchers have mainly focused on majority-minority relations and surprisingly few studies have examined the issue of comparing with two groups, one with a higher and one with a similar low status. Brown (1978), for example, analyzed the need for differentiation in an intergroup situation involving three groups from an engineering factory, one higher-status and two lower status groups. The results showed that all the groups tended to favor the in-group through a differentiation process: the higher-status group positively differentiated itself from the other two, whereas members of the lower-status groups tried to decrease the difference between their own group and the higher status group, and to increase the difference between the in-group and the other lower-status group.

By manipulating the status of the groups to whom children belong (higher vs. same vs. lower), Brown (1984) also found that status similarity enhanced feelings of competitiveness and hostility, which supports SIT's assumption that minority members can express discrimination toward members of other minority groups if they constitute a threat to their social distinctiveness and to the positive value of their social identity.

More recently, White and Langer (1999) examined what they called horizontal

hostility, which is defined as prejudice shown by members of a minority group toward members of a similar minority group that is perceived to be more mainstream. They showed that even when groups are quite similar, prejudice might persist.

Until now, there are -to our knowledge- no studies that examined comparisons between lower status minorities, and their implications for intergroup relations of children. The current study aims to fill this gap. We also intend to examine the perceived social hierarchy established in this more complex setting involving one majority and two minority groups. More specifically, we intend to examine whether the social hierarchy established by the higher status group is altered by minority groups' needs of decreasing the distance between their in-group and a higher status out-group. This issue is particularly important because most studies analysing such a social structure do this only from the point of view of higher status groups (see Hagendoorn, 1995), as if there was a universal consensus regarding this social hierarchy. Bennett, Lyons, Sani and Barrett (1998), for example, conducted a study with only White-English children regarding their preferences for three other European countries. As expected, they found that they prefer mostly children from their own country, followed by French and Spanish children and show the least preference for German children, but they did not check for the consensus of this hierarchy. More recently Cabecinhas (2002), in a study with only White-Portuguese children, similarly found that these expressed a greater preference for in-group children, followed by Black-Portuguese children, and the least preference for Gypsy-Portuguese children, but she also did not check for the consensus of the other two groups regarding this hierarchy. If different perspectives on the relative positions of groups in the social structure are not taken into account, they appear to converge within society as a whole, where the dominant view prevails. However, different groups may hold different representations of the social structure, which can become the source both of misunderstanding or social conflict and of social identity enhancement strategies.

In sum, the present study was designed to examine the role of comparisons between minority groups in an intergroup setting that involves only one higher status majority and two lower status minorities. Different from previous research, our study assessed the intergroup attitudes of 9-13 year-old children. Following Brown and Bigler (2005), we assume that 9 years old children have already acquired the cognitive skills associated with greater intergroup perceptions and also show considerable variability in their intergroup attitudes.

We assumed that social comparisons are oriented towards maintaining or enhancing group members' distinctiveness and positive intergroup differentiation, although at the same time minority groups have to take into account the so-called reality constraints, that is, the dominant assumption of the majority's higher status. Thus, we expected that majority children would positively differentiate from the two minority groups in their preferences (H1), whereas children from the two minorities would positively differentiate from each other, but not from majority children (H2). We also predicted that this pattern of preferences should be accompanied by causal attributions consistent with it, that is, positive acts of in-group and majority members would be attributed more internally than positive acts of children from the minority out-group (H3).

METHOD

Participants and design

Participants were 60 Portuguese 4th grade children from public primary schools (20 White children, 20 Black children and 20 Gypsy children), with ages between 9 and 13 years ($M = 9.85$ years, $SD = 1.32$).

The design was a 3 (participants' ethnicity: Black-Portuguese vs. White-Portuguese vs. Gypsy-Portuguese) X 3 (target's ethnicity: Black-Portuguese vs. White-Portuguese vs. Gypsy-Portuguese). Target's ethnicity was manipulated within subjects.

Procedure and measures

Children were asked to participate in a study concerning the ways in which children think about other children. Children were told there were no right or wrong answers and that confidentiality regarding their answers was guaranteed. Each child was interviewed individually for a period of 15 to 20 minutes. All the questions used to measure the dependent variables were presented in a sheet of paper and were read to the children in order to assure that all of them understood what we were asking; the children just had to point out the answers.

Ethnic belonging. Following Kinket and Verkuyten (1997; see also Phinney, 1992), we intended to control children's ethnic membership; in order to achieve this we asked children at the beginning of the interview to which group they belonged ("In this school there are different children, belonging to different ethnic groups...who do you say you are?"). All children correctly chose their own ethnic group ("I'm an Afro-Portuguese child"; "I'm a White-Portuguese child"; "I'm a Gypsy child").

Social preferences. After asking children about their ethnicity, participants responded to the following questions, which operationalised five different contact situations:

"Think of a White-Portuguese/Black-Portuguese/Gypsy-Portuguese child. Tell me whether you would like him (her): 1) to live in your neighborhood, 2) to play with you at the playground, 3) to sit next to you in the classroom, 4) to be your friend, 5) to marry you one day".

Children had to tick their choices for each of the three target-children. Children could choose for each target-child from all five to none of the situations. We created three preference scores, one for each target, by counting the number of choices and averaging them over all contact situations.

Causal attributions. In the second part of the interview the following story was told:

"I went to a school like yours and there was a drawing contest; all the pupils of the three classes of the 4th grade participated in the contest by doing drawings during all the morning. In the afternoon the teacher told the children who had won the contest in each classroom. In the first classroom an [X ethnic group] child won the contest; can you try to understand why he/she won the contest? (...). In the second class a [Y ethnic group] won the contest; why do you think he/

she won the contest? (...) Finally, in the third class a [Z ethnic group] child won the contest. Why do you think this child won the contest?."

X, Y and Z stand for White-Portuguese, Black-Portuguese and Gypsy-Portuguese in randomized order. Four items were used to assess the four kinds of attributions addressed by Weiner (1979): intelligence (internal, stable), effort (internal, unstable), luck (external, unstable) and kind of task (external, stable). Children answered on a 5-point scale (1= *not at all* to 5= *very much*) to each item (e.g., "to what extent did X child win the contest because of his/her intelligence?"). In order to test H3, combined scores for *internal attributions* (mean of intelligence and effort ratings) and *external attributions* (mean of luck and kind of task ratings) were created for each participant.²

Manipulation check. At the end of the experiment children were asked who had won the contest in each classroom. The within-subject manipulation of target group was successful for all participants.

After each interview session ended, children were thanked and debriefed.

RESULTS

In a 3 (participants' ethnicity) by 3 (target's ethnicity) GLM with *social preferences* for the three target groups as the within-subject factor and participants' ethnicity as the between-subjects factor, we found a main effect of target group, $F(2, 57) = 48.57$, $p < .001$, which means that participants showed most preference for White targets ($M = 1.77$, $SD = .26$), followed by a preference for Black targets ($M = 1.43$, $SD = .34$) and least preference for Gypsy ($M = 1.37$, $SD = .37$). This main effect was qualified by a significant interaction with participants' ethnicity, $F(4, 57) = 33.62$, $p < .001$. Pairwise comparisons³ showed, as expected in H1, that only White children's preferences were consistent with the hierarchy shown by the main effect. Indeed, these children showed most preference for in-group targets ($M = 1.91$, $SD = .16$), which significantly differed from preference for Black targets ($M = 1.43$, $SD = .31$, $p < .05$) as well as from preference for Gypsy targets ($M = 1.19$, $SD = .26$, $p < .05$). As predicted in H2, a different pattern was found for the two minority groups which did not differ significantly from each other: Black children showed a similar preference for the in-group target ($M = 1.67$, $SD = .28$) and the majority group target ($M = 1.72$, $SD = .27$, n.s.), but less preference for the Gypsy target ($M = 1.17$, $SD = .23$, $p < .05$), whereas Gypsy children also showed a similar preference for the in-group target ($M = 1.77$, $SD = .27$) and the majority group target ($M = 1.68$, $SD = .28$, n.s.), but less preference for the Black target ($M = 1.18$, $SD = .22$, $p < .05$). In sum, as expected in H2, children from both minority groups positively differentiated themselves from each other, but not from majority children (Figure 1).

In a 3 (participants' ethnicity) by 3 (target's ethnicity) by 2 (causal attributions: internal vs. external) GLM with participants' ethnicity as the between-subjects factor, and target's ethnicity and causal attributions as within-subjects factors, we found a main effect of attribution, $F(1, 57) = 23.11$, $p < .01$, which indicated that internal attributions were significantly more used to explain success ($M = 3.63$, $SD = .64$) than external

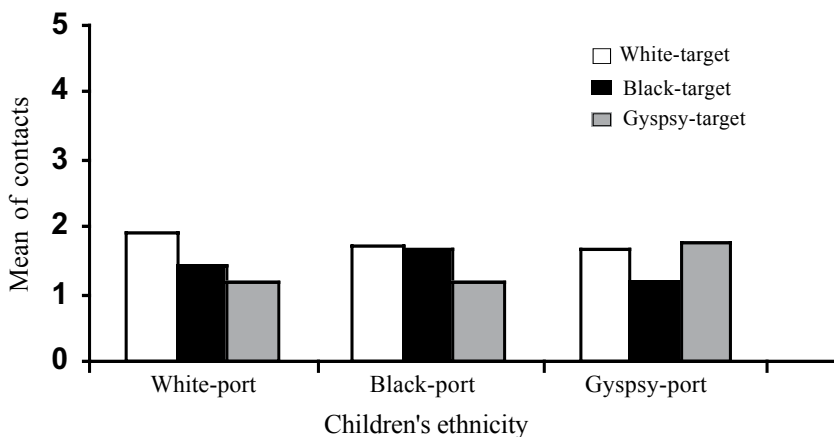


Figure 1. Mean of social preferences (contacts) as a function of participants' and target's ethnicity.

attributions ($M = 3.13$, $SD = .68$). However, this main effect was qualified by a significant interaction with target's ethnicity, $F(2, 57) = 4.88$, $p < .01$.

More important, a significant three-way interaction among attributions, target's ethnicity and participants' ethnicity, $F(4, 57) = 2.9$, $p < .05$, indicated that the different use of internal/external attributions according to the target's ethnicity depended on children's ethnic membership.

In order to understand this three-way interaction we run three separate GLMS, for the three participants' ethnic groups, with a 3 (target's ethnicity) by 2 (causal attributions: internal vs. external) complete factorial design, with target's ethnicity. The findings indicated that the main effect of attributions was significant, for Black children, $F(1, 19) = 18.58$, $p < .01$, as well as for Gypsy children, $F(1, 19) = 6.13$, $p < .01$, but not for White children, $F(1, 19) = 3.55$, n.s. Also, the interaction effect between attributions and targets' ethnicity was significant for both minority members, Black children, $F(2, 38) = 4.85$, $p < .05$, and for Gypsy children, $F(2, 38) = 6.13$, $p < .01$, but only marginally significant for White children, $F(2, 38) = 3.03$, $p = .06$. Pairwise comparisons indicated that White children use more group serving attributions (emphasizing internal compared to external attributions) for in-group targets than for both minority targets. A different pattern of results was found for the two minority groups: as expected in H3, for both minority members a positive outcome (success) of an in-group and of a majority member is attributed more internally than externally. This result was not found for the other minority group. More specifically, Black children used more internal than external attributions for White majority and in-group targets. By doing so, they positively distinguish White majority and in-group targets from Gypsy targets. On the other hand, Gypsy children use more internal than external attributions for White and in-group targets, whereas for the other minority targets no differences between internal and external attributions were made (Table 1). This effect was mainly due to differences between

Table 1. Mean responses and standard deviations to internal and external attributions for White, Black and Gypsy targets.

		Target's ethnicity								
		(N)	White children		Black children		Gypsy children		Total	
			Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Causal attributions	White target (20)	3.85 ^{a,y}	.67	4.10 ^{a,y}	.74	3.60 ^{a,y}	.80	3.85 ^{a,y}	.75	
	Internal Black target (20)	3.50 ^{a,b,x}	1.0	4.15 ^{a,y}	.67	3.27 ^{a,x}	.80	3.64 ^{a,b,y}	.91	
	Gypsy target (20)	3.15 ^{b,x}	.90	3.42 ^{b,x}	.87	3.70 ^{a,y}	.69	3.42 ^{b,x}	.98	
	White target (20)	3.02 ^x	1.0	3.22 ^x	1.1	2.82 ^x	.81	3.02 ^x	.99	
	External Black target (20)	3.27 ^x	.91	3.22 ^x	.99	3.20 ^x	.67	3.23 ^x	.85	
	Gypsy target (20)	3.20 ^x	.85	3.25 ^x	.85	2.97 ^x	1.0	3.14 ^x	.89	

Notes: a,b different superscripts indicate significant differences ($p < .05$) between targets in internal attributions; x, y different superscripts indicate significant differences ($p < .05$) between type of attribution within target; all pairwise comparisons were Bonferroni adjusted.

targets in internal attributions. External attributions did not differ significantly between targets.

DISCUSSION

This research was designed to examine whether minorities show positive distinctiveness in a multi-group situation where they can compare themselves with other minority groups and with a established high status majority. Consistent with the main hypotheses, the results regarding intergroup social preferences showed that Black and Gypsy minority children only displayed less preference for each other than for the in-group and the White majority target children, while White majority children displayed a clear in-group preference. On the whole, the social preference intergroup pattern suggests that when children from a minority group have the possibility of making intergroup comparisons other than with the majority group, they can achieve positive distinctiveness both through in-group bias regarding the other minority children and through evaluative similarity between in-group and majority children. Importantly, and in line with previous results (Brown, 1978), both minority groups showed this same pattern of intergroup preferences, ending up in a preference structure that challenges the majority's established social hierarchy for these groups.

In turn majority White children's preferences replicate the pervasive pattern of dominant group members' attitudes towards minorities that has been shown to appear already early in childhood (Powlishta, 1995; Verkuyten & Kinket, 2000; França & Monteiro, 2002; Cabecinhas, 2002; Rutland *et al.*, 2005).

The results regarding the attribution measures were consistent with the pattern shown by the preference measures: Minorities' children displayed more internal than external attributions to both the in-group and the White target's success, but not to the success of the other minority. In contrast, White children replicate the majority's dominating

ethnocentric view of an ethnic hierarchy that places themselves at the top, and minorities at the bottom. In our study, members of all three groups showed in-group favoritism. Thus, even if based on different comparisons, members of the two minorities as well as of the majority achieved a positive social distinctiveness (compared to an out-group). These results run counter to previous results that showed that minorities would rather share the view of the majority, showing that is known by out-group favoritism (e.g., Corenblum & Annis, 1993). These contradictory results can be explained by the fact that in our design minority children were given the opportunity to compare both with the majority and with another minority group, which made it possible for them to establish a positive distinctiveness by using a dual strategy: On the one hand they acknowledged the majority's superiority while defining themselves as similar to that majority and, on the other hand, they differentiated themselves positively from the minority out-group. Our data do not allow to estimate which of these strategies can be more important, and this may be addressed in future research.

Concluding remarks

The current results show the importance of taking into account a more complex pattern of social comparisons when the aim is to examine intergroup processes in minority groups. In a social setting where they have to compare themselves only with a more mainstream or dominant group they may often accept their situation. Also, children from different minority groups might learn differently to accept the stability or even propagated legitimacy of the social system, which according to the system justification perspective would be related to a greater internalization of collective inferiority (Jost & Banaji, 1994; Jost, Burgess, & Mosso, 2001, Jost & Hunyady, 2002). However, our findings do not support such an internalization process. Instead, they show that minorities do not always express inferiority towards the majority but can rather use creative strategies to reach positive distinctiveness and consequently a more positive social identity (e.g., Tajfel & Turner, 1979, Lemaire, 1974).

Moreover, our results also show that different groups in a society may hold different perceptions of the social structure. This can either enhance or reduce conflicts between social groups. It can be the basis of social conflict because of the disagreement about the relative status position of a certain minority group. If members of such a group see themselves higher in their relative status position than they are seen by members of the majority or other minorities, they may claim that they deserve more resources or acknowledgment than they receive, but this claim may not be judged legitimate by others (Mummendey & Wenzel, 1999). Moreover, in a society with a dominating majority the need for mutual differentiation between minority groups may lead to social conflicts between them, rather than between minority and majority members. However, the different perspective on the social structure may also provide a possibility to avoid or reduce social conflict, since it allows all minority groups to develop a positive distinctiveness in an intergroup relation among multiple groups. Previous approaches have tried to achieve such a reduction of social conflict using complementary tasks in intergroup contact (Deschamps & Brown, 1983). According to the model of

Mutual Intergroup Differentiation (Hewstone & Brown, 1986; see also Hewstone, 1996), a simultaneous positive differentiation (when both groups positive identities are salient, such as when groups display differentiated areas of expertise) can reduce social competition. The current situation differs from such a setting, since the relevant comparison out-group is not seen positively and conflict might not be reduced. Nevertheless, all groups end up with a positive identity, which may have positive effects on their wellbeing and collective self-esteem. Therefore, both the positive and negative consequences of divergent intergroup perspectives should be addressed in future research.

NOTES.

1. In this paper we refer to majority groups as dominant groups with both bigger size and higher status and to minority groups as dominated groups with a lower status, which are also smaller in number.
2. Including the stable-unstable variable as a factor in the data analysis did not change the results. Thus, for reasons of readability we decided to collapse the data across the stable-unstable factor.
3. All the pairwise comparisons in our analyses were Bonferroni adjusted.

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