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Can Conceptions of Respect Be Useful in Reducing Prejudice and Discrimination?

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In the *Monograph*, “[The Development of Respect in Children and Adolescents](#),” Malti, Peplak, and Zhang focus on how children conceptualize the complex feeling of respect, how this differs across childhood and adolescence, and how children’s understanding of respect relates to their own prosocial and antisocial behaviors. They use both quantitative and qualitative methods to highlight how children’s thinking and feeling about respect changes over time and across contexts. This is an important topic because respect, or the lack thereof, underlies so much of human interaction. As the authors note, “respect likely plays a substantial role in children’s positive peer relationships, their well-being, and the well-being of their peers” (p. 39).

One of the key themes in this *Monograph* is that children highly value respect and are especially likely to define respect as involving fairness equality, and equity. As Malti et al. write, “Children prominently consider respect to revolve around egalitarian interactions with others. Conceptions include equal treatment, acknowledging others’ rights, and reciprocity” (p. 23).

When thinking about how others show them respect, children focus on others being prosocial with them. Malti et al. write, “Themes included sharing, helping, and care” (p. 23). In other words, in terms of respect, being fair is important, and how you show it to others is through prosocial behaviors.

As the authors point out, these research findings are very consistent with the deeply ingrained belief that all people should be treated equally, and our behaviors should reflect the Golden Rule of treating others the way you want to be treated (originating with writings by Kant). Based on this *Monograph*, it is clear that by age 5, children value treating others fairly and equally, and they expect the same in return. Further, the results of the *Monograph* suggest that these conceptions of respect positively predict children’s prosocial behaviors and negatively predict their aggressive behaviors. At the interpersonal level, children indeed seem to value equality and expect others to do so as well. A different picture of childhood, however, emerges when examining the research on children’s intergroup relations – specifically research on children’s prejudice and discrimination. Although children may believe in treating individuals with fairness and prosociality, those attitudes and behaviors do not necessarily extend to the social group or to individual children who are identified as members of a group that differs from

their own (that is, members of the out-group). Interpersonal respect does not appear to translate to intergroup respect.

International meta-analyses show that within the first few years of life, children develop prejudices based on social categories such as race, ethnicity, and nationality (Raabe & Beelmann, 2011). Those explicit biases peak in middle childhood, decline slightly by age 10, and then show individual differentiation in adolescence. The variations during adolescence appear to be based on the status of the adolescent's group (e.g., members of high-status groups develop stronger prejudices than do members of low-status groups) and on the amount of intergroup contact they have (e.g., youth who have had more contact with out-group peers show lower prejudices than do youth who have had less contact).

In research that my colleagues and I have done, we consistently find that when asked about the abstract treatment of others, children endorse conceptions of fairness and equal treatment; but when asked about treatment of others' whose ethnicity or nationality differs from the child's own, their answers no longer reflect that same respect. For example, in samples of White elementary school children, we have found that children report wanting to go to school with an American child more than a Mexican, Chinese, or Middle Eastern immigrant child (Brown, 2011; Brown, Ali, Jewell, & Stone, 2017). In multiple samples of elementary and middle school children from a variety of school contexts, from the primarily White, primarily Black, to the ethnically diverse, from small cities in the South and urban Los Angeles, White children consistently rate White people more positively than people who are Black, Latinx, Asian, or from the Middle East (e.g., Brown, Alabi, Huynh, Masten, 2011; Brown, 2011; Brown et al., 2017). When White children were asked who they wanted to play with on a playground, they preferred other White children over children of color (Brown, 2006). Even in preschools in Jakarta and Bandung, Indonesia, children in the ethnic majority (i.e., Javanese in Jakarta and Sundanese in Bandung) assign Papuan children (the dark-skinned, lower status, ethnic minority group) negative traits and consistently state they do not want to play with them or have them attend their school; this prejudice persists even after a two-week intervention program designed to reduce their biases (Brown, Tam, & Aboud, 2018). These biases do not take years to develop, either. Even when children are randomly assigned for six weeks to groups designated by tee-shirt colors, children in numerical minority and majority groups prefer kids in their own color group (Brown & Bigler, 2002).

When children hear about treating someone unfairly, such as in a case of discrimination, they think it is wrong. This is consistent with the prosocial belief reflected in the *Monograph*. Yet, children consistently engage in discrimination. In our ethnically diverse sample of elementary and middle school students (Brown et al., 2011), more than 60% of children reported having witnessed an instance of ethnic bias, and 10% of children reported being the target themselves. More than 40% reported witnessing of an instance of gender bias, and one in four noted being the target. In a sample of Latinx elementary children in a majority White community, 73% of children perceived themselves to have been targeted by peer discrimination at least once in the past year (Brown & Tam, 2019).

In the *Monograph*, one child stated that respect meant "To be treated like everybody else." When asked how one shows respect, they stated "Showing kindness and playing with them when they don't have anyone to play with" (p. 35). Yet, there appear to be disconnects between children's conceptions of respect at the individual level and their behaviors at the

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intergroup level. In our research with Latinx elementary children (Brown & Tam, 2019; Brown & Chu, 2014), instead of “playing with them when they don’t have anyone to play with,” as the child in the *Monograph* reported, 23% of the Latinx children said they were sometimes left out of activities by their peers, and more than 35% said they were ignored, because of their ethnicity; an additional 14% reported that it happened a lot. Instead of being “treated like everyone else,” 53% of the Latinx children said they were treated unfairly, and more than 40% said other kids made fun of them because of their ethnicity. These are not isolated incidents, but consistent instances of unfairness by ethnic majority children toward ethnic minority children (for a more thorough review of the field, see Brown, 2017).

Given children’s often-biased intergroup attitudes and behaviors, what lessons might be learned from Malti et al.’s findings on children’s developing conceptions of respect that could be applied to reducing children’s prejudice? In a chapter reviewing the best prejudice reduction interventions, Aboud and Brown (2013) defined “respectful attitudes” as the opposite of “prejudice” and “bias.” Thus, a key way to reduce prejudice and bias might be to focus on increasing respect for other groups. Not just increasing respect for generalized others or similar peers, but specifically respect for others who differ from the child.

One suggestion drawn from the *Monograph* is to focus on broadening children’s ideas of fairness at a young age. Malti et al. noted that, “the youngest children expressed ethical sentiments by conceptualizing respect as an expression of fairness and kindness” (p. 75) and suggest that, “group discussions of common social conflicts in the school context in the middle childhood years may promote fairness-oriented conceptualizations of respect” (p. 85). Research has long shown that young children’s conceptions of fairness start based in notions of equality (i.e., equal treatment for everyone) before developing an appreciation for equity (i.e., consideration of such factors as effort, ability, and intentions, in determining outcomes; e.g., Damon, 1988). The discussion of common social conflicts suggested in the *Monograph* may need to be extended to include discussions of individual and systemic discrimination to help facilitate children’s understanding of group-level fairness and why equity is more critical to fairness in an intergroup context than equality (because of the need to redress unequal playing fields because of past and current discrimination).

Specifically, for White children to understand that fairness depends on social groups being treated equitably (rather than simply equally), they may need conversations that foster a better understanding of discrimination. Research by Rodger and Meltzoff (2017) found that White elementary school children were more likely to rely on beliefs in equality to describe race (e.g., “Everyone’s the same”), whereas Black children were more likely to express pride in and positive traits associated with their group (e.g., “It’s good to be Black”). In other words, although White children believe in fairness, they rarely acknowledge the importance of race in how people are treated, and thus their own racial biases are maintained.

In addition to increasing children’s conceptions of fairness to include group-level fairness, it may be useful to help children apply their conceptions of fairness and respect to incorporate more individual children. Given that children are biased toward children in their in-group, one approach supported in the literature is to broaden the in-group to make more children part of that group. For example, Houlette and colleagues (2004) evaluated an intervention program with children in middle childhood (i.e., Green Circle Program) that first had children discuss how it feels to be excluded because of race or gender. This is consistent with Malti et al.’s findings

because it draws on children's empathy towards people who may be excluded. The intervention program then encouraged children to include in "their circle" people who are different from themselves. The goal was to find a bigger, common in-group that included a diverse group of children. Although the effects were modest, children were more inclusive toward who they wanted to be friends with. This is consistent with the common in-group identity model (Gaertner & Dovidio, 2009), such that including an out-group in a common superordinate in-group is important, because positive attitudes about the in-group are then extended to that group. In the same way, children may have an easier time extending respect to out-group children if their common group identity is more salient.

Malti et al.'s findings suggest a different approach can be taken with older children. As children approach adolescence, the authors suggest that, "nurturing the conceptually related concept of sadness over wrongdoing, which was in part associated with respect in our empirical analysis, may also help strengthen children's development of respect" (p. 85). Among adolescents, conceptions of respect are related to their sadness over their own wrongdoing. This suggests that, for White teens, one approach to increasing intergroup respect and reducing prejudice is to nurture their understanding of sadness over group-level wrongdoing.

The "feeling of regret over own wrongdoing" (Malti, 2016) is an individual-level concept very similar to the group-level concept of "White guilt." Tatum noted that White youth sometimes feel the "discomfort of guilt, shame, and sometimes anger at the recognition of their advantage because of being White and the acknowledgment of the role of Whites in the maintenance of a racist system" (2017, p. 13). Research with adults has shown that White guilt is associated with greater awareness of discrimination and lower prejudice toward Black individuals (Swim & Miller, 1999). Further, when White participants feel the self-focused emotion of guilt over group-level wrongdoings, combined with feelings of the other-focused emotion of sympathy for the disadvantaged, they are more supportive of compensatory and equal opportunity policies for Black individuals than other White people who feel less guilt (Iyer, Leach, & Crosby, 2003).

Consistent with Malti et al.'s findings, White children's feeling of regret over group-level wrongdoing (i.e., White guilt) may facilitate their group-level respect (i.e., lower prejudice), at least among older children. This is supported by experimental studies in which Hughes, Bigler, and Levy (2007) taught White children about historical racism toward Black individuals. They found that, among 10- to 11-year-olds (but not younger children), White children who learned about racism valued racial fairness more and felt more White guilt compared to children in a control condition. White guilt and valuing fairness, in turn, were associated with lower prejudice toward Black people.

On the surface, the *Monograph's* focus on the children's understanding of respect, fairness, and prosociality seems at odds with the robust research on children's prejudice and discrimination. However, research has demonstrated that children – like adults – can hold a belief in equality, fairness, and respect for all, while simultaneously endorsing unfair, unequal attitudes based on social groups (Abrams, Houston, Van de Vyver, & Vasiljevic, 2015). Consistent with this ability to hold logically incompatible beliefs, Horn and colleagues have shown that youth perceive exclusion to be morally wrong when it is described in general terms, but less morally wrong when that exclusion is based on someone's sexual orientation or gender identity (e.g., Horn, Levy, & Killen, 2008).

In conclusion, respect at the general individual level seems deeply engrained and thoughtfully conceptualized, even among young children. Because of this clear conceptualization of individual respect, it may be a particularly useful entry point for helping children better embrace respect at the group level as a way to reduce prejudice and discrimination. As was tragically epitomized in the death of George Floyd (among others) in the spring of 2020, prejudice and discrimination are historically and generationally persistent; ignoring them does not seem an effective solution to reducing them. Intervention is necessary. Interventions within the family and the classroom can help children recognize and understand discrimination, increase their in-group to include diverse others, and help reconcile their feelings of guilt by actively working towards a less-prejudiced world. *That* goal is truly worthy of respect.

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