

The relationship between parental racial attitudes and children's implicit prejudice[☆]

Stacey Sinclair^{a,*}, Elizabeth Dunn^a, Brian S. Lowery^b

^a University of Virginia, 102 Gilmer Hall, P.O. Box 400400, Charlottesville, VA 22904-4400, USA

^b Stanford University, USA

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Abstract

Although many researchers assume that implicit racial attitudes develop via exposure to prejudicial socializing agents (e.g., parents, peers, and the media) starting in childhood, there is a dearth of research on implicit attitudes in children. This study looks at the effect of one socializing agent—parents—on children's or implicit racial prejudice. Specifically, we examine Allport's (1954) contention that children's identification with their parents moderates the intergenerational transmission of prejudice. Fourth- and fifth-grade children completed measures of implicit and explicit pro-White/anti-Black prejudice, as well as a survey assessing child–parent identification. Parents completed a survey that measured their attitudes toward Blacks. As hypothesized, we found greater correspondence between parents' prejudice and children's prejudice among children who were highly identified with their parents than less identified children.

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Introduction

Researchers have long posited that non-conscious, non-volitional (i.e., implicit) racial prejudice develops via exposure to prejudicial socializing agents starting in childhood (e.g., Devine, 1989). However, little published research has examined implicit racial prejudice in children (but see Teichman, 2001), let alone the degree to which it is a function of socialization. The current research examines the relationship between parents' racial attitudes and their children's implicit prejudice. It is hypothesized that parental racial attitudes will relate to

children's implicit prejudice to the extent that the child likes, and wishes to emulate, his or her parents.

Individual differences in implicit racial prejudice predict how people evaluate and behave toward those around them. Pro-White/anti-Black implicit prejudice relates to individuals' conscious evaluations of and discomfort around African Americans (e.g., Blair, 2001; Cunningham, Preacher, & Banaji, 2001; Fazio & Olson, 2003; McConnell & Leibold, 2001), as well as their degree of amygdala activation when exposed to African American versus White faces (Phelps et al., 2000). Given the ramifications of individual differences in this construct, it is important to ask why some people develop greater implicit prejudice than others.

Parental socialization of implicit prejudice

Although it is commonly hypothesized that implicit prejudice may develop in part through parental socialization during childhood, the socialization of implicit racial attitudes remains virtually unexplored (but see

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* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: ss8fz@virginia.edu (S. Sinclair).

Towles-Schwen & Fazio, 2003). There is, however, a long-standing body of research investigating the relationship between parents' and children's explicit (i.e., conscious, volitional) prejudice. These studies, which examine the correlation between parents' and children's explicit racial prejudice, have yielded mixed results (see Fishbein, 2000 for a recent review). For example, on one hand, Mosher and Scodel (1960) found a positive correlation between mothers' ethnocentrism and daughters' social distance from African Americans and Jews. Similarly, Carlson and Iovini (1985) found that reported social distance from African Americans among White fathers and sons was positively correlated (see also Epstein & Komorita, 1966; Katz, 2003). On the other hand, Aboud and Doyle (1996) found that mothers' responses on a scale measuring racial prejudice were uncorrelated with their children's responses on two scales assessing child prejudice (see also Branch & Newcombe, 1986; Katz, 1976; Radke-Yarrow, Trager, & Miller, 1952). The inconsistent results from efforts to find a correlation between parents' and children's prejudice suggests that researchers may be overlooking an important moderator of the intergenerational transmission of prejudice.

Several developmental and social psychological theories suggest that children's parental identification could be one such moderator. Social learning theory contends that children develop beliefs and behaviors by mimicking important others (Bandura, 1997). Likewise, attachment theory suggests that children internalize their parents' expectations and values to the extent that they are securely attached (Bretherton, Golby, & Cho, 1997). Consistent with these perspectives, Allport (1954) argued that the home is the most important source of ethnic bias, with children adopting their parents' views to the extent that the children desire affection and approval from their parents. Thus, several theoretical perspectives converge in suggesting that children's prejudice is a function of the expressed beliefs of their parents and the degree to which children identify with their parents. Highly identified children should absorb their parents' beliefs and values, including their prejudice, more so than children low in parental identification.

Although these theoretical perspectives were formulated prior to the recognition of implicit prejudice, recent research on this topic also supports the idea that the intergenerational transmission of prejudice may depend on child–parent identification. According to shared reality theory (Hardin & Conley, 2001; Hardin & Higgins, 1996), implicit prejudice is shaped by the expressed racial attitudes of a social actor to the extent that relationship motivation toward that social actor is high. For example, Lowery, Hardin, and Sinclair (2001) found that White participants exhibited lower implicit prejudice in the presence of a personable Black, as opposed to White, experimenter (see also Richeson & Ambady, 2003). These authors argued that the demon-

strated shift in pro-White/anti-Black implicit prejudice occurred because participants assumed that the Black person had more egalitarian attitudes than the White person and the experimenter role engendered high relationship motivation toward them. In a subsequent series of experiments, these authors also found that White participants had lower levels of implicit racial prejudice in the presence of a highly likable person wearing an anti-racism shirt versus a neutral shirt, regardless of her ethnicity, but implicit racial prejudice was not influenced by the views of an unlikable person (Sinclair, Lowery, Hardin, & Colangelo, 2002). These experiments demonstrate that the racial attitudes expressed by others who engender high relationship motivation influence people's implicit racial prejudice. To the extent that parent–child relationships function like other social relationships, this research also suggests that the racial attitudes parents are willing to express will influence children's implicit racial prejudice more so when children are highly identified with their parents than less identified.

The current study

The current study examines the interactive effect of parents' prejudice and children's identification with their parents on children's implicit pro-White/anti-Black prejudice as measured by the Implicit Association Test (IAT; Greenwald, McGhee, & Schwartz, 1998). For completeness, we also assessed their explicit pro-White/anti-Black prejudice as measured by a modified version of the Multi-response Racial Attitude measure (Doyle & Aboud, 1995). We hypothesized that children who are highly identified with their parents should develop racial attitudes that correspond to those of their parents more so than less identified children.

Method

Participants

Fourth- and fifth-graders were drawn from two schools in the Midwest; 25 girls and 33 boys attended School A and 15 girls and 14 boys attended School B (2 children did not report their gender). A total of 89 child/parent pairs participated in the study. Seventy-eight children were White, 2 were Hispanic, 1 was Asian American, and 8 did not report their ethnicity.¹ We requested that the child's primary caretaker complete the study materials; parental respondents included 80

¹ Two African American children also participated in this study but their data were not included in the analyses.

biological mothers, 1 step-mother, 6 biological fathers, and 2 adoptive fathers.

Procedure

Parents received a letter requesting that they and their child participate in a study on racial attitudes. This was followed by a consent form and a survey that included questions about the parent's racial attitudes. Children whose parents returned the consent form (the response rate was 14%) later completed a brief written survey that assessed identification with parents, basic demographics, and a version of the Multi-response Racial Attitude measure; they then completed the IAT. The IAT and written survey were administered to children in groups of up to 20 in the schools' computer labs.

Measures

Parents' racial attitudes were measured using a shortened version of the Intergroup Threat Scale (Stephan, Ybarra, & Bachman, 1999; Stephan et al., 2002). Participants were asked to rate their agreement with six statements on a scale ranging from *strongly disagree* (1) to *strongly agree* (7). See Table 1 for a complete list of the statements. Responses to the statements were averaged such that higher numbers indicated greater prejudice ($\alpha = .70$).

Children's parental identification was measured with four items ($\alpha = .58$). Children were asked to report how much they cared about making their parents proud on a scale ranging from *don't care at all* (1) to *care a lot* (7), and how often they did what their parents told them on a scale ranging from *never* (1) to *almost always* (5). Children were also asked how much they enjoyed spending time with, and how much they wanted to be like, the parent who completed the survey, on scales ranging from *do not enjoy at all* (1) to *enjoy a lot* (7) and *not at all* (1) to *exactly the same* (7), respectively. The item on a 5-point scale was transformed into a 7-point scale and the four identification items were averaged such that higher numbers indicated greater identification.

Children's implicit racial attitudes were measured using a racial prejudice Implicit Association Test (IAT) available via the internet (buster.cs.yale.edu/implicit/

[index.html](#); Greenwald et al., 1998; Nosek, Banaji, & Greenwald, 2002). We chose this measure because it is well validated among adults (e.g., Cunningham et al., 2001) and its availability via the internet allowed us to collect data in the schools' computer labs without having to install new programs onto their computers. The IAT measures implicit prejudice by assessing the speed with which participants are able to classify a series of adult male and female faces as either Black or White and a series of words as either good or bad. The faces of three Black males, three Black females, three White males, and three White females were displayed; the pictures were cropped at the chin and forehead so that no hair or clothing was visible. The good words were *joy, love, peace, wonderful, pleasure, glorious, laughter* and *happy*. The bad words were *agony, terrible, horrible, nasty, evil, awful, failure* and *hurt*. Within each block of trials, words and faces were drawn from each category randomly and without replacement until all stimuli from the category had been presented, and then this process was repeated until the end of the block. Reaction times were measured from the moment a word or picture appeared on the screen to the moment participants accurately categorized it. If participants miscategorized the word or face, they received an error message; reaction time continued to be assessed until they selected the correct categorization.

Although there were several blocks of practice trials (Nosek et al., 2002), only two blocks of trials were directly relevant to measuring prejudice. In one, children were asked to press one key if they saw a bad word or a Black face, and to press another key if they saw a good word or a White face. In the other block, pairings were reversed, such that bad words and White faces shared one key while good words and Black faces shared another key. Each of these blocks consisted of 40 trials. Block order was randomized across participants. IAT scores were determined by subtracting reaction times in the Black-good/White-bad trials from reaction times in the Black-bad/White-good trials.

In the web version of the IAT, prejudice scores are classified into seven sequential categories: *strong preference for Blacks versus Whites* (1), *moderate preference for Blacks* (2), *slight preference for Blacks* (3), *no preference* (4), *slight preference for Whites* (5), *moderate preference*

Table 1
Items from the Intergroup Threat Scale used to measure parental prejudice

Item 1	African Americans get more from this country than they deserve
Item 2	African Americans are a physical threat to the safety of most Americans
Item 3	African Americans should learn to conform to the rules and norms of American society
Item 4	The values and beliefs of African Americans regarding work are basically quite similar to those of most Americans (R)
Item 5	The values and beliefs of African Americans regarding moral and religious issues are not compatible with the beliefs and values of most Americans
Item 6	The values and beliefs of African Americans regarding family issues and socializing children are basically quite similar to those of most Americans (R)

Items marked "R" were reverse-coded.

for Whites (6), and strong preference for Whites versus Blacks (7). The web-based IAT automatically classifies participants' scores into these categories by grouping the difference scores in reaction time between Black-good/White-bad trials and the Black-bad/White-good trials as follows: difference of 41–100 ms equals "slight" difference, 101–160 ms equals "moderate," greater than 160 ms equals "strong," and –40 to 40 ms equals no bias. Aside from those in the no bias category, positive scores reflected pro-White/anti-Black bias and negative scores reflected pro-Black/anti-White bias.

In the original version of the Multi-response Racial Attitude measure (MRA; Doyle & Aboud, 1995), children sort index cards containing positive and negative traits into boxes that indicate members of different ethnic groups. Because of the survey format employed in this study, we created a pen-and-paper version of the measure ($\alpha = .69$). Children saw a picture of an unknown Black boy and an unknown White boy and a list of adjectives with a checkbox for each adjective under each boy's picture. They were instructed to place a checkmark beside the adjectives under each boy's picture if they thought the word described him. The adjectives included were the same as those used in the original measure, 10 positive traits (*helpful, good, friendly, wonderful, nice, kind, smart, happy, clean, and healthy*) and 10 negative traits (*selfish, bad, unfriendly, naughty, mean, cruel, stupid, sad, dirty, and sick*). We summed the number of positive and negative traits children assigned to the Black and White persons separately. Then, to create an explicit prejudice score conceptually similar to the IAT, we subtracted the number of negative traits assigned to a given ethnic group member from the number of positive traits assigned to that ethnic group member to yield scores indicating positivity toward each ethnic group. Lastly, we subtracted the Black positivity score from the White positivity score. This process yielded a final score in which higher numbers constituted greater pro-White/anti-Black prejudice.

Results

Preliminary analyses

The IAT program deemed the scores of 17 children inconclusive according to criteria outlined by Greenwald et al. (1998).² This percentage of inconclusive re-

sponses is consistent with the percentage of such responses generally observed on the web version of the racial prejudice IAT (Nosek et al., 2002). Because best practice regarding use of the IAT dictates eliminating inconclusive scores, the web-version of the IAT does not provide data for these individuals; thus, the inconclusive responses were not included in the analyses reported below.

Children's average implicit prejudice score significantly differed from the measure's neutral point of 4 ($M = 5.13$, $SD = 2.07$), $t(70) = 4.59$, $p < .001$, indicating that they had a "slight preference for Whites." It is interesting to note, however, that children's modal score of 7 indicated a "strong preference for Whites." Because children's implicit prejudice scores were highly skewed, all reported analyses were conducted with log transformations of this variable. In contrast, children's average score on the composite explicit prejudice measure ($M = .00$, $SD = .47$; mode = 0) was not significantly different from the neutral point of zero, $F < 1$, indicating that children did not report a preference for Whites over Blacks. Children's implicit and explicit prejudice were not significantly correlated, $r(68) = .02$, $p = .88$. In addition, parental racial attitudes were not significantly correlated with children's explicit, $r(82) = -.11$, $p = .34$, or implicit, $r(66) = .17$, $p = .18$, prejudice.

Main analyses

We hypothesized that children who are highly identified with their parents should develop racial attitudes that correspond to those of their parent more so than less identified children. To examine the veracity of this prediction with regard to implicit prejudice, we entered parents' racial attitudes, children's parental identification, and the interaction between these variables into a regression equation with children's implicit racial prejudice as the dependent variable. Both predictor variables were centered prior to conducting this analysis. This model predicted a significant amount of variance in the dependent variable, $F(3,56) = 3.89$, $p < .02$. There was a main effect of parental identification such that children who were more identified with their parents were lower in implicit prejudice ($\beta = -.28$, $p < .03$). In addition, the predicted interaction was found ($\beta = .30$, $p = .02$). As shown in Fig. 1, when parental identification was one standard deviation above the mean, simple slopes analyses revealed a positive relationship between parental prejudice and children's implicit racial prejudice ($\beta = .45$, $p < .01$), but these variables were unrelated when parental identification was one standard deviation below the mean ($\beta = -.08$, $p = .63$).

We used the same analytic strategy to examine the parental socialization hypothesis with regard to explicit prejudice. This model predicted a significant amount of variance in the dependent variable, $F(3,70) = 3.52$,

² The program considers any responses exceeding any of the following criteria inconclusive: average response time of 1500 ms across both critical blocks, average response time of 1800 ms within either critical block, 35% errors in either critical block, 25% errors overall, 25% errors in a critical block, if that block was the fastest of the two critical blocks. Children with inconclusive versus valid scores did not differ in terms of parental prejudice, parental identification, school, number of African American friends or number of African American classmates.

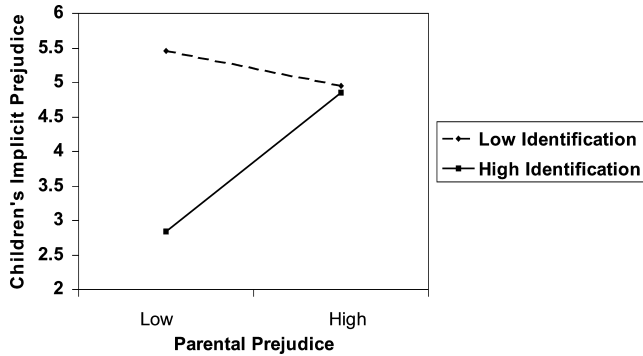


Fig. 1. Relationship between parents' prejudice on the Intergroup Threat Scale and children's implicit prejudice on the IAT as a function of parental identification. Values are plotted such that low corresponds to one *SD* below the mean and high corresponds one *SD* above the mean for both parental prejudice and parental identification.

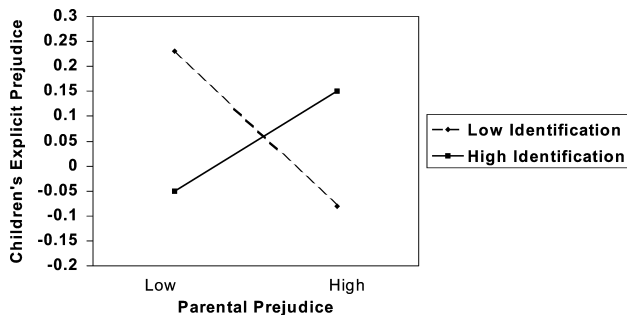


Fig. 2. Relationship between parents' prejudice on the Intergroup Threat Scale and children's explicit prejudice on the modified MRA as a function of parental identification. Values are plotted such that low corresponds to one *SD* below the mean and high corresponds one *SD* above the mean for both parental prejudice and parental identification.

$p < .02$. Again, the predicted interaction was found ($\beta = .36$, $p < .005$), while there were no statistically significant main effects (p 's $> .47$). When parental identification was one standard deviation above the mean, there tended to be positive relationship between parental prejudice and children's explicit racial prejudice ($\beta = .25$, $p = .10$), but these variables were actually negatively related when parental identification was one standard deviation below the mean ($\beta = -.42$, $p < .01$) (Fig. 2).

Discussion

The present research provides several intriguing findings relevant to the study of implicit prejudice in children. First, it demonstrates that pro-White/anti-Black implicit prejudice can be measured in fourth- and fifth-graders. Participants' responses were similar to those of adults in several ways: (1) they showed pro-White/anti-Black implicit bias (e.g., Lowery et al., 2001; McConnell & Leibold, 2001), (2) they yielded the same percentage of inconclusive responses as adults (Nosek

et al., 2002), and (3) their implicit prejudice was not correlated with their explicit prejudice (e.g., Ferguson, Rhodes, Lee, & Sriram, 2001; Sekaquaptewa, Espinoza, Thompson, Vargas, & von Hippel, 2003, for a review see Blair, 2001).

This study also provided evidence that parents' racial attitudes influence both their children's implicit and explicit racial prejudice to the degree that children identify with their parents. Children's implicit and explicit prejudice corresponded to the views of their parents more so when children had high as opposed to low identification towards them. While the focus of both our previous work and the present research lies in examining how implicit attitudes are influenced by the perceived attitudes of relationship partners, it is interesting to note the similarity of the results obtained for both implicit and explicit prejudice. Yet, an intriguing difference also emerged; among highly identified children, parental prejudice was significantly related to children's implicit prejudice but only marginally related to children's explicit prejudice, while among less identified children, parental prejudice was unrelated to children's implicit prejudice but *negatively* related to children's explicit prejudice. It is possible, then, that children who identify with their parents may adopt the racial attitudes of their parents more on an implicit than an explicit level, whereas children who do not identify with their parents may actually reject their parent's attitudes, but only on an explicit level.

Of course, it is ethically impossible to randomly assign children to racist or non-racist parents or manipulate level of child–parent identification. For this reason, we had to rely on a correlational design that precludes drawing strong causal inferences regarding the direction of the demonstrated relationship. It is conceivable, for example, that agreeing with parents about racial issues causes children to identify with their parents while disagreeing with parents about racial issues leads to disidentification. This is an important alternative to consider but it is unlikely that racial issues represent a major source of contention between most parents and their elementary school-age children. It is also possible that children who are more genetically similar to their parents would both identify more strongly and exhibit higher attitude concordance with their parents. Given that authoritarianism appears to have a reliable genetic component (McCourt, Bouchard, Lykken, Tellegen, & Keyes, 1999), children who inherit this trait from their parents might get along well with their similarly authoritarian parents and, like their parents, show the proclivity toward racism associated with this trait. Still, given the extensive theoretical support for the parental socialization hypothesis (e.g., Allport, 1954), it seems likely that this mechanism plays at least some role in explaining the correspondence between parents' and children's attitudes among highly identified children.

In the present study, we chose to measure parents' explicit (rather than implicit) prejudice for both theoretical and practical reasons. Our previous research has demonstrated that the attitudes people are willing to overtly express (i.e., by wearing an anti-racism shirt) can influence their relationship partner's implicit prejudice when relationship motivation is high (e.g., Sinclair et al., 2002). This suggested that the racial attitudes parents were willing and able to disclose (i.e., explicit attitudes) might influence implicit prejudice among children who were highly identified with their parents. Thus, while it may seem somewhat surprising that we were able to detect a relationship between parents' explicit prejudice and their children's implicit prejudice given the typical null correlations between individuals' own explicit and implicit prejudice, our previous work suggests that implicit prejudice ought to be influenced by the explicit attitudes of a close relationship partner. In other words, this work implied that even though self-presentational concerns or limited introspective access may prevent one's implicit attitudes from influencing one's explicit responses (Nossek, 2004), the explicitly endorsed attitudes of one's relationship partners may influence one's implicit attitudes (Sinclair et al., 2002). Therefore, assessing parents' explicit attitudes represented a reasonable starting point from a theoretical perspective.

As a practical matter, we were able to include a broader sample of parents by requiring them to complete only pen-and-paper measures to participate. Thus, the potential benefits of including an implicit measure were outweighed by the problems of limiting our sample to parents who were willing to come into the school or use a home computer to complete a test of implicit prejudice.

However, future research should examine the effects of parents' implicit and explicit prejudice on children's prejudice. Although implicit attitudes are not consciously accessible, parents may transmit them to their children via subtle non-verbal responses to target group members (e.g., Dovidio, Kawakami, & Gaertner, 2002). In fact, parents' implicit racial attitudes may have an even bigger impact on children's views than their explicit racial attitudes because parents are unaware of implicit biases and, therefore, unable to consciously censor them.

Although the present study focused on parents, other socializing agents may play an important role in the development of implicit prejudice. For example, there is reason to suspect that parents' racial attitudes may be particularly influential early on in childhood, whereas peers' attitudes may become more important as children grow older (Harris, 1995). It would be interesting, then, to examine the relative influence of parental versus peer attitudes on implicit prejudice among children of varying ages. In beginning to chart the passage of prejudice from one generation to the next, the present research

lays the groundwork for a broader understanding of the factors that lead people to develop implicit, negative reactions toward members of racial outgroups.

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