From the fear of death to the fear of ‘dissimilar other’: a research in elementary school classrooms

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From the fear of death to the fear of ‘dissimilar other’: a research in elementary school classrooms

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Social stereotyping and prejudice constitute pressing societal problems and have many causes. Terror Management Theory offers a compelling and heavily researched account of individuals’ reactions towards ‘dissimilar others’ when faced with thoughts of mortality. Building from previous research with adult samples, the present study aimed to explore whether terror management processes can have an effect on children’s attitudes towards members of an ethnic out-group. We used focus group as a method of collecting the data. Results showed that reminders of mortality led to an increase in stereotypic thinking, to negative evaluations of the out-group and to ethnic labelling. The results of the present study emphasise the necessity for interventions that would take into account, besides the role of cognition and the role of micro- and macro-level environment, other determinants, such as the role of incidental affect, which contribute to the genesis and maintenance of prejudice and in-group bias in children.

Keywords: prejudice; stereotyping; Terror Management Theory; children; elementary education

Introduction

Social stereotyping and prejudice are intriguing phenomena and constitute pressing societal problems. Prejudice occurs when negative evaluations of a group are based on faulty generalisations (Bergen 2001). It involves holding derogatory attitudes or beliefs, expressing negative affect or displaying hostile or discriminatory behaviour (Brown 1995). Because social stereotyping and prejudice emerge in early childhood, research in causal mechanisms and factors that heighten such reactions is critical for understanding the emergence and evolution of prejudices. Such research will also prove useful for developing policies that will face the challenges associated with ethnocultural diversity problems in schools, help children overcome stereotypes they already harbour and reduce the early emergence of negative consequences.

Several researchers investigating prejudice and discrimination in childhood have focused on environmental-learning factors, emphasising the role of social forces operating in children’s social environment. These theorists assume that children learn their ethnic and racial attitudes and behaviours via exposure to socialising agents (e.g. parents, peers and the media) in the same way they are assumed to learn other social behaviours (Aboud and Doyle 1996; Davey 1983). Even the non-verbal
behaviour that adults direct towards members of social groups or show in response to the presence of group members is a source of implicit information likely to cause prejudice. On the other hand, for the past 50 years, research on stereotyping and prejudice has been dominated by the social-cognitive perspective which has emphasised the cognitive determinants and consequences of stereotyping processes (Park and Judd 2005). Research from a social-cognitive perspective has linked qualitatively different types of prejudice at different ages with changes in cognitive structure, relating the high prejudice of young children to immature social cognitions (Doyle and Aboud 1995; Nesdale 2004).

However, several recent approaches (Fiske 1998; Rothbart and Lewis 1994) point out that prejudice in children is not solely dependent on the impact of socialising agents or the development of their perceptual–cognitive abilities, but also on integral and incidental affective states (Bodenhausen et al. 2001). Bodenhausen et al. (2001) define incidental affective states in inter-group context as affect that arises for reasons having nothing to do with the inter-group context itself. Research has shown that integral and incidental affect can influence perceptions, judgements, information, behavioural intentions and behaviour (Bodenhausen et al. 2001).

Terror Management Theory (TMT) has provided empirical evidence that specific emotions tend to increase the likelihood of negative attitudes towards members of an out-group (Greenberg, Solomon, and Pyszczynski 1997; Greenberg et al. 1992; Schimel et al. 1999). According to TMT, existential fear rooted in awareness of death is a primary source of distress and plays a central role in human motivation and behaviour. To cope with this threat, people have developed elaborate defensive mechanisms that enable them to remove the threatening material from conscious awareness and therefore protect themselves from death awareness (Pyszczynski, Greenberg, and Solomon 1999). One of these mechanisms is the cultural worldview defence. The theory posits that an individual’s worldview is a culturally derived yet individualised conception of reality that provides protection against the deep rooted fear of human mortality and vulnerability. According to TMT, when mortality is salient, people need to reassure their faith in their worldviews and so are likely to be displeased with anyone who threatens that faith. In other words, an encounter with a different worldview may pose a threat to the validity of one’s beliefs and may lead to negative reactions against people and ideas dissimilar from one’s own convictions (Greenberg, Solomon, and Pyszczynski 1997). The stereotypic depictions of out-group members prevalent in a given social context may become significant components of the worldview espoused by that culture. To the extent then that stereotypes are significant components of such a worldview, people would be expected to try to maintain their stereotypes when confronted with death-related anxiety.

Most research on TMT has focused on the mortality salience (MS) hypothesis. The MS hypothesis states that if a psychological structure functions to buffer awareness of death, inducing people to think of their death, should increase their need for this psychological entity. In other words, reminding people of their mortality should increase their faith in their cultural worldview and at the same time increase their hostility towards those who are different. This procedure is referred to as MS induction. In a typical MS study, one group of participants is confronted with a death-related stimulus, while a second control group is confronted with thoughts of an aversive topic (such as physical pain, future uncertainty and social inclusion) and their reactions are recorded.
Multiple studies conducted in at least 15 different countries have shown that reminding people of their own death led to amplified positive reactions towards people and ideas consistent with one’s cultural beliefs, out-group rejection, behavioural avoidance of out-group members, stereotyping and prejudice (Dechesne, Janssen, and van Knippenberg 2000).

Although the basic premise of TMT that awareness of one’s mortality can exacerbate negative reactions to the presence or to the mere existence of out-group members has been heavily researched with adult samples, there is only one study which investigated these assumptions with children (Florian and Mikulincer 1998). Therefore, our research, grounded in the terror management literature, was set to examine this idea in relation to late elementary school children. Building from the adult TMT studies, the aim was to qualitatively investigate whether death reminders would influence children’s attitudes towards members of an ethnic out-group and their willingness to interact with them. Based on the previous research with adult samples, we hypothesised that to the extent to which stereotypes are part of the cultural worldview that provides protection from mortality concerns, reminders of one’s mortality would increase the use of stereotypes and negative reactions towards an out-group.

However, only when people have a mature understanding of death would become preoccupied with their own death. Empirical research has shown that the adult concept of death is the product of a cognitive developmental process which seems to follow the patterns of cognitive development described by Piaget. According to this view, children develop a mature understanding of death around age 11, that is, they understand fully the finality, universality, irreversibility and inevitability of death. Therefore, we expected to observe the effects of MS among 11- to 12-year-old children, who have reached a full understanding of death.

The participants of the study are students in the final year of elementary school (sixth grade) in Greece. In Greece, like in many other European countries, classrooms are multicultural. According to the official records of the Greek Ministry of Education (2005), the number of immigrant students is approximately 10% of the total number of students in Greek schools. Although most of the immigrant students come from Albania, there are also students from other Balkan countries, as well as from countries of Asia and Africa. In order to facilitate the social and educational inclusion of these students, reception classes function in many schools, where the immigrant children attend intensive courses of Greek as a second/foreign language. There is, also, a small number of schools with a great percentage of immigrant students which have been characterised as ‘intercultural schools’. In these schools, pilot intercultural teaching and learning programmes and other intercultural activities are carried out with the aim to promote the development of intercultural awareness and empathy among the students. Such programmes are also carried out in many other elementary and secondary schools.

Method

Participants

Sixteen mixed focus groups of boys and girls were conducted involving a total of 137 children aged 11–12 years. The children were drawn from public elementary schools in socio-economically mixed urban areas of Volos, a town in central Greece, after obtaining written consent from their parents. Of these 71 children (33 boys and 38
girls/8 focus groups) were in the MS condition and 66 (41 boys and 25 girls/8 focus groups) were in the mortality non-salience (non-MS) condition.

Procedure
We used focus group as a method of collecting the data. Thinking that while the method is challenging with children, nevertheless is a valuable method for eliciting their views and experiences, given that this type of analysis is particularly indicated when researchers are concerned with controversial and personal issues (Krueger 2000).

Focus groups were conducted at the school setting. There were two sessions lasting 40 min each with 10-min break in-between the two sessions. The groups consisted of 7–10 participants, with each group meeting once. We used multiple focus groups in order to ensure that saturation has been reached (Morgan 1997).

Interviews were conducted by two experienced moderators. The first one presented the focus group with the stimulus material and a series of questions. She was also responsible for making the group feel comfortable, facilitating discussion, prompting children to speak and encouraging all of them to participate. The assistant moderator was responsible for recording the session and taking notes. The sessions began with structured warm-up activities, with the aim of reinforcing the message that participation was the aim of the session and promoting group cohesiveness. Focus group interviews were semi-structured and informal, although they were guided by a predetermined set of questions and probes based on the research objectives.

In the first session, children were exposed to death salient or non-salient conditions, and then they were encouraged to discuss their thoughts and their emotional reactions. Follow-up questions probed for more detail about material the children introduced in the discussion. In the second phase, children were presented with the social acceptance stimulus material and then the discussion concentrated on children’s thoughts and attitudes towards the members of a hypothetical ethnic out-group.

Materials
Following previous research, we randomly assigned participants to the two conditions, the MS and non-MS conditions. In the MS condition, children listened to Andreas’ story, a real incident which happened in 1995 after a 6.2 magnitude earthquake struck Egion, a town in South Greece. A 12-year-old boy was trapped under a toppled apartment block. He remained in the ruins for 21 h before the rescuers managed to take him out severely wounded but alive (Appendix 1(a)). The key goal was to use the earthquake tragedy to induce death-related thoughts in children. After that, the moderator asked children to imagine themselves in the place of that boy and discuss the thoughts and feelings that would cross their minds while the rescue teams would be struggling to save their lives. In the non-MS condition, children were asked to imagine themselves visiting a dentist because of a dental pain (an aversive topic unrelated to death) and describe their thoughts and feelings while they were in the waiting room. The successful manipulation of the MS condition was evident in children’s comments as is evident in the following remarks:
I would have thought that I would die, that I would keep calling for help but no one would reply.
I wouldn’t be able to think anything else except life or death.

To assess children’s thoughts and reactions towards members of an out-group, children listened to a hypothetical scenario involving an immigrant couple from Albania who came to Greece with their two children, a boy and a girl, looking for a job (Appendix 1(b)). The scenario described their difficulty in finding a place to rent, because the house owners refused to rent their apartment to immigrants. After listening to the story, children were asked to express: (1) their opinion about the owners’ behaviour, (2) their own thoughts and feelings in case that the immigrant family lived next to their apartment and (3) their readiness to interact with the two children at school, sitting next to them and playing with them during breaks.

It should be noted that there are powerful negative stereotypes concerning this specific minority group in Greece. In their studies, Droukas (1998) and Lazaridis and Wickens (1999) underline the prejudice against Albanian immigrants in Greece, which, in turn, confines the members of this specific ethnic group to conditions of inferiority, weakness and manipulation.

Results
The group sessions were audiotaped and transcribed. We used the group as the unit of analysis (Morgan 1997). Two investigators independently coded the transcripts using classical content analysis. During the first stage, the data were chunked into small units and then a descriptor or code was assigned to each of the units. The analysis was undertaken inductively, that is, the codes emerged from the data. After all the data have been coded, the codes were categorised by similarity, and a theme was identified and documented based on each category. Four main categories were identified in this way: (1) generation of negative affect towards the out-group, approval and justification of stereotype confirming others; (2) xenophobic, ethnocentric attitudes; (3) positive attitudes towards the out-group and (4) ambivalence as a result of children’s reasoning (Table 1).

Table 1. Classification of data.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Main themes</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Generation of negative affect towards the out-group, approval and justification of stereotype confirming others</td>
<td>Dislike, fear, suspiciousness, mistrust, anger and derogation of the out-group, approval of the stereotypic behaviour of others.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Xenophobic, ethnocentric attitudes</td>
<td>Prevalent ethnic stereotypes, reference to negative dispositional traits of the out-group, contact avoidance.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Positive attitudes towards the out-group</td>
<td>Expressions of sympathy, empathy, acceptance, reference to positive experiences of coexistence with members of the out-group, rejection of stereotypical behaviour of others.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Ambivalence as a result of children’s reasoning</td>
<td>Moral beliefs about equal rights and fairness vs. social-conventional beliefs involving stereotypes and prejudice.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Next, we assessed the frequency of each code within the two conditions (MS and non-MS conditions). As can be seen in Table 2, MS led to an increase in stereotypic thinking, more negative evaluations and judgements and less positive images of the out-group.

### Generation of negative affect towards the out-group, approval and justification of stereotype confirming others

This category includes references concerning dislike, fear, suspiciousness, mistrust and anger towards members of the out-group. In the MS condition, children often made references to the fear of the ‘other’. The following text is indicative of children’s answers to the question ‘If we assume that Erdin and Linda’s family finally rented a flat right next to yours, how would you feel, or what would you think, about your new neighbours?’:

*In the beginning I would have great fear because they maybe bad people.*

*I would be very suspicious. Who knows what they might have in their mind.*

*On the contrary, the references made by the children in the non-MS condition reveal either positive attitudes towards the out-group or some ambivalence:*

*I would be glad because I would have new friends, but I might also be suspicious as I wouldn’t know what kind of people they were.*

The suspiciousness and mistrust towards the ethnic other are also indicated in the way children in the MS condition justify the property owners’ behaviour:

*Like the landlord, I as well, I wouldn’t rent my house to people from another country. It is not easy to trust them.*

On the other hand, many of the children in the non-MS condition focus on the disapproval of the social context in case that the owner rented the house to the Albanian family, expressing in this way their own ambivalent feelings, as is evident in the following comment:

*If he (the landlord) rented the flat to those people the others might have start asking: ‘why did you rent it to them, don’t you know what they can do to you’.*
Xenophobic, ethnocentric attitudes
This category includes references reproducing the dominant stereotypes and stereotype-enhancing ideologies of the social context concerning the out-group, negative dispositional traits of the out-group members, as well as references to contact avoidance with the out-group. Children in the MS condition gave more prejudiced responses, used more stereotypical images and judgements about the out-group (e.g. cultural attributes presented as being characteristic of the out-group) and referred more to ethnic labelling and scapegoating:

I would say that entry to Greece from Albania should be banned because we already have people for the country’s workforce. Some say that they come to work for us. We have people for work. Why do we need the others?

Although children in the MS condition seem to produce the dominant negative ethnic stereotypes, they state that their attitudes are the result of personal experiences:

I don’t like Albanians because all Albanians I’ve met were not very good children. Just two or three of them were good, most were thieves, used profane language, behaved badly, and I don’t really like Albanians.

Children in the non-MS condition mostly referred to efforts of assimilation:

I would try to teach them Greek and to behave like Greeks.

However, in some comments a kind of ‘moral or egocentric superiority’ (Brewer 1999) was evident which is considered a form of implicit prejudice:

If they were like us, if they learn Greek and behave well, I wouldn’t have any problem with them.

Positive attitudes towards the out-group
Children in both conditions made some affective and cognitive comments expressing positive affect towards the out-group, sympathy and acceptance. This type of reference was significantly more frequent in the non-MS condition as compared to the MS condition. A challenge that arises from the data is whether the children in making these comments were simply responding in a socially desirable or politically correct way:

We will welcome them, give them some food to make them feel welcome. (MS condition)
I would be glad because I would make new friends in the neighborhood. (MS condition)
I would make no exceptions among my friends, they would all be the same to me. (non-MS condition)
It doesn’t matter to me that they are from another country, I would socialize with them. (non-MS condition)
The acceptance of the out-group seems to be connected to positive experience of coexistence with members of this group:

I didn’t know Besi in the beginning, we quarreled all the time, every day, but then we became friends. (MS condition)

In the middle of the last school year we met with Odysseus, an Albanian boy. Now he is my best friend. (non-MS condition)

Several children in both conditions expressed disapproval and condemnation of the property owners’ behaviour, although such references were more frequent in the non-MS condition:

The landlords behaved very badly, they didn’t helped them at all. The owners behaved like racists. (MS condition)

He is a racist because if they [the renters] came from a country with money, he [the owner] would easily give the house, but to Albanians because they have financial problems and he thinks that they are inferior he doesn’t rent the house easily. (non-MS condition)

Ambivalence as a result of children’s reasoning

A number of children seemed to alternate between two forms of social reasoning: moral beliefs about the appropriateness of the exclusion and marginalisation of the out-group members, and social-conventional beliefs about the out-group. Moral beliefs include concepts about equal rights, fairness and equal treatment (Turiel 1998). Social-conventional beliefs entail several forms of reasoning, including those that concern stereotypes and prejudice (Liben and Signorella 1993). Although this trend (weighing the competing moral and social-conventional considerations) was evident in both conditions, it was more pronounced in the MS condition.

Here is a characteristic comment: ‘They (the landlords) are racists, they didn’t give them the house because they are from a foreign country… all people are equal. They behaved arrogantly as if they were superior’.

A child in a MS condition focus group who had said: ‘I believe that he [the owner of the house] did not do well to get rid of them, he is a racist’, in answering the question ‘If we assume that the immigrant family rented a flat that was located right next to your flat, what would you think or feel about your new neighbors?’, his response was: ‘I am prejudiced against Albanians… If they were here today I wouldn’t help them’.

Similarly a child in a non-MS condition focus group who had declared that: ‘The owners were not right towards these people, the immigrants who sought refuge’. In answering the question ‘if we assume that Arben and Sonila were enrolled at the same school and in the same class as you, would you socialise with them, would you like to share desks?’ responded: ‘I wouldn’t like something like that. I wouldn’t know how they would behave at school, whether they would use bad language, whether they would speak good Greek, or involved in quarrels easily’.

It seems that when children were evaluating the owners’ behaviour who refused to rent their houses to immigrants on the basis of group membership and no other justification, moral reasons of fairness seem to prevail. On the other hand, when considering their own reactions they used stereotypes to justify their answers. It is possible that the ongoing presence of the two facilitators has created a social context
which elicited affective reactions, such as discomfort, that influenced children’s behaviour.

Discussion
The goal of the present study was to examine whether awareness of death, in the form of an incidental affective state, would influence children’s attitudes towards a discriminated out-group. Overall, the results indicate that 11- and 12-year-old children revealed reactions to MS similar to those shown by adults in TMT studies. These effects indicate that terror management mechanisms observed among adults appear to exist already in late childhood. Because value systems and cultural worldviews are already developed at this age, children can make use of them in managing their terror of death.

Generally, the results were congruent with predictions. Consistent with the basic premises of TMT, children in the MS condition as compared to those in the non-MS condition (a) felt more negatively and desired less contact with the out-group members; (b) made more extreme negative trait references and used the stereotypes more often; (c) attributed the out-group members behaviour more to consistent traits; (d) offered more justifications for stereotype-confirming behaviours and (e) displayed less positive images of the out-group and were less accepting of out-group members. In line with previous research, our results show that MS increased out-group derogation and rejection, led to an increase in stereotypic thinking and negative evaluation of those who are different.

It is also interesting to note that several children in both conditions seemed to hold conflicting views as a result of different types of social reasoning. On one hand, they judged as wrong from a moral viewpoint the prejudiced behaviour of others, a finding which is in line with other findings regarding children’s judgements of violations or rights and equality (Helwig 1997). On the other hand, they used the dominant stereotypes about the out-group to justify their own prejudiced behaviour. It might be that a child’s degree of experience of interacting with members of the out-group played a mediating role in this kind of reasoning. Understanding how children reason about such matters is important because such reasoning represents an integral part of reasoning about inter-group relationships in adults.

The findings of the present study contribute to a growing body of research which emphasises that children’s social attitudes are not based purely on their cognitions but might be determined by motivational considerations, such as the impact of incidental affect on peoples’ judgements, perceptions and behavioural intentions. Models of prejudice reduction, which focus on the role of social-cognitive factors in stereotyping, largely ignore the impact of aversive feelings based on situational factors which may intensify or serve to maintain ethnic or social prejudice. Therefore, when planning prejudice reduction strategies and interventions, it might also be necessary to examine the role of affect in inter-group bias. The present study should be considered as a very tentative step in that direction.

The limitations of the present study mainly concern the fact that a social desirability response bias was evident in all group discussions. A number of authors (Abrams, Rutland, and Cameron 2003; Ruble et al. 2004) have pointed out that racial and ethnic bias in children declines around 7 years of age reflecting the fact that children are increasingly sensitive to those attitudes that are socially sanctioned. It is argued that because of the process on norm internalisation in middle childhood
and due to self-presentation concerns, older children would be motivated to control their prejudiced behaviour. In addition, other researchers (Franca and Monteiro 2004) point out that, for the older children, the presence of an interviewer creates a normative context where inter-group bias is an undesirable behaviour. Therefore, future studies should try to reduce the social desirability of responses by including more subtle means of prejudice.

Another issue concerns the limitations of focus groups, in that they do not generate quantitative information that can be projected to a larger population (Basch 1987). Finally, we used the group as the unit of analysis in analysing the data, thus presenting emergent themes. These themes can give important and interesting information, but analysing and interpreting only the text can be problematic. In particular, in presenting and interpreting the emergent themes prevents the researcher from documenting focus group members who did not contribute to the theme or the code. Although the group interaction is generally seen as an advantage of focus groups, there is always the possibility that intimidation within the group setting may inhibit interaction (Maxwell 2005).

References


Appendix 1

(a) The story of young Andreas

June 15, 1995. Achaias prefecture, Aigion, time 3.16 am. An earthquake measuring 6.2 on the Richter scale overwhelms the region spreading catastrophe and panic. The damage is widespread and horrific scenes of destroyed buildings and stranded people unfold in the wider region. The eyes of all Greeks and the entire world are focused on one apartment block in central Aigion. A large number of people are trapped inside. Rescue teams make enormous efforts to evacuate the people stranded under tons of cement. One of these is young Andreas B, a 12-year-old boy. His story became international news as all waited in suspense for its development. Young Andreas, who was trapped for at least 21 h under tons of rubble, awaited the hand of rescue workers to survive. Thousands of thoughts crossed his mind as he lay crushed amid the dark rubble. Motionless and stuck between cement slates, the only thing he could do was breathe with difficulty and think.
The visit to the dentist

You have made an appointment to visit the dentist for either a check-up or dental problem that has emerged. You wait your turn in the waiting room. What do you think or feel while waiting?

(b) The hypothetical scenario about the ethnic out-group

Erdin and Linda are immigrants from Albania who came to Greece for financial reasons. They have brought with them their son Arben and daughter Sonila. The children are the same age as you. Upon arriving here, the first thing they do is look for a home. They visit many houses, but as soon as the owners realise that they are foreigners they decide not to make their property available to them. Erdin, Linda and the two children have a major problem. They are at a loss as to what to do.

What is your opinion about the behaviour of the property owners towards the family from Albania?

If we assume that Erdin and Linda’s family finally rented out a flat located right next to yours, how would you feel, or what would you think, about your new neighbours?

If Arben and Sonila enrolled at the same school and class as you, would you socialise with them? Would you like to share the same desk?