

## **CHILDREN'S PERCEPTIONS OF THEIR OWN AND ONE OTHER RELIGIOUS GROUP**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This poster reports an investigation of children's perceptions of their own and one other religious group. 242 5- to 11-year-old children living in south-east England took part in the study. The children came from two religious groups, Muslim and Christian. The children were questioned in order to elicit their descriptions of members of the two religious groups, and to assess the perceived variability attributed to members of both groups. The subjective importance of the child's own religious group membership was also measured. It was found that: religion became more important with age; the positivity of the children's descriptions of the outgroup increased as a function of age; the ingroup was described in a more positive way than the outgroup at all ages; the variability attributed to both the ingroup and outgroup increased as a function of age; and the outgroup was seen as being more variable than the ingroup at all ages. The findings are discussed in relationship to predictions made by Social Identity Theory and Self-Categorisation Theory.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Within any society, individuals belong to a large number of different social groups (e.g. gender groups, nationality groups, religious groups, etc.). Social Identity Theory (Tajfel, 1978, 1979, 1981) postulates that when a particular social group membership is salient and important to an individual, the within-group similarities and the between-group differences pertaining to that group are accentuated by that individual. This accentuation effect produces intra-group homogeneity effects, that is, an underestimation of the amount of variability which exists amongst the various people who make up a given social group. In addition, Social Identity Theory postulates that a fundamental human motivation is the need to have positive self-esteem. In constructing representations of ingroups and outgroups, dimensions of comparison are chosen which produce more favourable representations of ingroups and less favourable representations of outgroups, resulting in ingroup favouritism and outgroup denigration, thus producing positive self-esteem.

Self-Categorisation Theory (Oakes, Haslam & Turner, 1994), which is a subsequent development of Social Identity Theory, further suggests that individuals have both personal and social identities, and whether the individual categorises the self at the personal or social group level is dependent upon the specific social context and the principle of meta-contrast (which ensures that categorisation within any given context occurs at the level which maximises between-group differences and within-group similarities). When the context

contains both ingroups and outgroups, social categorisation of the self occurs, and perceived ingroup variability decreases. In addition, when the ingroup is a minority group which is perceived to be under threat from a majority group, the social identity may be more important than it might otherwise be for the members of that minority group, and ingroup variability may be decreased still further in order to protect the internal cohesion of the ingroup.

In the present study, 5-11 year old Muslim and Christian children living in south-east England were interviewed, in order to elicit their descriptions of Muslim and Christian people. The following predictions were made on the basis of Social Identity Theory and Self-Categorisation Theory:

- The subjective importance of religious identity would correlate with the perceived variability of the ingroup and the outgroup (from Social Identity Theory)
- The ingroup would be evaluated more positively than the outgroup (from Social Identity Theory)
- Religious identity would be more important to minority group members (Muslims) than to majority group members (Christians) (from Self-Categorisation Theory)
- The ingroup would be judged to be less variable by minority group members (Muslims) than by majority group members (Christians) (from Self-Categorisation Theory)

## METHOD

### Participants

242 5- to 11-year-old children took part in the study. All children were living in south-east England and all were born in the UK. The children came from two religious groups, Muslim and Christian. Christians constitute the majority religious group within the UK, with Muslims constituting a minority group. Approximately equal numbers of boys and girls took part. A breakdown of the sample is shown in Table 1.

**Table 1:** Age and number of participants, broken down by age and religion.

Religion	Young	Middle	Old
Christian	5 years 1 month – 7 years 6 months N=40	7 years 6 months – 9 years 6 months N=40	9 years 7 months – 11 years 6 months N=42
Muslim	5 years 7 months – 7 years 3 months N=40	7 years 6 months – 9 years 6 months N=40	9 years 7 months – 11 years 7 months N=40

## Materials and Procedure

### *Relative Subjective Importance of Religion Task*

The children participated in the study on an individual basis, and it was ensured that no cues were given to suggest that the main focus of the study was religion prior to the administration of this first task.

A sorting task was used. The children were presented with 32 cards. The name of one identity was written on each card. The cards related to the following identities: religion; nationality; de facto group memberships; origin; language; age; and gender. The individual cards in each category were as follows:

*Religion:*

Muslim; Hindu; Christian.

*Nationality:*

Indian; Pakistani; Bangladeshi; Sri-Lankan; Tamil; Scottish; Welsh; Irish.

*De facto group memberships:*

British; European; English; Speak English.

*Origin:*

Asian.

*Language:*

Speak Bengali; Speak Gujarati; Speak Hindi; Speak Punjabi; Speak Urdu; Speak Tamil.

*Age:*

Aged 4; Aged 5; Aged 6; Aged 7; Aged 8; Aged 9; Aged 10; Aged 11.

*Gender:*

Boy; Girl.

Two boxes were used for the sorting task. One was labelled 'Me' and the other was labelled 'Not Me'. The instructions given to the children were as follows: *"Here are some cards with some words on which could be used to describe people. Some of them could be used to describe you. Do you see we have two boxes here, one has 'Me' on it, and one has 'Not Me' on it. Can you put all of the cards which describe you in the 'Me' box and all the ones which don't describe you in the 'Not Me' box"*.

When the child had finished sorting the cards, all the cards in the 'Me' box were placed face up on the table, and the child was asked: *"If you had to choose just one card which was most important to you, which one would you choose?"* This card was then removed, and the child was asked to choose the next most important card, until all the cards had been chosen. This resulted in a measure of the importance of religion relative to other identities.

### *Variability/Positivity Task*

The scale which was used to measure variability and positivity consisted of five cards: All of them; A lot of them; Half of them; A few of them; None of them. These five cards were placed face up in a fixed order on the table.

In order to train the children in how to use the scale, a number of training cards were used. Each training card depicted a number of men, dressed in either blue or red clothes. The proportion of men dressed in each colour differed on each card. Each child was shown a

number of cards and asked to state how many of the men were wearing blue using the answers in the scale. Training continued until the interviewer was confident that the children were able to use the scale.

The children were then told that the interviewer would like to talk to them about Christians and Muslims, and the children were asked which of the two groups they belonged to.

In order to assess perceived group positivity and variability of Christians and Muslims, the children were asked about both groups; the order of presentation of the two groups was randomised. The children were asked to point to the scale card which showed how many Christians/Muslims could be described by a particular adjective (e.g. *“How many Muslim people do you think are hardworking? Is it none of them, a few of them, half of them, a lot of them, or all of them?”*). 11 adjectives were used in total; these were administered in a differently randomised order to each individual child. The 11 adjectives were: hardworking, lazy, kind, unkind, nice, not nice, polite, rude, good, bad, clean (N.B. dirty was not used due to its strongly pejorative connotations in English). The scoring of this task is shown in Table 2.

**Table 2:** The scoring of the variability and positivity scales.

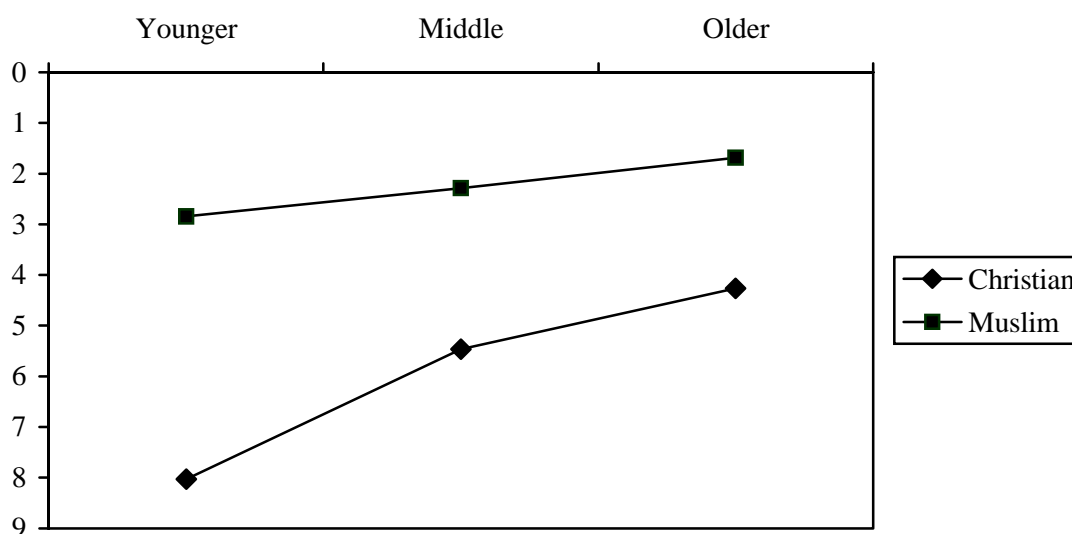
	None of Them	A Few of Them	Half of Them	A Lot of Them	All of Them
Variability (total Variability score obtained by summing across all 11 adjectives)	3	2	1	2	3
Positivity (for positive adjectives)	1	2	3	4	5
Positivity (for negative adjectives) (total Positivity score obtained by summing across all 11 adjectives)	5	4	3	2	1

## RESULTS

- **Religious identity would be more important to minority group members (Muslims) than to majority group members (Christians)**

The relative subjective importance of religion was higher for Muslims than for Christians ( $U=3856.5$ ,  $p<0.001$ ) (see Figure 1).

**Figure 1:** Subjective importance of religion across age and religious group (high score = less important)



The relative subjective importance of religion increased with age for both Muslims ( $\chi^2(2) = 6.75, p < 0.05$ ) and Christians ( $\chi^2(2) = 10.09, p < 0.01$ ). Post-hoc tests revealed that for both Muslims ( $U = 563.5, p < 0.01$ ) and Christians ( $U = 513, p < 0.005$ ), the significant difference lay only between the young and old groups. The results can be seen in Figure 1.

- **The ingroup would be evaluated more positively than the outgroup**

The ingroup was described in a more positive way than the outgroup at all ages ( $F(1,230) = 114.93, p < 0.001$ ) (see Table 3).

Table 3: Ingroup and outgroup positivity split by age group

	Ingroup positivity	Outgroup positivity
Young	43.10 (6.99)	35.52 (7.62)
Middle	44.13 (5.52)	38.41 (7.77)
Old	43.69 (4.94)	39.83 (5.39)
Means	43.64 (5.86)	37.94 (7.20)

As far as the outgroup positivity scores were concerned, there were significant differences between the age groups on these scores ( $F(2,230)=7.90$ ,  $p<0.001$ ). The mean scores and standard deviations for the three age groups are shown in Table 3. It can be seen that the positivity of the children's descriptions of the outgroup increased with age. Post-hoc Scheffe tests revealed that the significant differences lay between the young children and the other two groups, with no significant difference being obtained between the middle and old children.

As far as the ingroup positivity scores were concerned, there were no significant differences between the age groups on these scores.

- **The ingroup would be judged to be less variable by minority group members (Muslims) than by majority group members (Christians)**

Contrary to the prediction, there were no significant differences between the two religious groups in their ratings of ingroup variability.

However, the ingroup was perceived as being less variable than the outgroup at all ages, irrespective of the children's own religious group membership ( $F(1,230)=36.29$ ,  $p<0.001$ ) (see Table 4).

There was also a main effect of age upon the variability scores ( $F(2,230)=3.80$ ,  $p<0.05$ ). Post-hoc Scheffe tests revealed that the significant difference lay between the young and old children only.

**Table 4:** Ingroup and outgroup variability split by age group (low score = more variable)

	Ingroup variability	Outgroup variability
Young	24.09 (5.03)	22.70 (4.87)
Middle	24.23 (4.31)	22.01 (4.01)
Old	23.09 (4.16)	20.80 (4.02)
Means	23.79 (4.52)	21.83 (4.37)

- **The subjective importance of religious identity would correlate with the perceived variability of the ingroup and the outgroup**

Kendall tau b partial correlations, partialling out age, were used to examine the relationship between the subjective importance of religion and the judgements of ingroup and outgroup variability and positivity.

It was found that, for the Muslim children only, as religion became more important, the outgroup was judged as being less variable ( $\tau = 0.26$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ).

No other significant correlations were found.

## **SUMMARY OF FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

- Religion became more important with age, and was more important to the Muslim children than to the Christian children
- The positivity of children's descriptions of the outgroup increased as a function of age
- The ingroup was described in a more positive way than the outgroup at all ages
- The variability attributed to both the ingroup and the outgroup increased as a function of age
- The outgroup was seen as being more variable than the ingroup at all ages
- For the Muslim children only, as the importance of religion increased, the outgroup was judged to be less variable

Relating these findings to the predictions made by Social Identity Theory and Self-Categorisation Theory, some support for these theories is yielded by several of the findings: that the minority Muslim children placed more importance on religion than the majority Christian children; that the ingroup was viewed more positively than the outgroup; and that, for the Muslim children, a correlation was obtained between the importance of religion and perceived outgroup variability.

However, no differences were obtained between the minority and majority children on perceived ingroup variability, contrary to the predictions of Self-Categorisation Theory, and no further correlations were obtained between the importance of religion and perceived variability and positivity, contrary to the predictions of Social Identity Theory.

In addition, numerous age effects were obtained in this study, indicating that the manner in which children think about groups changes as a function of age. Social Identity Theory and Self-Categorisation Theory do not account for these developmental changes. However, it should be noted that the increase in the perceived variability of the ingroup and the outgroup across this age range, and the increased positivity attributed to the outgroup across this age

range, are consistent with the findings of Doyle, Beaudet & Aboud (1988) and Doyle & Aboud (1995), who found similar developmental trends across this age range.

In summary, partial support for Social Identity Theory and Self-Categorisation Theory was obtained in this study. However, further work is needed to investigate the developmental changes which occur in the perception of religious groups by children.

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