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Are minority status children's cross-ethnic friendships beneficial in a multiethnic context?

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Abstract

Past research has demonstrated the negative impact of perceived ethnic discrimination (PED) on psychological well-being among children. Given research demonstrating the benefits of cross-ethnic friendship for children's intergroup attitudes, we examined whether cross-ethnic friendships would attenuate the effects of PED on well-being and resilience within a multiethnic context. 247 South Asian British children ($M = 11$ years) recruited from 37 classrooms completed measures of perceived cross-ethnic friendship quantity and quality, PED, psychological well-being and resilience. Friendship quality, but not quantity, had direct positive associations with psychological well-being and resilience. A higher quantity of cross-ethnic friendships moderated the negative effects of PED on both outcomes. Results suggest cross-ethnic friendships are beneficial for South Asian British children by functioning as a protective factor from the negative effects of discrimination within a multi-ethnic context.

Keywords: cross-ethnic, friendships, discrimination, resilience, well-being

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Perceived ethnic discrimination (PED) is known to be a potential risk factor within multiethnic settings. Research suggests it can have a detrimental effect on children's and adolescents' self-esteem, psychological resilience and academic achievement (e.g., Wong, Eccles, & Sameroff, 2003). Nonetheless, some children are able to show resilience in the face of challenges and maintain a healthy sense of self (Crocker & Major, 1989; Keyes, 2009). One possible explanation may be the contribution of cross-ethnic friendships, since research suggests they are related to better social adjustment (Kawabata & Crick, 2008).

In this study, we address this possibility, by examining whether cross-ethnic friendships buffer the negative effects of PED on psychological outcomes among ethnic minority status children living in a multi-ethnic city. It is known that cross-ethnic friendships (i.e. high quality contact) result in improved out-group attitudes amongst children (e.g. Feddes, Noack, & Rutland, 2009; Tropp & Prenovost, 2008). Other researchers have also shown that childhood cross-ethnic friendships are related to higher multicultural sensitivity, pro-social behavior and social satisfaction (Hunter & Elias, 2000; Lease & Blake, 2005).

Yet, at present, we know little about the influence of cross-ethnic friendships on children's psychological well-being and resilience. Previous research suggests friendships can operate as a protective factor that buffers potential risks (e.g., Hamm & Faircloth, 2005). In multi-ethnic contexts, cross-ethnic friendships are likely to be especially important, because these types of friendships should indicate a degree of social acceptance amongst culturally diverse peer groups and, therefore, allowing the child to discount any PED.

Research with young adults suggests cross-ethnic friendships are related to psychological well-being (e.g., Mendoza-Denton & Page-Gould, 2008). To our knowledge, however, no studies

involving children living in multi-ethnic contexts have examined the protective role of cross-ethnic friendships in psychological well-being and resilience. In this study, we focused on South Asian children, because research demonstrates that this ethnic group is more likely to experience ethnic discrimination compared to other ethnic groups in the United Kingdom (e.g., Maxwell, 2009) and report relatively high levels of bullying in British schools (Eslea & Mukhtar, 2000).

We sampled secondary school children because they are sensitive to discrimination when entering a new school environment and have to form new friendships (Jugert, Noack & Rutland, 2011; Spears-Brown, 2008). Moreover, with age friendships become increasingly important (Dunn, 2004), as children start spending more time in activities away from home and turn more to their peers as a source of belongingness and self-worth (Eccles, Roeser, Vida, Frederick, & Wigfield, 2006). Primary school friendships are based on play and other activities, whereas secondary school friendships are more likely to be based on mutual sharing and intimacy (Buhrmester, 1990; Fuligni & Eccles, 1993).

In the present study, therefore, we assessed both perceived cross-ethnic friendship quality and quantity. Previous research into intergroup contact demonstrates that quality of contact is effective in reducing intergroup bias (Tropp & Prenovost, 2008). We, therefore, predict that cross-ethnic friendship quality rather than quantity should relate to higher psychological well-being and resilience. Most importantly, we also expect these friendships will buffer the possible negative effects of PED.

Method

Participants

The participants were 247 South Asian British children (108 boys, 139 girls) living in lower-middle socio-economic status areas of London, UK from different cultural heritages (65

Indian, 121 Pakistani, 42 Bangladeshi and 19 Tamil/Sri-Lankan). The mean age was 11.10 years ($SD = .30$).

Classroom ethnic diversity was treated as a control variable and was measured by the Simpson Diversity Index (Simpson, 1949) which has previously been used to assess ethnic/racial diversity in classrooms (Juvonen, Nishina, & Graham, 2006). The index ranges from 0 to 1, with higher scores indicating greater ethnic diversity. The Greater London index of .43 is the highest in the UK (2011 Census, Office of National Statistics). In this study, the diversity index ranged between .34 and .85 with a mean of .65 ($SD = .13$)¹.

Procedure

Children completed a questionnaire that measured perceived quantity and quality of cross-ethnic friendships, PED, psychological well-being and resilience. Parents were informed about the research and were required to give informed consent. The children were also told participation was voluntary.

Friendship measurements. Participants were asked to think about their friends that they ‘hang out’ with regularly. Ethnic group was defined as ‘a group of people who share a cultural, religious and geographical history, e.g.: ‘White British or Indian British’. A cross-ethnic friend was described as ‘a friend who is of a different ethnic group than yours, e.g.: African British and Indian British’.

First, we measured perceived friendship quantity by asking two questions (‘how many friends do you have from your same ethnic group? how many friends do you have from a different ethnic group?’). Cross-ethnic friendship quantity was computed by dividing the number of cross-ethnic friendships by the total number of friendships. When calculating our cross-ethnic

¹The index takes into account the size and the number of ethnic groups within the classroom. The participating classrooms usually contained a variety of ethnic group children such as White European, Black, Middle Eastern and mixed-ethnicity children.

friendship measures we did not use the broad prescribed social category (e.g. South-Asian) to define the children's in-group and out-group, since previous research suggests this is not meaningful for children living in the London area (Brown et al., in press; Nigbur et al., 2008; Rutland et al., 2012). This is because there are important cultural, religious and political differences between regions or nations within South-Asia and discrimination is known to exist between individuals whose heritage is within these different localities (Robinson, 2005; 2009). To ensure the ecological validity of the study, we therefore, allowed the participants to define their own ethnic group when answering the two friendship questions.

Second, we measured perceived friendship quality by two indicators: frequency of interaction and psychological closeness. This is because research suggests from childhood into adolescence, individuals increasingly spend more time with friends within their peer group and form close friendships (Berndt, 1998; Eccles et al., 2006) and psychological closeness is a key feature of peer friendship and acceptance (Parker & Asher, 1993). Participants were asked to think about their three best cross-ethnic friends. Then, they had to rate each friend on frequency of interaction and the closeness of their friendship by answering two questions: 'how much do you interact with this friend?' - 1 (not very frequently) to 5 (very frequently) and 'how close do you feel to this friend?' - 1 (not very close) to 5 (extremely close). A cross-ethnic friendship quality measure was computed by averaging the scores for these two questions across three best cross-ethnic friends².

PED. This was measured by an eight item scale (see Wong et al., 2003). The items assessed how often children thought they were discriminated against because of their race or ethnicity (e.g., 'how often do you feel that teachers call on you less often than they call on other

²For participants who reported fewer than three friends, the mean quality was computed based on the quality of two or one cross-ethnic friend. Students who did not report quality for any cross-ethnic friend were excluded from the analyses.

kids because of your race or ethnicity'). The response scale ranged from 1 (never) to 5 (all the time). Reliability was high with a Cronbach alpha of .91.

Psychological Well-being. A fourteen item well-being scale was used (Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Well-Being Scale; Tennant et al., 2007). Sample items were 'I've been feeling relaxed'. The scale showed high reliability (Cronbach alpha of .87).

Resilience. Resilience was measured by a four item resilience scale (Bartko & Eccles, 2003). For example, participants were asked to indicate how often they thought they are very good at 'figuring out problems and planning how to solve them'. The reliability of the scale was satisfactory (Cronbach alpha of .60).

Results

Descriptive statistics and correlations are presented in Table 1. Initially, we checked whether the use of an Hierarchical Linear Modelling procedure (HLM; Raudenbush & Bryk, 2002) was necessary. Unconditional models revealed no significant variance explained at the classroom level; therefore, ordinary multiple regression models were performed. All continuous variables were centered. PED, cross-ethnic friendship quantity and quality were entered as main variables. Two interaction terms (PED X quantity and PED X quality) were included at the final stage. Simple slope analyses were performed with -1 and +1 standard deviation values of the moderator (Aiken & West, 1991).

Psychological well-being. Cross-ethnic friendship quality was positively associated with psychological well-being ($\beta = .27, p < .01$) and PED was negatively associated with psychological well-being ($\beta = -.16, p < .05$). An interaction between cross-ethnic friendship quantity and PED was detected ($\beta = .21, p < .01$). The simple slope was not significant for children with higher cross-ethnic friendship quantity, $t(155) = .53, p > .05$. In contrast, children

with lower cross-ethnic friendship quantity reported lower psychological well-being when PED was higher, $t(155) = -3.36, p < .001$ (see Figure 1).

Resilience. Cross-ethnic friendship quality was positively associated with resilience ($\beta = .17, p < .05$) and PED was negatively associated with resilience ($\beta = -.25, p < .01$). Cross-ethnic friendship quantity interacted with PED ($\beta = .19, p < .05$). The simple slope was not significant for children reporting higher cross-ethnic friendship quantity, $t(155) = -.62, p > .05$. However, it was significant for children reporting lower cross-ethnic friendship quantity, $t(154) = -3.82, p < .001$. This showed lower cross-ethnic friendship quantity decreased resilience when PED was higher (see Figure 2). Table 2 presents multiple regression models predicting psychological well-being and resilience.

Discussion

In line with our prediction, perceived cross-ethnic friendship quality rather than quantity was significantly related to higher psychological well-being and resilience. Importantly, also as expected, we found that the quantity of cross-friendships buffered the negative effects of PED on psychological well-being and resilience. Hence, although quality was associated with well-being, quantity may be a more important buffer against discrimination by providing consistent disconfirmation of negative expectations about intergroup contact from multiple sources (Mendoza-Denton, Page-Gould, & Pietrzak, 2006). Therefore, continuous and frequent positive interactions may be more effective than quality *per se* in reducing the effects of discrimination.

These findings have significant implications for the developmental intergroup contact literature (e.g. Feddes et al., 2009; Tropp & Prenovost, 2008), which has typically shown contact between children from different ethnic groups only improves the intergroup attitudes of majority status children. Here, we have shown, in a multi-ethnic context, that these types of friendships

also have beneficial effects for minority status children. The benefits, however, are not in terms of more positive intergroup attitude as commonly found amongst ethnic majority status children. Instead, this study suggests cross-ethnic friendships have beneficial effects for the personal outcomes of ethnic minority status children.

The present study showed that increasing cross-ethnic friendships quality, in terms of frequency and closeness, was related to higher psychological well-being and resilience. We also demonstrated, for the first time amongst children, that an increase in the number of cross-ethnic friendships helps protect psychological wellbeing and strengthen resilience of ethnic minority status children from the consequences of PED. The protective role of cross-ethnic friendships has typically been overlooked in the literature with the focus on same-ethnic friendships as a buffer against ethnic discrimination (e.g., Reynolds, 2007). Nonetheless, the findings of this study are in line with previous research showing that among young people cross-ethnic friendships function as resources helping them to cope with stressful intergroup experiences (Page-Gould, 2012).

It would have been informative to examine whether same-ethnic friendships had similar effects to cross-ethnic friendships. It is possible that the benefits to well-being are not unique to cross-ethnic friendships. It is more questionable, however, whether same-ethnic friendships act as a buffer against PED in a multi-ethnic context. Although it is likely that same-ethnic friendships also contribute directly to psychological well-being (Gauze, Bukowski, Aquan-Assee, & Sippola, 1996), they are unlikely to provide disconfirmation of negative intergroup contact (Page-Gould, Mendoza-Denton, & Tropp, 2008). Nevertheless, this is an empirical question that should be examined in future research. Other factors that may protect positive development from PED should be examined in further studies e.g., ethnic identification and

ethnic socialization (e.g., Miller & Macintosh, 1999). It would also be interesting in future research to see if these findings generalize to other ethnic groups and more importantly to other age groups during childhood and adolescence. Finally, our resilience scale had a low reliability; one reason may be that the items were hard to grasp for this age group. Future studies should consider using a more accessible and concrete measure for this concept.

In conclusion, this study makes an original contribution to development intergroup contact literature by showing that cross-ethnic friendships are beneficial to ethnic minority status children by promoting psychological well-being and resilience and buffering against the negative effects of PED.

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Table 1

Means, standard deviations and correlations among main variables

	<i>Means (SD)</i>	2	3	4	5
1 Cross-ethnic friendship quantity	.55 (.28)	.19*	.07	.11	.06
2 Cross-ethnic friendship quality	3.69 (.89)	-	.02	.26***	.15**
3 Perceived ethnic discrimination	1.53 (.77)		-	-.11	-.10
4 Psychological well-being	3.63 (.69)			-	.56***
5 Resilience	3.58 (.70)				-

* $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$ *** $p < .001$.

Table 2

Multiple regression models predicting psychological well-being and resilience

	Psychological well-being	Resilience
Gender	.05 (.11)	-.13 (.11)
Ethnic diversity	-.07 (.41)	.00 (.41)
CE friendship quantity	.12 (.21)	.07 (.21)
CE friendship quality	.27 (.06)**	.17 (.06)*
PED	-.16 (.07)*	-.25 (.07)**
PED X CE quantity	.21 (.31)**	.19 (.32)*
PED X CE quality	-.06 (.08)	-.13 (.08)
Model <i>F</i> value	$F(7,151) = 4.37^{***}$	$F(7,150) = 4.15^{***}$
Model R^2	.17	.16

Note. Standardized regression coefficients and standard errors (in parentheses) presented. CE = Cross-ethnic. PED = Perceived ethnic discrimination.

* $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$ *** $p < .001$.

Figure Captions

Figure 1. Interaction between cross-ethnic (CE) friendship quantity and perceived ethnic discrimination (PED) on psychological well-being.

Figure 2. Interaction between cross-ethnic friendship quantity and perceived ethnic discrimination on resilience.

Figure 1

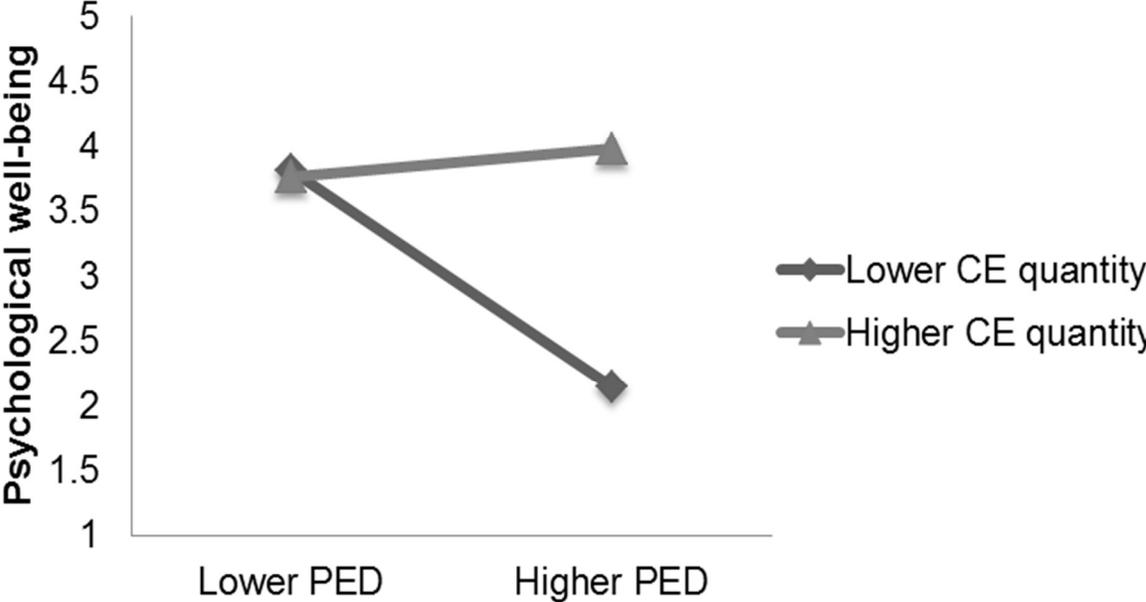


Figure 2

