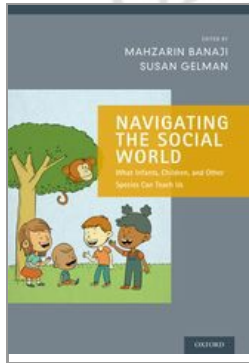


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Navigating the Social World: What Infants, Children, and Other Species Can Teach Us

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Bridging the Gap Between Preference and Evaluation During the First Few Years of Life

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[+] Abstract and Keywords

This chapter traces evidence for the early emergence of intergroup preference and suggests that these preferences may initially not be evaluative at all. It proposes one candidate mechanism by which these representations may acquire evaluative content over the first few years of life. Specifically, it suggests that such positive and negative evaluations may emerge as a byproduct of two distinct cognitive processes: perceptual fluency (a familiarity bias) and children's developmentally emerging explanatory frameworks (an attribution bias).

Keywords: evaluation, children, intergroup preference, perceptual fluency, familiarity bias, explanatory framework, attribution bias

Evaluative preferences are a cornerstone of human life. Judgments of good and bad

mediate behavior, influencing daily decisions from which fruits and vegetables to purchase from a local store, to the friendships people form, and, of course, to the editorial decision to publish this manuscript. In addition to guiding behavior, evaluative judgments influence explicit and implicit cognitive processes, including the encoding and retrieval of memories, leading to stronger memories for negative information relative to positive information (Aloise, 1993; Ito, Larsen, Smith, & Cacioppo, 1998; Rozin & Royzman, 2001). Representations of good and bad also shape moral intuition. The positive and negative intentions and outcomes of one's actions are carefully weighed when determining responsibility, praise, and punishment (Cushman, Young, & Hauser, 2006; Haidt, 2001). The ubiquity of evaluative judgments is underscored by its domain generality as they extend across explicit and implicit levels of processing and across ontological barriers, including people, animals, and artifacts (Bargh, Chaiken, Gendler, & Pratto, 1992).

Understanding the psychology of evaluation is perhaps most important in the social domain of intergroup cognition, where such evaluations widely lead to intergroup conflict, discrimination, and prejudice (Devine, 1989; Greenwald, Poehlman, Uhlmann, & Banaji, 2009). On measures of explicit intergroup bias, children as young as 3 years begin to exhibit positive and negative social group evaluations (Patterson & Bigler, 2006). A rich body of work has detailed similar findings illustrating own-group preference across many social groups, including those based on gender, class, age, ethnicity, race, language, and religion (see Bigler & Liben, 2007, for a review). An emerging body of research has utilized new methodologies to focus on the development of *implicitly* represented intergroup evaluations as well. For example, Baron and colleagues demonstrated that unconscious race attitudes are present by age 6, revealing a positive evaluation of in-group members relative to out-group members (Baron & Banaji, 2006, 2009; Dunham, Baron, & Banaji, 2008; Rutland, Cameron, Milne, & McGeorge, 2005). More recently, this finding has been extended to 3- and 4-year-olds (Cvencek, Greenwald, & Meltzoff, 2011). Much of this work has also suggested that children may be equipped with an automatic tendency to prefer the in-group by the fourth or fifth year of life. Collectively, this work illustrates that intergroup evaluations of this age are not restricted to a single category and instead reflect a more generalized system of social evaluation that is an important part of children's early social cognition.

The robust presence of explicit and implicit representations of intergroup evaluation so early in development point to its emergence within the first few years of life, well before an age when children are exposed to the attitudes of peers, teachers, or the media and likely well before children begin to explicitly identify with others as an in-group member or as an out-group member. This chapter will trace evidence for the early emergence of intergroup preference and suggest that these preferences may initially not be evaluative at all. One candidate mechanism by which these representations may acquire evaluative content over the first few years of life will be proposed. Specifically, it will be suggested that such positive and negative evaluations may emerge as a by-product of two distinct cognitive processes: perceptual fluency (a familiarity bias) and children's developmentally emerging explanatory frameworks (an attribution bias). **(p.282)**

Foundations of Intergroup Evaluation in Infancy: Preference Without Evaluation

As preschoolers already exhibit positive and negative intergroup evaluations on both explicit and implicit levels of analysis, researchers have turned to infancy to identify the roots of intergroup evaluation. Surprisingly, such work has suggested that by 3 months of age infants exhibit preferences for a variety of social categories. For example, research has demonstrated that 3-month-olds exhibit a visual preference for own-race faces (Bar-Haim, Ziv, Lamy, & Hodes, 2006; Kelly et al., 2005). Visual looking-time preferences have been observed for categories of facial attractiveness and gender as well. For example, Langlois and colleagues (Langlois, Ritter, Roggman, & Vaughn, 1991) showed that infants prefer to look more at faces judged to be attractive by adults. Research by Quinn, Yahr, Kuhn, Slater, and Pascalis (2002) demonstrated that infants prefer to look at female faces relative to male faces. Work by Kinzler, Dupoux, and Spelke (2007) has provided cross-cultural demonstrations that 10-month-olds prefer to look at and even interact more with individuals who speak their native language compared with a foreign language. Collectively, this work demonstrates infants have acquired a variety of intergroup preferences within the first year of life.

The aforementioned results notwithstanding, it remains unclear whether such findings with infants are based on a genuine evaluation of one group as more positive (or negative) than another rather than a preference to look at the more familiar individual (or group member). Indeed, there is a crucial theoretical distinction here between a *familiarity preference* on the one hand and an *evaluative preference* on the other hand. Only evaluative preferences entail positive and negative content, and it is this type of contentful representation that appears to drive intergroup behavior among older children and adults. Indeed, most demonstrations of intergroup preference in infancy, including those described earlier, have revealed a mediating role for familiarity. For example, race preference is mediated by the majority race in the environment (Bar-Haim et al., 2006). Attractiveness preference is mediated by prior exposure to faces of varying degrees of attractiveness (Rubenstein, Kalakanis, & Langlois, 1999). Gender preference is mediated by the sex of the primary caregiver (Quinn et al., 2002). Speakers of a native language with a familiar accent are preferred over those with an unfamiliar accent (Kinzler et al., 2007). Clearly, familiarity plays an important role in establishing intergroup preference among infants. Whether these demonstrations of preference only capture a sense of familiarity or whether they also demonstrate social evaluation remains an open question.

Of course, infants of this age can form evaluative representations. Research has shown that infants can evaluate actions as either positive or negative (Hamlin, Wynn, & Bloom, 2007). This demonstration is important as it shows infants are capable of establishing positive and negative evaluations. Thus, while early *intergroup* preferences may lack evaluative content as suggested here, these findings imply that this absence is likely not caused by an inability to form representations with evaluative content *good* and *bad*. Although infants may be able to rely on the same sort of evaluative mechanism described by Hamlin and colleagues to support intergroup evaluation (e.g., observation of prosocial and antisocial behavior), the argument advanced here considers an entirely independent

way in which evaluative preferences form. Instead, intergroup evaluations may be constructed on top of a familiarity-based preference in the absence of direct experience with one group behaving prosocially or antisocially.

Automatic Preference for the Familiar

A preference for the familiar appears to be automatic as even a single exposure, supraliminal or subliminal, is sufficient to establish such a preference (Zajonc, 1968). These observations have been reported across behavioral and physiological measures for a range of stimuli, including sounds, images, smells, and textures, underscoring the generality of this mechanism of preference formation. Furthermore, the roots of this bias are present early in life as newborns exhibit such preferences based on experiences in utero across every modality (DeCasper, Fifer, Oates, & Sheldon, 1987; DeCasper & Spence, 1986; Romantshik, Porter, Tillman, & Varendi, 2007; Varendi, Porter, & Winberg, 1996). That such a mechanism for establishing preference is present from birth and possibly universal across cultures suggests that it may be one such pathway for young children to establish *evaluative* preferences. At the very least, preferences rooted in familiarity may either serve as a cognitive prior to the formation of evaluative preferences, or it may serve as a potential building block for the acquisition of intergroup evaluations later in development. **(p.283)**

Moving From Preference to Evaluation: The Drive to Explain

Humans exhibit an intrinsic drive to explain behavior. Philosophers and cognitive scientists alike have argued that humans spontaneously engage in a variety of stances (e.g., teleological, intentional) in order to generate, accept, and justify explanations for their own and others' behavior (Dennett, 1998; Heider, 1958; Keil & Wilson, 2000; Kelley & Michela, 1980; Lombrozo & Carey, 2006; Malle, 2003). Research suggests that the explicit drive to explain one's own actions begins to emerge between 2 and 3 years of age, well after children have established a variety of familiarity-based intergroup preferences. Familiarity-based preferences shape two particular behaviors that may invite explanation: visual attention and behavioral interaction (e.g., choosing to take a toy from a member of the familiar group over the unfamiliar/less familiar group). The proposal offered here suggests that once children become motivated to explain their own behavior they begin to ascribe positive attributions to the groups that currently receive their greater attention. In other words, children begin to justify their selective interaction in terms of attributing a positive evaluation to that group (e.g., "I attend more to this group *because* this group is good") and a negative evaluation to the other group (e.g., "I chose not to take the toy offered by that group *because* they must not be nice").

Accordingly, the construction of such an explanation for selective intergroup attention will then serve to reinforce the newly created evaluation. Specifically, research shows that once a child (or adult) forms an evaluation of an individual or group, recall and recognition of congruent information are facilitated (Devine, Hirt, & Gehrke, 1990; Stangor & McMillan, 2002). Therefore, children may be more likely to notice when individuals from familiar groups engage in positive behaviors and when individuals from less familiar groups engage in negative behaviors. In addition to a confirmation bias, research has

demonstrated that memory for expectancy-congruent behavior is stronger than memory for expectancy-incongruent behavior. Therefore, once children establish a positive (or negative evaluation) of a social group, enhanced memory for consistent behaviors should be observed. As such, a confirmation bias and an expectancy congruency bias may collectively serve to reinforce children's emerging evaluative intergroup preferences, filling a central gap in the transition from a familiarity-driven preference observed among infants to the evaluative intergroup preferences observed among preschoolers and older children.

Supported Predictions

Several predictions follow from the argument that a developmentally emerging explanatory framework leads to positive attributions of familiar groups and to negative attributions of unfamiliar groups. First, whereas infants may exhibit evaluations for select individuals and social groups (e.g., those observed to engage in prosocial or antisocial behaviors), once toddlers begin to adopt an explanatory stance toward their own behavior, familiar groups will automatically be encoded as good and unfamiliar groups as bad. Second, the encoding of familiar groups as good and unfamiliar (or less familiar) groups as bad will be supported and enriched via confirmation and expectancy congruency biases. Indeed, while this claim may always apply when a social group is evaluated, the implication here is that these perceptual biases should be observed much earlier in development than previously demonstrated. Third, early intergroup evaluations will be sensitive to the degree of visual familiarity children have with members of different social groups. Specifically, children from homogeneous environments will show a stronger positivity bias toward familiar groups compared with children from heterogeneous environments who have decidedly more exposure to other groups. In addition, within environments where there is little to no out-group exposure, in-group positivity will likely emerge prior to out-group negativity as the child's behaviors inviting explanation will be predicated almost exclusively in terms of selective interaction with the familiar in-group. Thus, the asymmetry in the reported development of in-group and out-group attitudes (e.g., Aboud, 2003) may likely be shaped by the amount of exposure children have had to out-group members and not as the result of a particular cognitive limitation to form negative intergroup evaluations.

Conclusion

Understanding the origins of intergroup evaluation promises to open new avenues to shape intergroup behavior. Research suggests that the seeds of intergroup bias are planted surprisingly early and, at least on implicit measures, appear to undergo little change in magnitude across development (**p.284**) (Baron & Banaji, 2006, 2009). However, there is a gaping hole in the literature between 1- and 3-year-olds. On measures of explicit and implicit intergroup bias, 3-year-olds reveal positive and negative evaluations. The consensus from work with infants is that they have at least established preferences for familiar social groups. Between the first and third year of life children transition from a preference rooted in familiarity to one that entails positive and negative evaluative content. The argument put forth here suggests that as toddlers begin to adopt explicit explanatory stances, they will seek to justify their selective intergroup behavior.

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Those groups of people with whom the child is more familiar will subsequently be perceived as more *positive* than or as *better* than other (less familiar) groups. This initial attribution will then be reinforced through perceptual biases that facilitate the identification and recall of evaluatively consistent behaviors among group members. This proposal will hopefully shed light on one potential mechanism by which intergroup evaluation unfolds and spark specific questions for future research to examine.

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