Ethnic Categorization Among Children in Multi-ethnic Schools in the Netherlands

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ABSTRACT

In this study the use and importance of ethnic categories is investigated among children in multi-ethnic schools. It is argued that concentrating on ethnic categories ignores the many alternative forms of social categorization that can be used. It also ignores the possibility that social categories are not used at all. In the present study children were not confronted with material that explicitly stressed ethnicity, nor were they forced to respond to ethnic categories, but the social categories spontaneously used in written essays were analysed. The results show that ethnic categories should not be taken for granted. First, categorical constructs were not the only ones used, as many particular descriptions were given. Second, although most children did use ethnicity in describing differences between schoolmates, many other social categories were used and there were hardly any references to ethnicity when the children described patterns of playing.

Key words: Ethnic categorization, children.

Studies on inter-ethnic relations and cross-ethnic contact by definition concentrate on ethnic categories. In doing so these studies often implicitly assume that ethnic origin is the main or even decisive characteristic around which relations are structured. The presupposition is that ethnic categories are pervasive, especially among youth. Ethnic categories are said not only to be chronically available but also actually applied in the way people relate to each other, and in making sense of their social world. However, taking ethnic categories for granted blinds research for the way it imposes these categories (Reicher, 1986).

Take, for instance, existing studies in the Netherlands (Koot, Tjon-A-Ten, and Uniken Venema, 1985; Dors, 1987; Teunissen, 1988; Verkuyten, 1988a). Most of these studies reproduce ethnicity rather than simply measuring it. Essentially this is done in two ways. First, children are confronted explicitly with ethnic labels in questionnaires or by using pictures and dolls. These labels serve as response categories

for questions such as 'Who do you like to prefer to sit next to in the classroom?'
In general, the results of these studies show the existence of a strong preference
for one's own ethnic group. Second, sociometric techniques are used, whereby chil-
dren are asked to name their playmates. Subsequently the answers are analysed
in terms of inter and intra-ethnic patterns, disregarding other social characteristics
which might be of relevance. In comparison to the first type of studies, sociometric
studies typically find that ethnicity plays a much less important role. For instance,
Teunissen (1988) found that ethnic origin played some role for friendships but not
for rejections, and Dors (1987) found that ethnicity was a much less important factor
than he presumed. Thus, in the first type of studies children are forced to use or
to respond to ethnic categories because they are presented with material that explicitly
stresses ethnic origin. In this way research makes ethnic categories salient and pro-
vokes ethnic responses. These studies also force subjects to categorize and therefore
do not allow them to avoid categorical constructs. The second technique avoids
categorical constructs but ethnic categories are constructed afterwards by the
researcher, on the assumption that these categorical distinctions are important for
the children themselves. In so doing, other potentially important social categoriza-
tions are ignored. The distinction between interpersonal and intergroup choices and
interactions is also disregarded (Brown and Turner, 1981). Sociometric choices pre-
dominantly refer to personal relationships and individual characteristics, which can
be distinguished from interactions that are determined by social category member-
ships such as ethnic origin.

Thus both techniques fail to address the important question of whether and when
ethnic categories are psychologically salient and whether these categories are actually
applied in different contexts. This question will be addressed in the present study.

Billig (1987) has argued that contempory research in social psychology has stressed
categorization to the point that it is regarded as the basic cognitive process. What
is neglected, according to Billig, is the cognitive counterprocess of particularization,
which is just as fundamental and functional. Every 'object' possesses not only features
that are similar to other objects and which thus form the basis for categorization,
but also unique features, which demarcate it from others. The result of particulariza-
tion is that objects are seen in their uniqueness and not so much conceptualized
in terms of social categories. Billig (1987) discusses particularization as a rhetorical
procedure operating within an argumentative context. Apart from this context, the
distinction between categorization and particularization draws attention to the fact
that people do not only categorize and use categorical constructs. Applying the
distinction, it can be argued that ethnic categorical constructs are not inevitable
and that people can see others in terms of the unique characteristics. This means
not only that the presupposition concerning the availability and use of ethnic categor-
ies can be questioned, but also that one can question the use of categories *per se.*

Billig (1987) stresses that the process of particularization *complements* that of
categorization: categorization is, of course, an important process of thought, which
has implications for intergroup relations as social identity theory (Tajfel and Turner,
1979) and self-categorization theory (Turner, 1987) argue. Research into the use
of categorization shows that people can use different types of category both in order
to identify oneself and to identify others (Tajfel, 1982). Ethnic categorization is
only one of the possible ways for ordering the social environment. There are many
alternative forms of categorization so that relationships can be structured around

different aspects, such as common tasks and interests, and not necessarily around ethnic origin.

Apart from the fact that many of the characteristics that can be used to categorize the social environment do not have to refer to ethnic origin, there are also different characteristics that can be used when ethnic categories are constructed. In Britain and the US a racial discourse based on physical features dominates. In the Netherlands the dominant discourse is not racial, but based on ethnic origin and ethnic distance, conceptualized in such terms as nationality, land of birth, and foreignness (Hagendoorn and Hraba, 1989). The question concerning the features around which ethnic categories are organized has, for instance, relevance for knowing how to combat ethnic prejudice. Apart from the question of which features are used to define ethnicity, there is also the question of how this category is defined. Ethnic categories can be seen in many different ways. For instance, they can be used in an evaluative or neutral descriptive way, but they can also be confirmed or denied.

Social categorizations must not be seen as rigid and lacking contextual variability. For instance, social identity theory stresses that group stereotyping reflects and functions in the context of existing and changing intergroup relations, and consequently has to be understood in these terms (Tajfel and Turner, 1979). The social contextual basis of cognitive processes is crucial. As self-categorization theory argues, salient social categories are intrinsically variable and fluid (Turner, 1987). They are actively constructed in a social context and reflect the contextual properties of self and others: categorization seems inherently comparative and therefore context-dependent. Social categorization is probably also dependent on the position one's group holds in the existing intergroup relations. Belonging to a social majority or minority group can be of relevance for what categories are used in describing other people and how these categories are defined. Considering the fact that ethnic group boundaries in the Netherlands are quite impermeable, and minority groups hold lower status positions, social identity theory would predict that minority group members show especially strong identification with their ethnic group and that they stress ethnicity (see Ellemers, 1991). In describing oneself, this seems to be true among minority youth living in the ethnic Netherlands (Verkuyten, 1992), and it probably also holds for describing others. For Dutch youth, this is not to be expected, as is confirmed by their self-descriptions (Verkuyten, 1992). The present research studies these predictions by comparing Dutch and minority subjects. It could be argued that such a comparison is in contradiction with our previous critique on ethnic categorization. However, using ethnicity as an analytical category for the purpose of data analysis is not the same as imposing these categories upon subjects as part of the method used. The analytical use of ethnic categories can improve our understanding of the consequences of social exclusion and discrimination.

Social categorization is not only context-dependent but probably also relative to what we will here call a 'frame of application'. The process or categorization as such, and the content of the categories, may vary according to the cognitive task people are confronted with. Children, for instance, can be aware of ethnic differences when thinking about contemporaries in their social environment in general, and at the same time do not have to use ethnic categories to structure friendships. If a frame of application is indeed important it can be used to identify conditions that make ethnic categories salient and stimulate their use.

As argued earlier, in studying the use of ethnic categories one has to avoid making

ethnic categories salient and provoking ethnic responses. A way to do this is to examine the language of the respondents themselves. In the present study spontaneous descriptions were elicited and qualitative analyses were used to establish structure prior to statistical analysis, instead of simply applying these analysis to limited and predefined categories.

To summarize, the present study explores the presupposition that ethnic categories are applied in making sense of the social environment by looking at the way in which children in multi-ethnic settings view their contemporaries. Three questions will be addressed:

(1) Do children predominantly describe contemporaries as members of social categories, or are particular features also used? The process of categorization and particularization were not studied as such but the focus was on the use of social categories, and especially ethnic categorical constructs in relation to mentions of individuality.
(2) Are ethnic categories psychologically salient and applied when using social categories? In other words, what is the relative importance of ethnicity as a social category?
(3) Which features are being used when the social environment is structured in ethnic terms and how are ethnic categories described?

These three questions were studied not only among Dutch children but also among minority children, and it was argued that minority children would probably stress ethnic origin more than Dutch children. It is difficult to hypothesize if there are also differences between both groups concerning categorical and particular constructs, and concerning the features around which ethnic categories are organized. In addition to ethnic group differences, we also studied whether a frame of application is relevant for the way children structure their social environment. We wanted to identify possible conditions under which ethnic categories become salient and are used. Two conditions were used. The first one tried to elicit the social categories that are used to describe contemporaries, and the second condition was used to study the way play activities are structured.

The present study concentrates on children who live in a social environment—school and neighbourhood—with a high percentage of different ethnic groups. The main reason to restrict the study to multi-ethnic schools was that in these situations specific ethnic features (physionomic, appearance, language) are visible and available, with the result that ethnic categories might be used frequently. If this is not the case it would make a strong argument against taking ethnic categories for granted.

METHOD

Subjects and design

The study was carried out in four primary schools in the south of Rotterdam. All four schools had roughly 50% of pupils from minority groups, and the schools were similar denominationally. Disregarding children of mixed parentage ($N = 18$) the research population consisted of 149 children between 10 and 12 years of age; 55% were boys. Fifty-one per cent of the total population had a Dutch father and mother,

and the minority group children where mainly of Turkish, Moroccan, or Surinamese origin. Considering the many different minority groups and the limited number of respondents, we analysed the minority group in general. A comparison between Dutch children on the one hand and minority children on the other hand can be justified by the common experience, among the last group, of being seen and treated as a social minority.

Instead of supplying beforehand the (ethnic) categories we were interested in, we have tried to elicit spontaneous descriptions. The children were asked to write a short essay in response to a given topic; each child wrote one essay during class hours. The essays were anonymous and were administered by the teachers who were present during the writing. Two topics served as an operationalization of a different frame of application. Each topic was used in two different schools. For the first topic children ($N = 70$) were asked to write an essay about 'The children at my school are all different'; the title for the second topic ($N = 79$) was 'With which children do you play and do you not play, and why?' On average,children produced an essay about three-quarters of a page (A4) long. However, on the first topic the essays were longer in terms of the number of words used ($t = 7.8, p < 0.01$). There was no significant difference between Dutch and minority children in the mean number of words used ($t = 0.06, p > 0.10$ and $t = 0.88, p > 0.10$, respectively), and there were also no significant differences in standard deviations (F-test).

Coding
All essays were scored in terms of particular–categorical descriptions using four categories:

(1) *Only particular*, containing those essays where respondents only gave names or stressed the uniqueness of each child, and where no social categories were used.
(2) *Predominantly particular*, containing those essays where children started with giving names, which were subsequently grouped and labelled under category terms.
(3) *Predominantly categorical*, containing those essays in which children started with category descriptions that were subsequently specified or explained by using names.
(4) *Only categorical*, containing essays in which only category descriptions were given.

The children themselves made a clear distinction between contemporaries they played with and the children they do not play with. Thus the essays on this topic were divided accordingly, and each was scored. The essays were scored independently by the two authors and a research assistant. Most essays were easy to score. The essays with no unanimity of opinion (less than 10%) were discussed to reach consensus.

Content of the different social categories. The extent of the variety of the social categories used in the essays illustrates the richness of the descriptions of others, but also form a problem. A certain standardization if advisable to avoid ambiguous and arbitrary measuring (Berry, Dasen, and Sartorius, 1988). Researchers are more or less forced to categorize the various descriptions, so as to create a manageable set of data. In order to do this, the essays were read and reread until a complete inventory was made of the social categories used. This inventory was analysed by

the two authors in terms of phrases, words, or meanings that referred to similar social categories. The next step concerned reducing the different categories into a manageable set for the coding process, and also giving a name to each category. To do this, existing schemes for coding self-descriptions were used (Gordon, 1968; Verkuyten, 1988b). Eventually 15 different categorical constructs were distinguished, which can be divided in four clusters:

(1) Four categories that refer to ethnic differences and that were structured around four different features:
    (a) colour of the skin;
    (b) foreignness;
    (c) nationality (country of migration);
    (d) cultural differences (e.g. language, religion).
(2) Five categories that refer to more or less visible characteristics other than ethnic related:
    (a) sex;
    (b) age;
    (c) physical features (e.g. length, weight);
    (d) clothing;
    (e) physical competence and condition (e.g. strength, health).
(3) Three categories referring to social memberships:
    (a) educational references (e.g. school, class);
    (b) kinship (e.g. nephew, niece);
    (c) preferential references (e.g. member of clubs).
(4) Three interaction and personal characteristics:
    (a) familiarity (e.g. children I know well);
    (b) behavioural characteristics (e.g. nice, honest, bossy, quarrelsome);
    (c) personal characteristics and abilities (e.g. slow, smart, dumb).

The reliability of the coding scheme was checked by calculating a measure of inter-coder reliability: Cohen's kappa was 0.81.

Using this scheme, the social categories used in response to the proposition 'The children at my school are all different', have been scored, and most essays contained five or fewer different social categories. For the second topic, the division in 'play' and 'do not play' was used, and most children used only two categories. In addition to the categories used, the way in which they were used was also scored. First of all, the categories were analysed to see if they were used in an explicitly positive, negative, or neutral descriptive way. Second, to see whether ethnic categories and differences were confirmed, denied, or seen as unfamiliar and strange. As our data are nominal we used chi-square tests for the statistical analysis.

RESULTS

Particular and categorical descriptions

Table 1 shows that particular as well as categorical descriptions were used on both topics. Respondents did not only use category descriptions but a considerable number of children gave only, or predominantly, particular descriptions, even for the first topic (e.g. 'In my school every child is different. There are only 15 children in my

class and everyone is different, and also in Holland and the whole world, everybody is different'; 'All children are different because they all have a different father and mother. But for example twins are only a little bit different'). Table 1 shows that there were few differences between 'play' and 'do not play' on the second topic.

Table 1.   Particular and categorical descriptions in the essays for the first topic and for 'play' and 'play not' on the second topic

	All different	Playing	
	$(N = 70)$	Play $(N = 79)$	Do not play $(N = 76)$
Only particulars	9 (13%)	18 (23%)	25 (33%)
Predominantly particulars	10 (15%)	25 (31%)	14 (19%)
Predominantly categorical	8 (11%)	14 (18%)	8 (10%)
Only categorical	43 (61%)	22 (28%)	29 (38%)

Comparing both essay topics—whereby the 'play' and 'do not play' description was summated—there was a clear difference in terms of particular and categorical descriptions ($p < 0.01$). Category descriptions dominated on the first topic, where respondents described their fellow pupils, but this was not the case for the second topic, where play activities were described. Thus, depending on the frame of application there was a significant difference in terms of particular or category description. This held for both Dutch as well as minority subjects, as there were no significant differences between both groups (all conditions, $p > 0.10$).

Content of the social categories
Tables 2 and 3 contain the percentages of respondents who provided descriptions of a specific category at least once (Table 2) or of a category of a cluster at least once (Table 3).

When the children were asked to respond to the proposition 'all children are different' many ethnic-related category descriptions were elicited; 81% of the children gave at least one ethnic description (Table 3). The strong emphasis on ethnicity was also apparent when the order in which the categories were given was studied; 65% of the respondents started by referring to ethnic-related features and the second and third category descriptions also contained many ethnic references (72% and 40% of the respondents, respectively). Thus, ethnic categories were salient when children described their schoolmates.

The pattern of results is remarkably different on the second topic concerning 'playing'. Only a small minority of the children (14%) gave at least one description referring to ethnic-related features. Thus, ethnic-related category descriptions were hardly used to structure and explain play activities, even when it concerned children one does not play with. Social categories most frequently used referred to educational references, familiarity, and behavioural characteristics. This last category was used most when describing and explaining why one does not play with specific contemporaries (e.g. they were seen as nasty, quarrelsome, bossy), while familiarity and references to social memberships were used to describe and explain why one played with specific children.

Comparison of the results for the different response categories among Dutch and

Table 2. The number (and percentage) of respondents using a response category at least once: for the two essay topics

	All different (N = 70)	Playing (N = 76)
Ethnic references		
Colour skin	16 (23%)	5 (6%)
Foreignness	17 (24%)	2 (2%)
Nationality	40 (57%)	4 (5%)
Cultural	26 (37%)	1 (1%)
Visible characteristics		
Gender	10 (14%)	14 (18%)
Age	2 (3%)	5 (6%)
Physical features	27 (39%)	5 (6%)
Clothing	10 (14%)	1 (1%)
Physical competence	6 (8%)	1 (1%)
Social memberships		
Educational	4 (6%)	26 (34%)
Kinship	3 (4%)	3 (4%)
Preferential	6 (9%)	12 (16%)
Interaction characteristics		
Familiarity	1 (1%)	27 (35%)
Behaviour	24 (34%)	48 (63%)
Personal	16 (23%)	4 (5%)

Table 3. The number (and percentage) of respondents using one of the response categories of the four cluster at least once: for the two essay topics

	All different	Playing	
	(N = 70)	(N = 76)	Chi-square
Ethnic references	57 (81%)	11 (14%)	68.2*
Visible characteristics	34 (49%)	18 (24%)	9.7*
Social memberships	12 (17%)	37 (48%)	15.9*
Interaction characteristics	32 (46%)	61 (80%)	18.6*

*$p < 0.001$.

minority subjects showed no significant differences between the two groups (all comparisons, $p > 0.10$). This holds for every category as well as for the four clusters of categories, and also for the different topics separately. Both groups of subjects used the different categories just as frequently and the patterns of results for the first and second essay topic were similar.

Defining ethnic categories
Table 2 not only contains the results for the question on the relative importance of ethnic categories, but also makes a distinction between four different terms that the respondents used to indicate ethnic differences. For the first topic, children mostly used nationality and cultural characteristics as the main features to construct ethnic categories. The children tended to conceptualize ethnic differences in terms of the

country of migration (e.g. from Turkey, Morocco, China, and Turkish, Moroccans, Chinese) and, to a lesser degree, in terms of language, religion, and cultural practices. Foreignness and colour of the skin were also used, but less frequently. There were no significant differences (all comparisons, $p > 0.10$) between Dutch and minority children in the use of these four features.

As well as the features used, we also analyse how Dutch children in particular used ethnic labels. Fifty per cent of the respondents who gave ethnic-related references on the first topic did so in a neutral descriptive way (e.g. 'Some children are Turkish and others are Surinamese or Dutch'). Ten per cent were explicitly negative, i.e. did not like contemporaries from other ethnic groups and rejected them (e.g. 'I do not like playing with foreign children and I hate people from Surinam and not only from Turkey'), 24% were explicitly positive (e.g. 'Foreign children are just nice, they only look different but that doesn't matter, they still are just like us, they do almost always the same things other children do', and 'It is very nice to play with children from other countries. They can learn us their language, they also know different games, and they have different food which sometimes tastes better'), 16% stated that they saw other ethnic groups as strange and were unfamiliar with them, which hampered interactions (e.g. 'One is from Pakistan and the other from Surinam or another country. I find that very strange because they all talk different so that you can't understand each other'; 'It is very strange all those different children, sometimes you do not know what they mean or do').

On the second topic ('playing') there were hardly any references to ethnicity. The few that were made typically denied the relevance of ethnic differences for friendships (e.g. 'I do not mind if they have a different colour'; 'It does not matter if they are black or white'; 'Some children find foreigners strange because they have another colour or talk another language, I myself do not mind and have very often friends from other countries'). This denial appeared also on the first topic. However, there were also some essays where subjects indicated that *other* children did not like ethnic minorities (e.g. 'Many Dutch children behave nasty towards foreigners only because they are different'; 'We also have brown children in our class and they are often teased'; 'Sometimes children discriminate because others are different, for instance black or yellow or white').

DISCUSSION

We have tried to show that ethnic categories among children in multi-ethnic schools should not be taken for granted. In many studies the implicit assumption is that ethnic origin is a decisive feature used in making sense of the social environment and in structuring activities. This assumption not only reproduces and reconfirms ethnic constructions but also does not allow the study of the possible variability in usage of ethnic categorizations. In addition, it disregards, the possibility that social categories are not used at all.

These results show, first of all, that social categorization is not the only process of thought by which children make sense of their social environment. Children use particular descriptions as well, thus social categorical constructs are not inevitable. Both particular and category labels were used, often alternately. The use of both seems to depend on variations in the proposition the children were responding to.

There was a clear difference between the way subjects responded to the proposition that all children are different and the way play activities were structured. On the first topic category descriptions dominated, whereas on the second one more particular descriptions were given.

Accepting the point that ethnic categories should not be taken for granted because categorization is not the only cognitive process and because children particularize as well, it could still be argued that if social categories are used in multi-ethnic situations it will be predominantly categories structured around ethnic-related features. The results show that this is not necessarily true, indicating the relative importance of ethnicity as a social category. Ethnicity was predominant in describing differences among schoolmates, but many other social categories were also used. Moreover, when describing and explaining with whom one does and does not play, there were hardly any references to ethnicity, but mainly to interaction characteristics. This suggests that acceptance is behaviour-related rather than ethnic-related, which has also been found in other studies in the Netherlands (Schruijver, 1990: Kleinpenning and Hagendoorn, 1991). Again, these results indicate the importance of the frame of application. How questions are phrased and which topic is proposed leads to strong variations in expression. So ethnic categories dominate in some situations but not in others showing the variability in usage.

The present study investigated not only the use of ethnic categories but also the way they were used. Only a small minority (10%) used ethnic categories to describe schoolmates in an explicitly negative way. This result should be interpreted carefully as it is probably due to the fact that children responded to the proposition that all children are different. This might have elicited mainly neutral descriptions. However, there were hardly any ethnic-related descriptions and explanations in the case of play activities, and the few that were made denied the relevance of ethnicity. This denial, however implicitly indicates that at least some respondents were aware of the fact that ethnicity does sometimes play a role in structuring interactions among schoolmates, and therefore they felt the need to express that for them it did not matter.

As argued in the introduction, most research reproduces ethnicity rather than simply measuring it because ethnic categories are supplied and subjects are more or less forced to respond to these categories. To guard against the bias of making ethnic categories salient, and thus provoking ethnic responses, it was suggested that the categories that the subjects themselves use have to be studied. However, such an approach also has limitations, not only concerning the difficulties in the coding process, where one is trying to squeeze unwieldy and rich material into manageable chunks, but also concerning normative influences. Examining the ordinary language subjects use can imply that topics that are regarded as more or less taboo are not talked about. People can be reluctant to write that they do not like other people because they are black, and they will probably be more reluctant to do so in response to a question of a researcher, even if this is anonymous.

Thus it could be argued that our results are (partly) due to the fact that children are acting in socially desirable ways. In this respect two objections can be made. First, the two essay titles might reflect different social norms. The first question is a categorical assertion of difference, which may be read as legitimating statements of general difference. The second question allows only implicitly for the possibility of difference; it does not assert it. Second, part of what the children write is probably

linked to the research setting in which observation and measurement takes place. Some of their statements may be designed for the eyes of their teacher or for us as researchers, and thereby reflects what is considered socially acceptable. This could explain why there are hardly any references to ethnicity on the 'play and not play' topic.

There are indeed studies that show that children can give non-ethnic reasons for their choices while their actual choice reflects a certain degree of same-ethnic preferences (Ramsey, 1987). However, in another study where we measured children's actual choices on a sorting task, we found the same pattern of results as in the present study (Verkuyten and Masson, 1993). In addition, both objections have as their implicit starting point the fact that people possess particular representations, which they may or may not express truthfully. From this point of view, there may indeed be distorting demand characteristics. However, one could also argue that people use categories flexibly as a function of context, so that categories are always expressed in an interactive setting. What our results then show is that, in a specific context, there are clear variations in expression of ethnic categorizations depending on the task the children were confronted with.

This variation can be explained in several ways. First, it might indicate that ethnic differences are highly accessible and frequently used when describing contemporaries, whereas these differences are considered of little relevance in concrete interactions. In line with this interpretation are observational studies conducted in multi-ethnic situations in the Netherlands, which generally show little group-formation along ethnic lines Arends *et al.*, 1986; Van Niekerk, 1990). Second, as pointed out, this variation might reflect a difference in the implicit social normative character of the wording of the two essay titles. Third, there is also a difference between both titles in level of abstraction. The distinction between an abstract account of differences between contemporaries and an account of specific interactions in a concrete context might be of influence on the results. Future research should try to study the adequacy of these interpretations in order to understand more fully why specific social categories predominate in some instances and not in others.

Contrary to what was expected, minority subjects did not stress ethnicity more than Dutch subjects. There were also no significant differences between both groups for particular and categorical answers, and for the features around which ethnicity was structured. An explanation for these results is perhaps that in the present study both groups lived in the same social environment and visited the same four schools, which were all similar. In line with the idea of social representations this can mean that children living in this environment share social beliefs, which are used to define and understand each other. The way children think about themselves and others may be related to the social representations they share. Doise (1988) mentioned several studies that illustrate this idea, and Hewstone, Jaspars, and Lalljee (1982) found that 'public' and 'comprehensive' schoolboys had social representations of themselves and others that were shared social beliefs (but see Potter and Litton, 1985). If the assumption of a social representation is valid for the present study, it would explain why a distinction between ethnic groups is not associated with different ways in which children, at least in the present multi-ethnic situation construct their social world.

To conclude, the present study suggests that research should be careful in presupposing the use of ethnic categories, at least among children. Such a presupposition

does not only disregard the richness and diversity of conceptions used but may also reproduce and reconfirm the existing ethnic constructions. What should be studied more systematically in the future is whether, when, and why ethnicity is used to structure the social world. In our view such a study has promise for a more fully understanding of judgements and relationships among children.

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