

Prejudices: development, influencing factors and prevention

SELECTED FINDINGS FROM SOCIAL-PSYCHOLOGICAL PREJUDICE RESEARCH

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This article provides an overview of selected findings from social-psychological prejudice research and the implications for prevention work with children.

WHAT ARE PREJUDICES?

According to Gordon Allport, the pioneer of social-psychological prejudice research, prejudices are “an antipathy based upon a faulty and inflexible generalization. It may be felt or expressed. It may be directed toward a group as a whole or toward an individual because he is a member of that group.” (Allport, 1954, p. 9) The rise of the cognitive perspective in psychology brought with it the acceptance of a three-dimensional concept of prejudice which still prevails in the research today (Legge & Mansel, 2012, p. 503). According to this, prejudices may manifest themselves affectively (e.g. through **negative emotions**), cognitively (e.g. through **stereotypical convictions**) and conatively (e.g. via **discriminatory behaviour**) towards a group (ibid., p. 503). Prejudices are therefore not simply possible individual opinions among many, rather false and inflexible generalisations which may have

far-reaching negative consequences for members of marginalised groups and society as a whole.

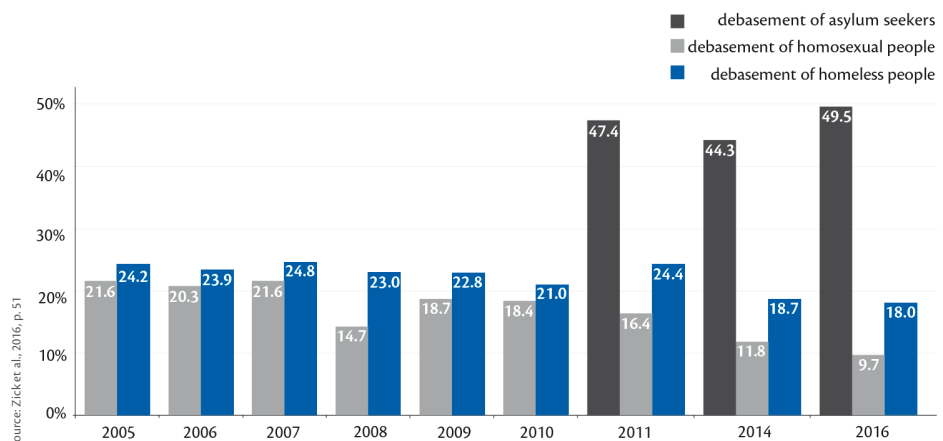
Allport, Gordon Willard (1954). The nature of prejudice. Reading: Addison-Wesley.

Legge, Sandra & Mansel, Jürgen (2012). Gruppenbezogene Menschenfeindlichkeit und Diskriminierung. In Günther Albrecht & Axel Groenemeyer (Eds.), Handbuch soziale Probleme (pp. 494-548). Wiesbaden: VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften.

WHAT ARE THE SOCIAL CONSEQUENCES OF PREJUDICES?

For years now, negative prejudices and debasement of particular population groups have remained at a stable level within the German majority society (Ill. 1 and 2). This is the key finding of the study “Gespaltene Mitte – Feindselige Zustände” (“Divided Middle

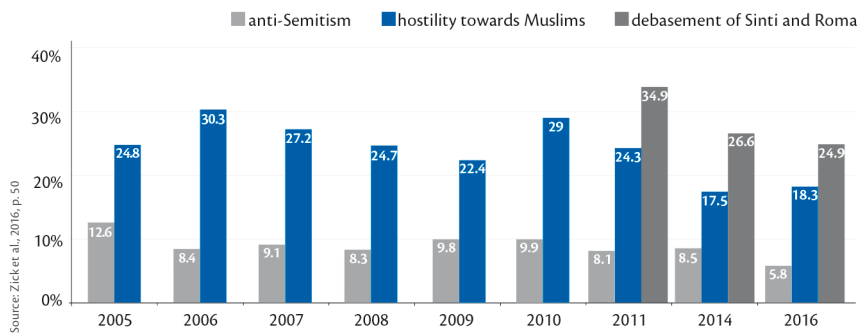
– Hostile Conditions”), which is conducted every 2 years by the Institute for Interdisciplinary Research on Conflict and Violence (Zick et al., 2016; see also Zick in this issue). According to this study, a third of the 16- to 90-year-old Germans surveyed (n=1,890) think too many foreigners are living in Germany. A quarter believe Jewish people take advantage of their persecution during the Third Reich (ibid., p. 43). Around a third of the respondents feel there is too much foreign infiltration by Muslims living in Germany and, respectively, think that Sinti and Roma have criminal tendencies (ibid., p. 48). Wilhelm Heitmeyer, who has researched **Group-Focused Enmity** in a long-term study, and who also established the theoretical basis for this concept (Heitmeyer, 2002-2011),



Ill. 1: Trend in approval of debasement of asylum seekers, homosexual and homeless people

is currently talking about “authoritarian temptations” (“autoritäre Versuchungen”; 2018) which have reached the open society. A temptation is the concept of “collective assignments of guilt”: “It serves to channel anger. It may be directed at both ‘the people at the top’, i.e. the economic and political elites who are held responsible, and ‘the people at the bottom’, i.e. the ‘freeloaders’ and the ‘useless people’, such as the long-term unemployed, low-skilled migrants and refugees seeking asylum.”¹¹ (ibid., p. 105)

In his research, Heitmeyer was able to prove empirically what had been suspected since the beginnings of prejudice research (e.g. by Adorno et al., 1950, and Allport, 1954): prejudices towards socially weak groups should not be considered in isolation from one another. It is rather the case that people who generally support hierarchies between socially weak groups also tend to support the debasement of such groups (see e.g. Zick et al.,

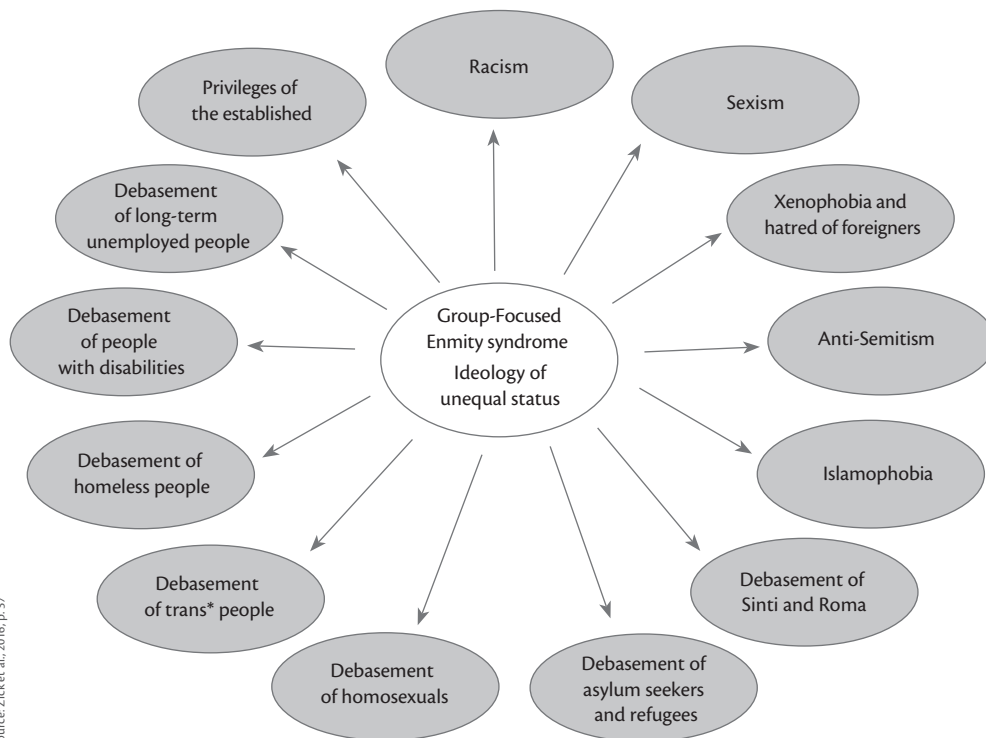


Ill. 2: Trend in approval of debasement of Sinti and Roma, anti-Semitism and hostility towards Muslims

2016). People who, for example, have anti-Semitic prejudices are considerably more likely to have a hostile attitude towards Muslims, and vice versa (ibid., p. 34). This phenomenon is called Group-Focused Enmity: “It designates who belongs to the group, i.e. who is ‘in’ and who is ‘out’, who is of higher value and at the top, and who is of lower value and at the bottom.”¹² (ibid.) In the view of the authors of the long-term study, Group-Focused Enmity goes right to

the heart of our society and has, at its common antidemocratic core, an “ideology of unequal status”. In this respect, sexist, racist, homophobic, anti-Semitic and other pejorative prejudices are about different facets of a general phenomenon (Ill. 3). The debasement of these groups by the majority society is justified with social, political or even religious views and serves to legitimate discriminatory and violent behaviour (Grau, 2017, p. 11). Here, the

underlying motives are characteristic of right-wing extremist thinking, which justifies the “lower value and legal status”¹³ (ibid.) of particular groups of people on the basis of ethnic, cultural, mental or physical differences. Which social group is in danger of being branded the “scapegoat” is determined by the following factors (Zick et al., 2011, p. 304): the threat to one’s own status (e.g. from women), insecurity (e.g. caused by Islam), an attack on normality (e.g. by homosexuals) as well as changes in the power relations between groups (e.g. due to migration).



Ill. 3: Elements of the syndrome “Group-Focused Enmity”

Source: Zick et al., 2016, p. 37

Zick, Andreas, Küpper, Beate & Krause, Daniela (2016). *Gespaltene Mitte – Feindselige Zustände*. Bonn: J.H.W. Dietz.

Heitmeyer, Wilhelm (Ed.) (2002-2011). *Deutsche Zustände*, Vol. 1-10. Berlin: Suhrkamp.

Heitmeyer, Wilhelm (2018). *Autoritäre Versuchungen*. Berlin: Suhrkamp.

Adorno, Theodor et al. (1950). *The authoritarian personality*. New York: Harper & Brothers.

Grau, Andreas (2017). *Zum Konzept der Gruppenbezogenen Menschenfeindlichkeit im lokalen Raum*. In Kemal Bozay & Dierk Borstel (Eds.), *Ungleichwertigkeitsideologien in der Einwanderungsgesellschaft* (pp. 7-23). Wiesbaden: Springer.

Zick, Andreas, Küpper, Beate & Heitmeyer, Wilhelm (2011). *Vorurteile als Elemente Gruppenbezogener Menschenfeindlichkeit – eine Sichtung der Vorurteilsforschung und ein theoretischer Entwurf*. In Anton Pelinka (Ed.), *Vorurteile: Ursprünge, Formen, Bedeutung* (pp. 287-316). Berlin: deGruyter.

evaluated, inter alia, on the basis of the stereotype assigned to them, whereby one's own group is usually evaluated positively and the outsider group tends to be evaluated negatively (Degner et al., 2009).

Zick, Andreas, Küpper, Beate & Hövermann, Andreas (2011). *Intolerance, prejudice and discrimination. A European report*. Berlin: Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung. Available at: <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/do/07908-20110311.pdf> [22.02.19]

Appel, Markus (2008). *Medienvermittelte Stereotype und Vorurteile*. In Bernad Batinic & Markus Appel (Eds.), *Medienpsychologie* (pp. 313-335). Heidelberg: Springer.

Devine, Patricia (1989). *Stereotypes and prejudice: Their automatic and controlled components*. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 56, 5-18.

Degner, Juliane, Meiser, Thorsten & Rothermund, Klaus (2009). *Kognitive und sozial-kognitive Determinanten: Stereotype und Vorurteile*. In Andreas Beelmann & Kai Jonas (Eds.), *Diskriminierung und Toleranz* (pp. 75-93). Wiesbaden: VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften.

influencing factors. Killen and Stangor (2001) have shown that there are age-related differences in the connection between prejudices and moral development in 7- to 13-year-olds (n=130). They show that older children are more likely to consider social conventions, e.g. when trying to decide whether an Afro-American child should be incorporated into an Anglo-American peer group: the "functioning" of the group (and therefore the exclusion of a child) is more important to them than treating an individual fairly and without prejudice. By contrast, moral considerations such as fairness or justice play a greater role among younger children (7-10 years old), and these counteract the development of prejudices and marginalisation.

Motivational influencing factors take into account the social identity processes relating to children in the respective dominant ethnic group. An experiment with Australian children between the ages of 6 and 9 (n=480) has shown that a high level of identification with one's own group reinforces the development of prejudices (Nesdale et al., 2005). These children were assigned to an art group (ostensibly on the basis of their existing talent). In addition, the children were told that they were very fortunate to be one of these highly talented artists, thereby creating a high level of identification with one's own group. Then the children were shown a drawing from another art group which was allegedly less talented than their own. The experimental manipulation of the ingroup's self-worth led to an increased rejection of the other group – and this was without having had any direct contact with this group. This finding might, to a certain extent, explain the success of right-wing extremist and populist agitators who ultimately try to establish the "natural" higher value of the ingroup on the basis of the alleged inferiority of the outgroup (e.g. when refugees are vilified, in a racist manner, as "rapees") (Zick et al., 2016, p. 34).

HOW DO PREJUDICES ARISE?

According to Zick et al. (2011), prejudices arise in a three-stage process. First, a distinction is made between the ingroup and the outgroup through **categorisation**, a fundamental cognitive process which runs almost automatically, and which is what makes it possible for us to understand the complexity of information in our environment in the first place. Depending on the situation, categorisation is carried out on the basis of gender, age or ethnic identity. The media play a subliminal role here, guiding attention and steering it towards specific characteristics (e.g. religious identity) (ibid., p. 33, and summarised in Appel, 2008).

Once we have categorised them, we move to the next stage of **stereotyping**, ascribing particular attributes to people on the basis of their group identity. Here we observe the phenomenon that the members of an outgroup seem to us to be very homogeneous, whereas we perceive the ingroup as very diverse. However, this stereotyping phase and the subsequent biases are not inevitable: "We also have the option of stopping to think and consciously reconsidering or revising our stereotypes" (Zick et al., 2011, p. 33 f., after Devine, 1989) It is only at the **evaluation** stage that the individuals categorised as groups are

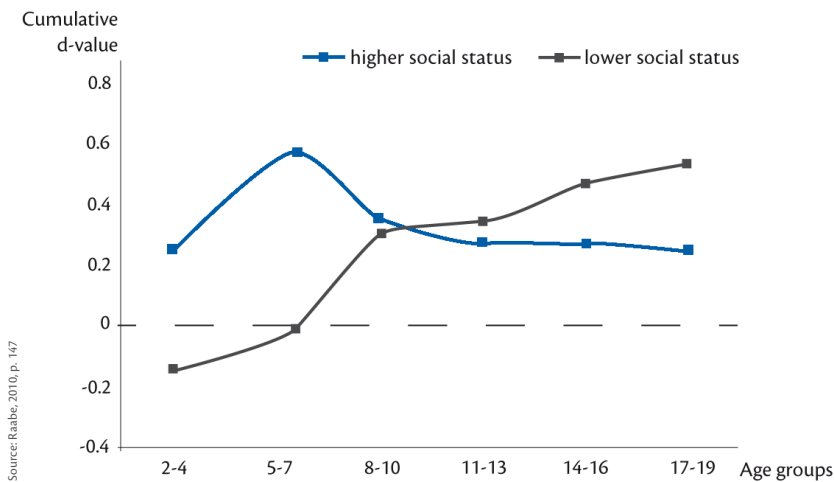
HOW DO PREJUDICES DEVELOP AMONG CHILDREN?

Factors which influence the development of prejudices

Prejudices and evaluative differences between one's own group and a different social group do not only develop in adulthood, rather they are already forming in children of pre-school age. The – sometimes contradictory – theories and findings discussed in the research on the development of prejudices are connected with various influencing factors.

Cognitive influencing factors target children's emerging ability to form categories in order to be able to understand their environment. Due to their limited cognitive abilities, children in early childhood mainly concentrate on individual perceptible characteristics such as gender or hair colour. Here, the more familiar group evokes more positive emotions in the child than the group that is alien to him/her (Cameron et al., 2001).

Competencies relevant to prejudice, such as empathy or moral thinking, are described as important **socio-cognitive**



Ill. 4: Trend in development with estimated absolute prejudice values among age groups

Source: Raabe, 2010, p. 147

Numerous international studies have empirically investigated **familial influencing factors** and have convincingly shown that there are (if sometimes only weak) correlations between parental attitudes and children’s prejudices (overview in Heinemann, 2012, p. 36 ff.). Here too, however, the research was primarily focused on children from the majority society. Bigler and Liben (2006) assume that children take their cue from their parents when evaluating the importance of a category. So, if adults repeatedly refer to “the foreigners”, children know that this group is somehow significant. If parents also behave (explicitly or implicitly) differently towards this group, children themselves actively look for explanations for this and take differences between this group and their own as the basis. An experimental study (Skinner et al., 2017) has shown that 4- to 5-year-old children are already registering non-verbal signals by adults with regard to social prejudice and that, subsequently, they too behave in a generalising and prejudicial manner.

Development in prejudice as age increases

Although there have been studies on how prejudice develops with age since the 1930s (e.g. Horowitz & Horowitz,

1938), the existing state of research is heterogeneous and, to a certain extent, contradictory. Raabe and Beelmann (2011) have studied the empirical findings on age differences in a meta-analysis of 121 cross-sectional studies. The authors come to the conclusion that there is a significant increase in children’s prejudices towards other ethnic groups between the ages of 2 and 4, peaking at the age of 7, as well as a small but significant decrease between the ages of 8 and 10 (Ill. 4). This means that middle childhood is the decisive phase when it comes to the development of prejudices: around the age of 7, the development of prejudices reaches its peak, and after this these prejudices decrease again because the children have developed socio-cognitive abilities, such as the ability to empathise with other people (Heinemann, 2012, p. 129 ff.). It is important to note here that this finding only applies to children from the majority society. Children who belong to a social minority initially have no prejudices towards the social majority, in fact they often even have a positive attitude. Prejudices only arise later as a consequence of discrimination, and these may persist much more stubbornly than the prejudices of children with a higher social status (Raabe & Beelmann, 2011, p. 1729).

Cameron, Jessica et al. (2001). *Children’s lay theories about ingroups and outgroups: Reconceptualizing research on prejudice*. *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, 5(2), 118-128.

Killen, Melanie & Stangor, Charles (2001). *Children’s social reasoning about inclusion and exclusion in gender and race peer group contexts*. *Child Development*, 72(1), 174-186.

Nesdale, Drew et al. (2005). *Threat, group identification, and children’s ethnic prejudice*. *Social Development*, 14(2), 189-205.

Heinemann, Kim Sarah (2012). *Wodurch wird die Vorurteilsentwicklung im Kindes- und Jugendalter beeinflusst? Eine Meta-Analyse zu individuellen und sozialen Einflussfaktoren*. *Doctoral thesis*. Jena: Friedrich-Schiller-Universität.

Bigler, Rebecca & Liben, Lynn (2006). *A developmental intergroup theory of social stereotypes and prejudice*. In Robert Kail (Ed.), *Advances in Child Development and Behavior* (pp. 39-89). *Amsterdam: Elsevier*.

Skinner, Allison, Meltzoff, Andrew & Olson, Kristina (2017). *“Catching” social bias. Exposure to biased nonverbal signals creates social biases in preschool children*. *Psychological Science*, 28(2), 216-224.

Horowitz, Eugene & Horowitz, Ruth (1938). *Development of social attitudes in children*. *Sociometry*, 1(3-4), 301-338.

Raabe, Tobias & Beelmann, Andreas (2011). *Development of ethnic, racial, and national prejudice in childhood and adolescence: a multinational meta-analysis of age differences*. *Child Development*, 82(6), 1715-1737.

Raabe, Tobias (2010). *Entwicklung von Vorurteilen im Kindes- und Jugendalter. Eine Meta-Analyse zu Altersunterschieden*. *Doctoral thesis*. Jena: Friedrich-Schiller-Universität.

WHAT CAN WE DO ABOUT PREJUDICES IN CHILDREN?

The existing state of research provides numerous indications that middle childhood is a particularly sensitive and decisive phase with regard to the development of prejudices. The more prejudices children have developed by the end of their childhood, the less they are prepared to enter into contact with members of different groups, and it becomes more and more difficult to reduce prejudices (Raabe, 2010, p. 176 ff.). This is why, according to prevailing scientific opinion, early prevention is important. Prejudice research has evaluated numerous approaches to the reduction of prejudices (overview in Paluck & Green, 2009). Here, according to a meta-analysis of 81 studies on 122 prevention programmes (Beelmann & Heinemann, 2014), **contact programmes** – i.e. measures

which bring different groups into social contact –, training in **empathy and understanding other perspectives**, as well as promoting **moral development and the transmission of values** have proved to be particularly valuable. Among children and adolescents, measures aimed at changing social categorisations (e.g. through simplifying assertions that differences between individual groups are not relevant) are the least effective (ibid., p. 18).

Prevention programmes are generally more successful when they take their cue from the children's respective stage of development. However, the social status of the children must also be taken into account when devising and implementing prevention measures for reducing ethnic prejudices. For instance, promoting socio-cognitive abilities in a school class attended by children from both the social minority and the social majority may well result in a reduction in prejudices among children from the majority society, but may also lead to a rise in prejudices among children from the social minority (Heinemann, 2012, p. 137). This is because meta-stereotypes relate to how a person believes members of a different group perceive his/her own group. The prerequisites for developing meta-stereotypes are, again, socio-cognitive abilities such as understanding other perspectives (ibid., p. 115). In this case, children from the social minority could assume that the members of the social majority have a negative opinion of their group.

Reducing prejudices through contact

The meta-analysis by Pettigrew and Tropp (2006) broadly confirms the contact hypothesis with regard to the reduction in intergroup prejudices (see also Dill-Shackleford in this issue). The contact hypothesis (Allport, 1954) asserts that positive effects may arise in contact situations between different

groups if 4 key conditions exist: equal status, cooperation (and not competition) between the groups, common objectives, and support from social and institutional authorities. The extended contact hypothesis (Wright et al., 1997) is based on the premise that simply knowing that a member of one's own group has a close connection or friendship with a member of the other group may improve one's attitude towards the outgroup.

Media producers in particular will note that this prejudice-reducing effect evidently also applies to **indirect contact**, e.g. via stories in which the protagonists of an ingroup and an outgroup are friends with one another. Cameron and Rutland (2006), for example, showed that a 6-week vicarious contact intervention led to an improvement in children's attitudes towards people with disabilities. With 67 children between the ages of 5 and 10, they read about and discussed friendships between disabled and non-disabled children who had adventures together, and this produced positive effects. Another study (Cameron et al., 2006) showed that such vicarious contact stories can be used to change attitudes towards refugees.

The scientific evaluation of the prevention programme PARTS, which was implemented in Thuringia, Germany, with 586 primary school children in years 3 and 4 (aged about 8-10) from 2007 to 2011, also confirmed that the long-term effects of promoting acceptance, respect, tolerance and social competence are measurable (Beelmann & Karing, 2015). As well as teaching units focused on promoting intercultural knowledge and training in prejudice-related (socio-)cognitive skills, the multimodal programme also involved working on contact and friendship stories with members of other ethnic groups. These stories were about Russian and German children having adventures together, winning a competition through cooperation, or successfully rescuing a peer after an

accident, which was only possible because the German and Russian children all pulled together. ■

Paluck, Elizabeth Levy & Green, Donald (2009). *Prejudice reduction: what works? A review and assessment of research and practice*. Annual Review of Psychology, 60, 339-367.

Beelmann, Andreas & Heinemann, Kim Sarah (2014). *Preventing prejudice and improving intergroup attitudes: A meta-analysis of child and adolescent training programs*. Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology, 35(1), 10-24.

Pettigrew, Thomas & Tropp, Linda (2006). *A meta-analytic test of intergroup contact theory*. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 90(5), 751-783.

Wright, Stephen et al. (1997). *The extended contact effect: Knowledge of cross-group friendships and prejudice*. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 73, 73-90.

Cameron, Lindsey & Rutland, Adam (2006). *Extended contact through story reading in school: Reducing children's prejudice toward the disabled*. Journal of Social Issues, 62(3), 469-488.

Cameron, Lindsey et al. (2006). *Changing children's intergroup attitudes toward refugees: Testing different models of extended contact*. Child Development, 77(5), 1208-1219.

Beelmann, Andreas & Karing, Constance (2015). *Förderung toleranter Einstellungen und die Prävention von Vorurteilen. Langzeitwirkungen des Programms zur Förderung von Akzeptanz, Respekt, Toleranz und sozialer Kompetenz (PARTS)*. forum kriminalprävention, 1, 51-58.

NOTES

¹ Translated from German

² Translated from German

³ Translated from German

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