

Broaching Sensitive Topics in Vicarious Contact Interventions Can Reduce Prejudice: Evidence from Two Field Experiments in Israeli Schools

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Many Contact Studies Avoid the Elephant in the Room

- Most contact interventions avoid broaching sensitive topics, fearing that addressing inequalities, grievances, disagreements, or stereotypes may be ineffective or counterproductive [1, 2, 3].
- Thus classic contact interventions do not address the elephant in the room, a pattern exacerbated by majority group members' tendency to avoid discussions of group differences [4].
- The lack of constructive discussions of sensitive topics at the heart of intergroup relations might explain why recent studies show that exposure to outgroups has modest [5, 6], or null effects on prejudice [7, 8].

Our Intervention: Broaching Sensitive Topics with Vicarious Contact

- Acknowledging that intergroup tensions are closely linked with inequality, grievances, disagreements, and stereotypes, we design a vicarious contact program that broaches these sensitive topics constructively.

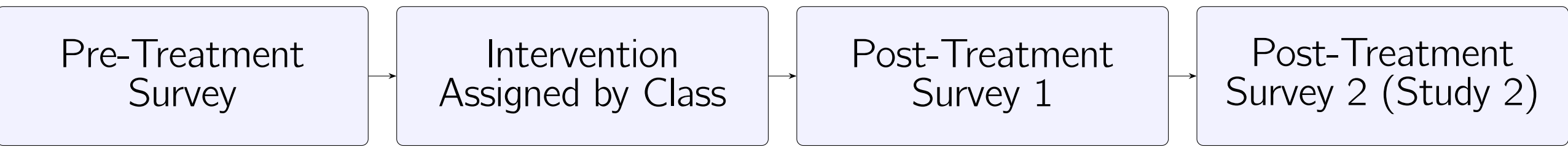


Excerpt from the TV show in which an Arab child answers the question "why is Arabic a scary language".

- The intervention included four sessions. In each session elementary school students watched a 15 minute episode and engaged in constructive classroom activities linking the episode's content relating to group differences, grievances, disagreements, and stereotypes, with insights about cross-group similarity, intergroup heterogeneity, and the value of perspective getting.

We Test Our Intervention with Two Field Experiments

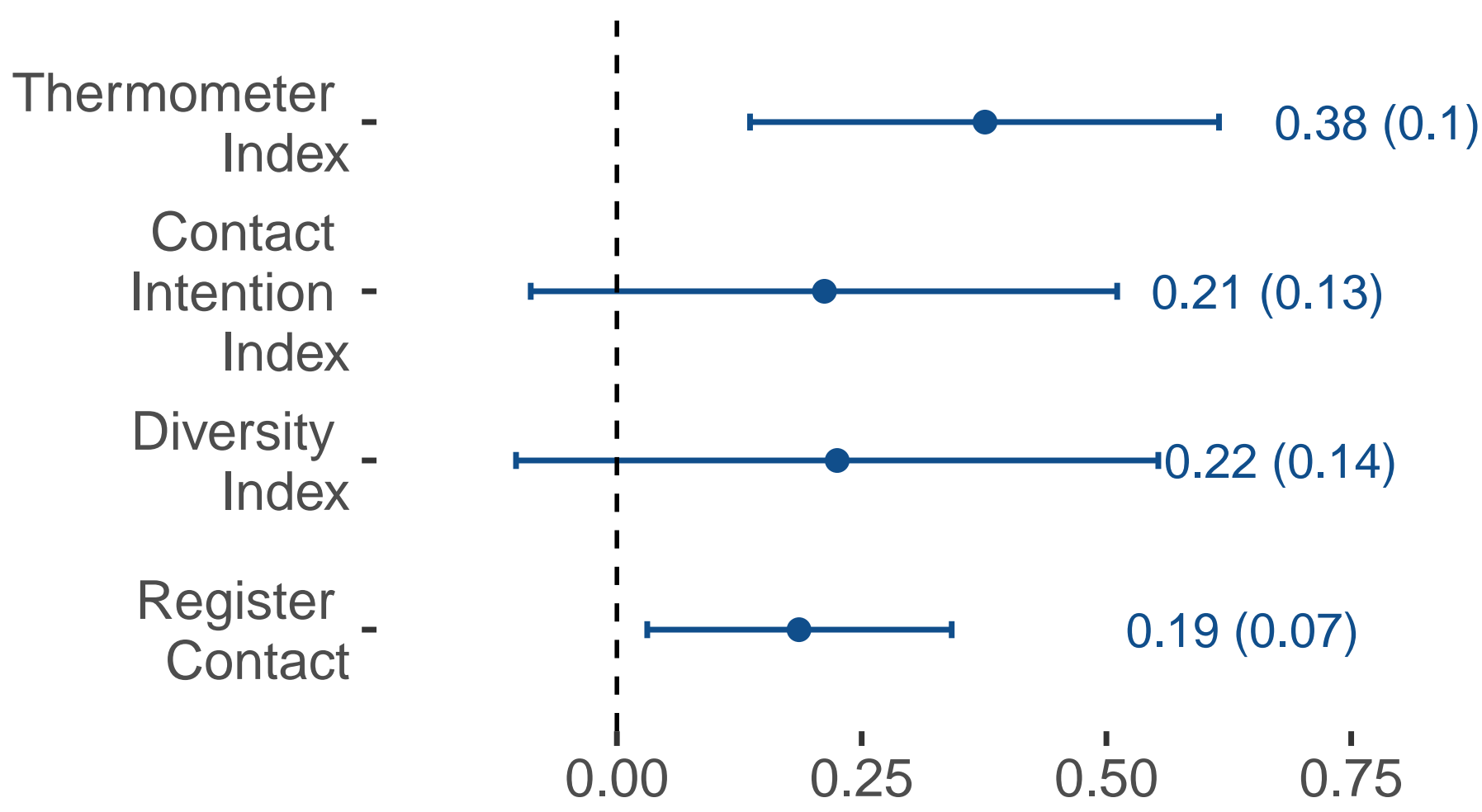
- **Design:** We fielded two block-cluster randomized controlled trials in Israeli schools:



- **Sample:** Jewish elementary school students in grades 4–6:
 - *Study 1:* Implemented in Spring 2021 ($n_{students} = 253$, $n_{blocks} = 3$, $n_{clusters} = 12$).
 - *Study 2:* Implemented in Spring 2022 ($n_{students} = 767$, $n_{blocks} = 14$, $n_{clusters} = 46$).
- **Treatment:** Participation in four sessions focusing on Arab, immigrant, and blind children.
 - *Study 1:* Implemented by external practitioner.
 - *Study 2:* Implemented organically by teachers to probe scalability (train the trainers).
- **Outcomes:**
 - *Primary Attitude Indices:* Outgroup thermometer, contact intention, support for diversity.
 - *Primary Behaviors:* Register for contact event, take up of a pro-diversity bracelet (study 2).
- **Estimation:** OLS interacting covariates with treatment [9], errors clustered by class:

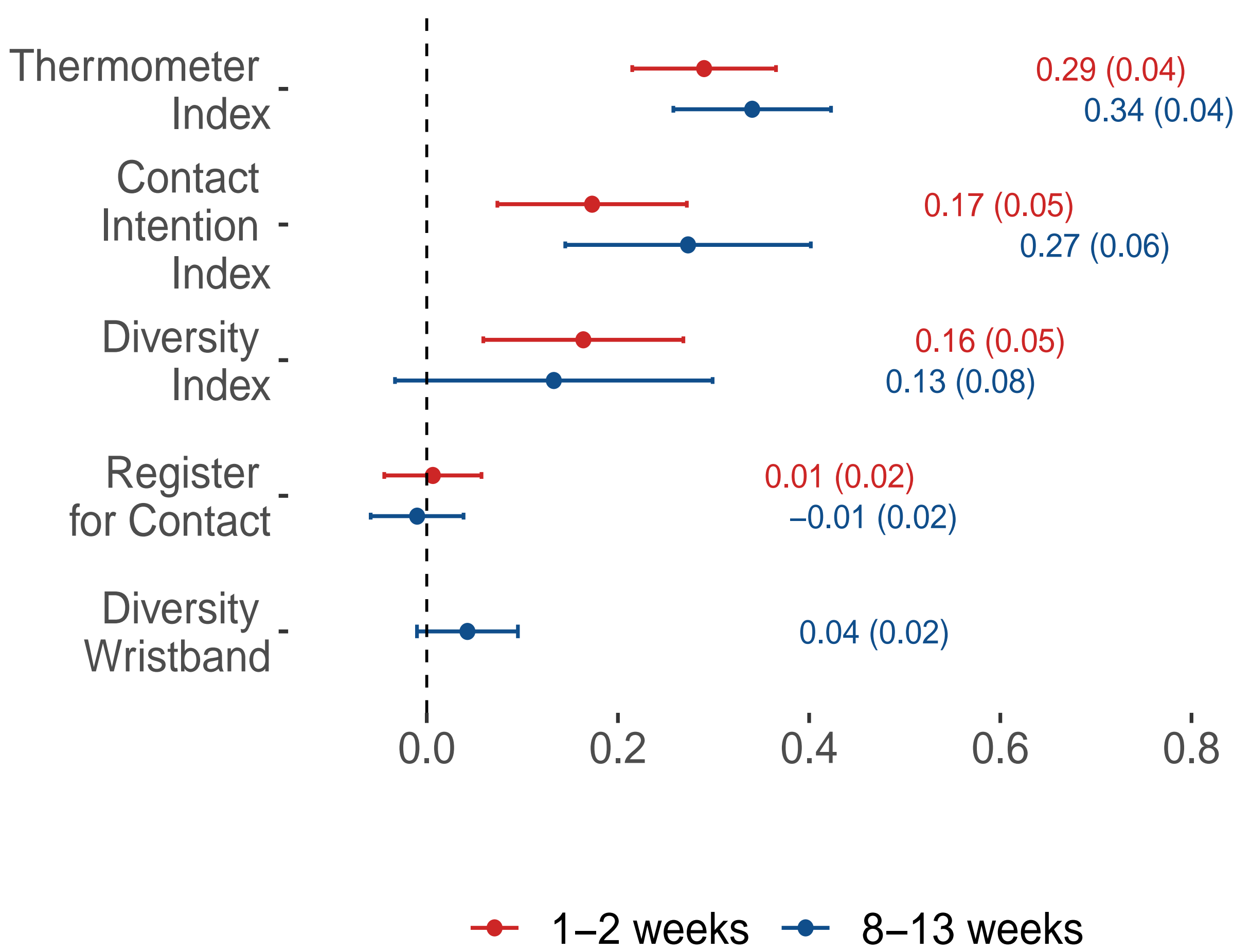
$$\underbrace{Y_{icg}}_{Outcome} = \underbrace{\beta Z_i}_{Treatment} + \underbrace{\gamma X_i}_{Covariates} + \eta(Z_i * X_i) + \epsilon_{icg}$$

Study 1: The Intervention Increased Intergroup Affect and Registration for an Intergroup Contact Event



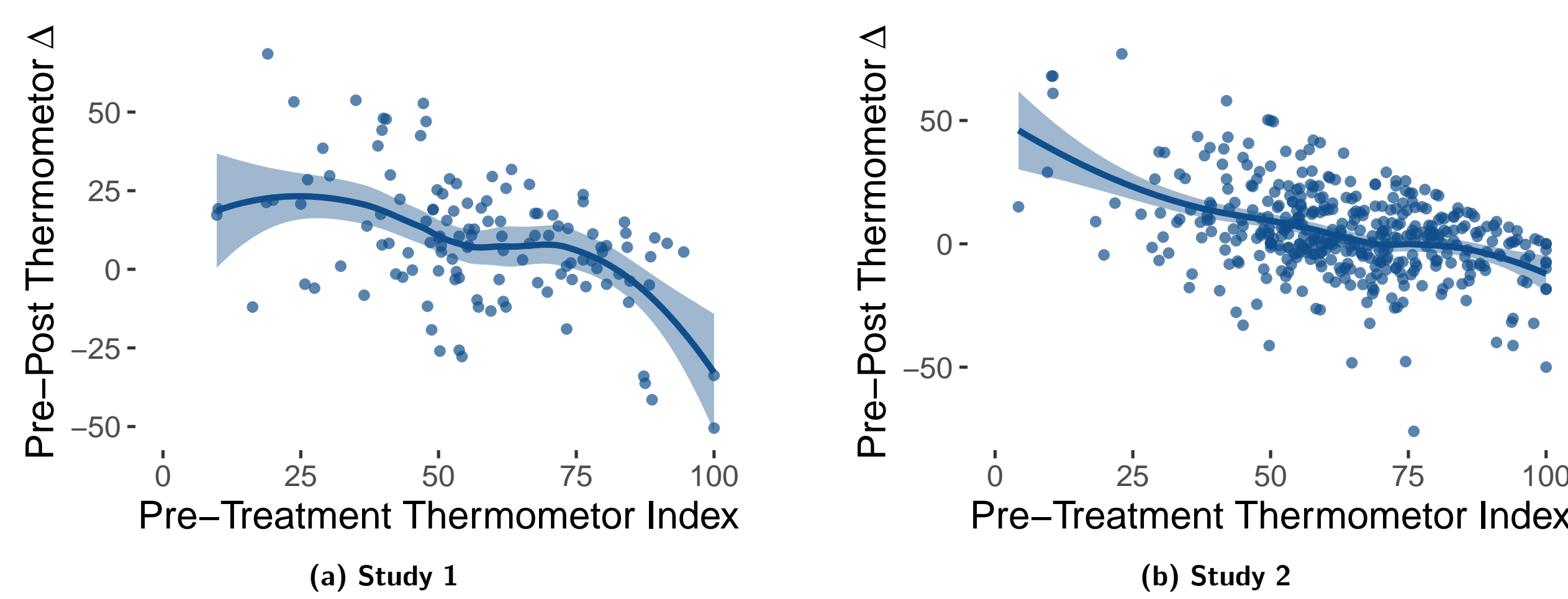
Point estimates represent the intervention ATEs on students' attitudes and behaviors. All outcomes are standardized. Thermometer and contact indices combine students' attitudes towards Arab, immigrant, blind, and Ultra-Orthodox children. Results are robust when employing randomization inference, and wild cluster bootstraps that account for the modest number of clusters.

Study 2: The Intervention Increased Intergroup Affect, Contact Intentions, Support for Diversity, and Take-Up of Diversity Wristband 3 Months Post-Treatment



Despite delegating treatment implementation to teachers, the magnitude of ATEs remains large, ranging between a sixth and a third of a standard deviation change in attitudes 3 months post-treatment emphasizing the scalability of the intervention.

Intervention Effects are Driven by Prejudicial Students



Among treated students, pre-post changes in the feeling thermometer index are largest for students with prejudicial pre-treatment attitudes. This suggests that our intervention is not preaching to the choir, but rather shaping attitudes of prejudicial students.

Main Takeaways

- Vicarious contact interventions that constructively engage with sensitive topics relating to inequality, grievances, disagreements, or stereotypes can shape children's prejudice.
- Prejudice reduction among children is important because social and political orientations are acquired during childhood [10].
- Thus prejudice reduction interventions need not shy away from sensitive topics, and mass media can help address sensitive topics without overly burdening many minority group members.

Acknowledgements

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