Fostering felt understanding through structured communication: Developing a tool to improve intergroup relations

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Author note

Abstract

This research tested a procedure for improving intergroup relations by fostering intergroup felt understanding – the belief that members of another group understand one's own community's perspectives, experiences, and identity – in conflict-affected Northern Ireland. Based on previous research, the procedure involved incorporating a 'reflecting back' step into structured communication between communities. First, 28 Catholics and Protestants shared ingroup perspectives with members of the 'other' community, then reflected back to those members what was important to the outgroup community. Then, in a wider community sample of 1,203 Catholics and Protestants we tested the effect of reading outgroup members' 'reflected back' summaries compiled from the first stage. Doing so led participants to feel more understood and more positively regarded by the outgroup, view intergroup relations more positively, and report greater optimism and trust, relative to a control condition and a 'perspective getting' condition. We discuss future developments, extensions, and implications of this approach.

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Research in social psychology and other disciplines highlights how deep misunderstandings between groups contribute to polarization and intractable conflict (Demoulin et al., 2009; Lees & Cikara, 2019; Ruggeri et al., 2021). More recently, evidence has grown for the role of felt understanding – the belief that outgroup members understand ingroup perspectives – as a psychological basis for intergroup trust and reconciliation. However, there is little theory or evidence as to how intergroup felt understanding might actually be developed in a conflict-affected society. Focusing on Catholic-Protestant relations in Northern Ireland, our aim in this research was to develop and test a communication-based procedure that improves intergroup relations by fostering felt understanding.

Intergroup felt understanding

Intergroup felt understanding is the belief that outgroup members understand and accept ingroup perspectives, including ingroup members' values, beliefs, experiences, and identity (Livingstone, 2023). It has been found to cross-sectionally predict greater intergroup trust (Ioku & Watamura, 2022; Livingstone, Fernández Rodríguez, et al., 2020) and post-conflict forgiveness (including in Northern Ireland), and to have causal effects on outcomes such as trust, hope and optimism, and perceptions of the intergroup relationship in a variety of settings (Livingstone, Windeatt, et al., 2020). Evidence suggests that feeling understood predicts more positive intergroup attitudes via a sense of positive regard: when we feel understood by 'them', we feel that they regard us more positively in general, which in turn predicts more positive attitudes (Brik et al., 2023; Livingstone et al., 2024; for other evidence that felt positive regard positively affects intergroup trust and behavioral intentions, see Ellemers et al., 2004; Livingstone, Fernández Rodríguez, et al., 2020; Livingstone, Windeatt, et al., 2020; Putra, 2014; Simon et al., 2015; Vorauer et al., 1998). This process echoes work

in other fields which emphasizes that people will become more open to improving conflictual

relationships when they feel that they have been understood by the other (Rogers, 1989).

There is nevertheless no established, theory-informed procedure that specifically

fosters felt understanding between groups and yet this is a vital next step for promoting

intergroup relations 'on the ground'. In addressing this challenge we focused on what makes

felt understanding distinct among predictors in intergroup relations research: namely, that it

reflects a meta-meta level of perception, in which the object is one's own (ingroup's)

perspectives in the mind's eye of outgroup members (Dennett, 1989; Gillespie & Cornish,

2010; Perner & Wimmer, 1985). It follows that a key factor to target is perceptions of what

outgroup members believe about ingroup perspectives. This can be contrasted with (lower-

level) perspective-taking, which relates more simply to taking outgroup members'

perspectives *per se* (Eyal et al., 2018; Galinsky & Moskowitz, 2000; Todd & Galinsky,

2014). Instead, felt understanding requires that we know about outgroup perspectives *about*

ingroup perspectives.

We tested whether this can be achieved through structured communication that

involves group members not only communicating ingroup perspectives to outgroup members,

but then communicating back their understanding of the other group's perspectives – what we

term a 'reflecting back' step in intergroup communication. This approach differs from other

forms of communication-based intervention (e.g., intergroup contact, indirect approaches

such as perspective getting, and turn-taking dialogue) that involve sharing intergroup

perspectives, but not necessarily ensuring that group members' understanding of an

outgroup's perspectives are shared back explicitly. Introducing a 'reflecting back' component

in intergroup communication, however, should provide a clearer basis for feelings of being

understood by an outgroup, and represents an adaptation of reflective listening techniques

often used in therapeutic contexts to build trust (Bruneau & Saxe, 2012; Rogers, 1989;

Rosenberg, 2015). Such an approach also draws on related research into high-quality listening (Itzchakov et al., 2022, 2024) and its positive effects. These each emphasize that when an interaction partner shares back the perspectives that we communicate, with compassion, accuracy, and non-judgment, then we come to feel 'heard', understood, and positively regarded by them (Itzchakov et al., 2024; Roos et al., 2023).

Overview of present research

Our overall aim was to test a theory-informed procedure that improves intergroup relations by fostering felt understanding, and which can be scaled up beyond dyadic or small-group communications. We did so in the context of Catholic-Protestant relations in Northern Ireland; a post-violent conflict society still characterised by deep divisions (Gray et al., 2018; Mac Ginty et al., 2007), and with renewed concern about peace in the future following BREXIT (the UK's departure from the European Union).

Following the logic described above (targeting the 'meta-meta' level of perception involved in felt understanding), the study involved an initial stage of structured, indirect (computer-mediated) communication between 10-20 Catholics and Protestants (Stages 1-2). The responses at each step of this communication were then used to develop intervention materials for the main field study which tested the effect of reflected back perspectives – which summarize for ingroup members what outgroup members' believe is important to ingroup members – on the wider community in a larger sample of Catholics and Protestants (Stage 3).

Felt understanding vs. perspective getting. A further critical test was whether reading these reflected back summaries produce more positive intergroup relations not only relative to a control condition, but also relative to an alternative strategy of having ingroup members simply read about what is important to outgroup members – a form of perspective-getting intervention which has also been found to improve intergroup attitudes (Broockman

& Kalla, 2016; Kalla & Broockman, 2020, 2023). For this reason, we also compared a felt understanding-focused condition to a condition focusing on outgroup perspectives (as opposed to outgroup members' perspectives on ingroup perspectives, as in the felt understanding-focused condition). This tests the alternative possibility that it is hearing from the outgroup per se (i.e., perspective getting, or virtual intergroup contact) which is beneficial, rather than there being a particular benefit to the reflected back information in the felt understanding condition.

Our pre-registered hypotheses were thus that (1) intergroup felt understanding would be higher and intergroup orientations would be more positive (e.g., greater trust, forgiveness, positive future-focused emotions) in the felt understanding condition compared to the control condition and the 'perspective getting' condition, and (2) the positive effect of the felt understanding condition on intergroup orientations would be mediated by felt positive regard (the extent to which the ingroup is believed to be held in positive regard by an outgroup; Livingstone et al., 2024). No specific group-based differences between Catholics and Protestants were hypothesized. We tested these hypotheses both immediately after presenting the stimuli, and again six weeks later.

Method

Phase 1: Structured communication stimuli development

This phase involved three stages of structured communication between Catholics and Protestants, with the aim of generating a set of 'reflected back' narratives in which members of each community provide a summary of what is important to outgroup members, based on reading outgroup members' initial summaries of what is important to them. These 'reflected back' narratives offer a direct indication of how well ingroup perspectives are understood by outgroup members. Ethical approval was obtained from *anonymous university*.

Sample

Participants who were born and living in Northern Ireland were recruited to take part in the research through convenience sampling and advertising on Prolific Academic. Twenty-eight participants took part at Stage 1 (15 Catholic, 13 Protestant; 13 Female, 15 Male; M_{age} = 37.43, SD = 11.40), 22 of whom (12 Protestants and 10 Catholics) provided 'reflected back' summaries at Stage 2. Participants were paid £20 in total (£4 each for Stages 1 and 2, and £12 for Stage 3). All data were collected using the survey software tool, Qualtrics.

Materials and Procedure

After ascertaining their ingroup identity (Catholic or Protestant in this context), participants were asked in Stage 1 to provide open-ended text responses to three questions: (1) *"What does being <ingroup community member> in Northern Ireland mean to you?"*, (2) *"What does being <ingroup community member> mean to other <ingroup community members> in Northern Ireland?"*, and (3) *"What do you most want <ingroup community> people in Northern Ireland to know and understand about what it means to be <ingroup community member> in Northern Ireland?"*. Participants were then matched at random with two or three outgroup members for Stage 2.

Stage 2 asked participants to read responses from outgroup members from Stage 1, and then write 'reflected back' summaries of those responses. Participants were sent individualised surveys and asked to read two or three outgroup members' responses to the Stage 1 question on what it means to be a member of the outgroup community. Participants were then asked to write open-ended responses to the following questions: (1) *"What does being <outgroup community member> in Northern Ireland mean to this person?"* (asked after each individual contribution from an outgroup member), and (2) *"From the perspective of the people whose answers you read, what does it mean to be <outgroup community member> in Northern Ireland in general?"*.

In Stage 3 participants were asked to read the 'reflected back' responses to the questions from Stage 2 from the outgroup members who read participants' Stage 1 responses. Thus, participants read responses from outgroup member(s) who had summarised and reflected back what was important to participants and ingroup community members in general.

In order to gauge how participants felt after reading these 'reflected back' summaries from outgroup members, we asked them to provide open-ended responses to two further questions: (1) "*How well did the participants understand what it means to you to be <ingroup community member> in Northern Ireland?",* and (2) "*How well did the participants understand what it means to be <ingroup community member> in Northern Ireland more generally?"*. Finally, participants were asked to complete a series of survey measures to enable us to select the 'reflected back' responses for Phase 2. These included measures of felt understanding, intergroup emotions such as hope, and perceptions of the ingroup-outgroup relationship. Details of these measures can be found on the project OSF page: https://osf.io/sgn7a/?view_only=073ff3ff31de40c08b1e7dda444f276a.

Once the completed Stage 3 responses were collated, the narratives created as part of Phase 1 were used to create experimental stimuli for Phase 2 (reported below).

Phase 2: Field study

Phase 2 experimentally tested the effects on a range of intergroup relations-related outcomes of reading 'reflected back' summaries from outgroup members about ingroup perspectives, both immediately, and after six weeks. Design, method, sampling, hypotheses, and analyses were pre-registered at

https://osf.io/pm76e/?view_only=9413e6de25044e16bb332115c713dd66.

Stimuli Development

The felt understanding condition stimuli were developed by compiling a set of 'reflected back' quotes from participants in Stage 2 of the first phase. We reviewed the Stage 3 qualitative and quantitative responses to help inform the quotes to use: Where participants indicated feeling understood by outgroup members, the corresponding Stage 2 responses were considered for inclusion in the stimuli. We excluded any Stage 2 responses that veered off task, for instance by not summarizing back the Stage 1 narratives. Of the remaining narratives, a range were selected to represent the perspectives of a range (six or seven) outgroup members with a target of around 500 words for each set (one for Catholics and one for Protestants).

For the 'perspective getting' condition, a similar process was followed but using the narratives created in Stage 1, with a range of narratives selected to represent the perspectives of six or seven outgroup members for both the Catholic and Protestant communities. Full details of the materials can be found here:

https://osf.io/sgn7a/?view_only=073ff3ff31de40c08b1e7dda444f276a.

Sample

For the main study, participants who were born and living in Northern Ireland were recruited to take part in the research via Facebook advertising. The study was open from 8th – 26th October 2021. A total of 1990 people provided at least some responses. Following pre-registered exclusion criteria, we excluded people who did not identify as Catholic or Protestant (130 respondents), those who answered incorrectly on the survey attention check (312 responses), and those who withdrew before the end of the questionnaire (345 responses). This left a final sample for analysis of 1203 participants (491 Catholic and 712 Protestant; 683 Female, 512 Male, five non-binary, and three not specified; $M_{age} = 49.35$, $SD = 14.64$). Participants were given the opportunity to enter a prize draw for £50 Amazon vouchers.

At the six-week follow up, 637 participants provided responses. Of these, 349 could be reliably matched with their responses to the main survey, including the condition to which they had been allocated. A further 30 of these participants were excluded because they answered incorrectly on the attention check in the follow-up survey (25), or identified as a different religious denomination compared to the main survey (five). This left a follow-up sample of 319 (106 Catholic and 213 Protestant; 171 Female, 145 Male, two non-binary, one not specified)

Materials and Procedure

Prior to data collection, ethical approval was obtained from *anonymous university.* The study was advertised on Facebook to people aged 18+ in Northern Ireland. Participants who clicked on the link were directed to a Qualtrics survey. Following the participant information sheet and consent processes, participants were randomly assigned to one of the three experimental conditions, using the stimuli developed as part of Phase 1. Participants in the control condition did not read any narratives and instead proceeded straight to the questions.

Felt understanding condition. Participants were asked to read 6-7 quotes written by outgroup members from Phase 1 (Stage 2) which described what they thought it means to be a member of the participant's own community in Northern Ireland. For example, Catholic participants read the following quote from a Protestant from Phase 1: *"Being Catholic in N Ireland means having a strong identity and belonging to the country you live in. Being Catholic means you could be abused verbally or physically because of what side you come from. It also means that you can view both sides of the coin and also see where Protestants come from. You can also appreciate the benefits of living in a dual country. A Catholic person just wants to live their live well, honestly, without fear of violence or retribution because of their religion."* (*Protestant female, age 47*).

Perspective getting condition. Responses from Phase 1, Stage 1 were used for this condition. Participants were asked to read 6-7 quotes from outgroup members about what it means to be a member of the outgroup community. For example, Catholic participants read the following quote from a Protestant from Phase 1: *"It means a strong community, where everyone looks after each other when they are in need of help. Sharing Christian values regarding family and treating others the way you want to be treated. Hopes for the future would be that there is no return to violence to Northern Ireland in any way. We want health care, a nice home in a good area with low crime, we want good education for our children, the ability to work and look after our families and provide for them. We want to recycle and look after the environment and the right to worship."* (*Protestant female, age 47*).

Outcome Measures. Participants then completed the measures described below, and again at the six-week follow up. Demographic information, including age, gender, national identity, socio-economic status, and political party preferences, was requested at Time 1 only. Unless otherwise stated, responses were recorded on a 7-point scale ranging from -3 (strongly disagree) through 0 (neither agree nor disagree) to 3 (strongly agree).

Felt Understanding. The extent to which participants felt that outgroup members understood ingroup perspectives was measures using 10 items ($\alpha = .91$) adapted from Livingstone, Fernández Rodríguez, et al., (2020), including *"<outgroup community> know a lot about the identity of <ingroup community>"*.

Felt Recognition of Conflict Experiences. A similar scale of 4 items ($\alpha = .80$) adapted from Livingstone, Fernández Rodríguez, et al., (2020) assessed the more specific perception that outgroup members understood ingroup perspectives and experiences during the period of violent conflict known as the 'Troubles'; e.g., *"<outgroup community> recognise that <ingroup community> suffered during the Troubles"*.

Felt positive regard. A 6-item scale (α = .92) adapted from Brik et al. (2023) assessed the extent to which the outgroup was perceived as viewing the ingroup positively. Example items include "*In general, <outgroup> look down on <ingroup>*", "*In general, <outgroup> respect <ingroup>*".

Optimism/hope. The extent to which participants felt optimism/hope about relations between Protestants and Catholics was assessed using four items (α = .93): *positive; hopeful; reassured; optimistic*. These were embedded in a set of 16 emotion items that also included emotions such as anger, sadness, and fear. The items were prefaced with the statement, 'Thinking about the relationship between Catholics and Protestants, I feel…'. Responses were recorded on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (not at all) to 7 (extremely).

Outgroup Trust. Adapted from Noor et al. (2008), outgroup trust was measured using eight items (α = .92), including: *"I can trust <outgroup community> when they say they want peace"*, and *"Most <outgroup community members> cannot be trusted"*.

Forgiveness. Adapted from Noor et al. (2008), outgroup forgiveness was measured using six items (α = .81), including:: *"I try not to hold a grudge against <outgroup community> for their misdeeds"* and *"I hold feelings of resentment towards <outgroup community> for their misdeeds"*.

Perception of Intergroup Relations. Perceptions of the ingroup's relationship with the outgroup (Livingstone, Windeatt, et al., 2020) were measured on a scale (α = .93) composed of seven semantic differential items (e.g., negative/positive; cold/warm; tense/relaxed) measured from -3 (negative anchor) to 3 (positive anchor). These were preceded by the statement "The relationship between (outgroup) and (ingroup) is…".

Covariates and additional measures.

Intergroup Contact. Intergroup contact quantity and intergroup contact quality were each assessed using single items adapted from Tam et al. (2009). Contact quantity was

measured by asking participants on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (*None at all*) to 7 (*A great deal*) "*How much contact do you have with people from the <outgroup> community?*".

Contact quality was measured by asking participants to rate on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (*Very unpleasant*) to 7 (*Very pleasant*). "*In general, when you meet people from the <outgroup> community, do you find the contact pleasant or unpleasant?*".

Ingroup Identification. The degree to which the participants identified with their ingroup community was measured by a 4-item scale (α = .92; Doosje et al., 1995); e.g., "*I feel strong ties with <ingroup> community*", and "*I see myself as <ingroup>*".

Dispositional Empathy. Nine items (α = .77) adapted from Davis (1983) assessed dispositional empathy, including perspective taking, cognitive approaches to understanding the perspectives of others, and empathic concern. An example perspective taking item is "*I believe that there are two sides to every question and try to look at them both*", and an example empathic concern item is "*When I see someone being taken advantage of, I feel kind of protective towards them*".

Attention check. An attention check item requested that participants answer '6' on a 10-point scale ranging from 1 (labelled 'completely dissatisfied') to 10 (labelled 'completely satisfied').

Peacebuilding Values. Thirteen items (α = .79) adapted from McKeown and Taylor (2017) examined attitudes towards specific policies regarding peacebuilding, including "*Mixed sports teams of Catholics and Protestants encourage cross-community peacebuilding*" and "*Peace walls in Northern Ireland should be taken down to improve community relations*". These peacebuilding policy items were originally pre-registered as an outcome variable, but we have not analysed them as such. The reasons include that on hindsight reading, the policies are ambiguous in terms of whether they indicate support for peace and reconciliation. For instance, objection to removing so-called 'peace walls' in

Belfast could be seen as opposition to reconciliation, or alternatively as reflecting a concern that doing so would escalate conflict. This ambiguity is reflected in the generally low inter-item correlations among the items, and the fact that these correlations differ between Catholic and Protestant participants. We have nevertheless included all data on these items in the data file on OSF.

<div align="center">

Results

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The jamovi data file and all analyses can be found on the project OSF site: https://osf.io/sgn7a/?view_only=073ff3ff31de40c08b1e7dda444f276a. This file is accessible using the free-to-use jamovi software, and enables step-by-step verification of the analyses reported below, and of the computation of all scales.

Randomization checks

Before the main hypothesis-testing analyses, we conducted randomization checks to ensure that random allocation of participants to condition had avoided potential confounds with demographic variables and covariates. These include participants' religious denomination (Catholic or Protestant), age, gender identity, self-reported family economic status, political party typically supported, and four covariates: ingroup identification, dispositional empathy, quantity of contact with the outgroup, and quality of contact with the outgroup.

A summary of each variable broken down by condition is provided in Tables 1a-1d. One-way ANOVAs with condition as the IV indicated negligible differences across conditions in terms of participants' age, $F < 1$, and family economic status, $F (2, 1197) = 1.65$, $p = .192$, $\eta^2_p = .003$. Similarly, there were no differences between condition in terms of participants' religions denomination, $\chi^2_2 = 0.49$, $p = .782$, gender identity, $\chi^2_4 = 3.08$, $p = .545$, or the political party they typically supported (coded as 1 = Unionist/Loyalist, 2 = Nationalist/Republican, 3 = Neutral, and 4 = None), $\chi^2_6 = 4.75$, $p = .576$. The

Unionist/Loyalist category included the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP), Ulster Unionist Party (UUP), Traditional Unionist Voice (TUV), each of which typically have more support among Protestant communities. The Nationalist/Republican category included Sinn Fein, the Social and Democratic Labour Party (SDLP), and People Before Profit, which are typically have more support among Catholic communities. The Neutral category included parties that do not take a formal position on the constitutional future of Northern Ireland: the Alliance Party and the Green Party.

There were also negligible differences across condition in terms of ingroup identification, quantity of contact, or trait empathy, Fs < 1.04. The only variable to show differences across condition was quality of contact, $F(2, 1198) = 6.24$, $p = .002$, $\eta^2_p = .01$, with a slightly higher mean in the felt understanding condition ($M = 5.78$, $SD = 1.41$) than in the perspective getting ($M = 5.41$, $SD = 1.51$) or control conditions ($M = 5.56$, $SD = 1.46$). Given that this variable was measured after the manipulation, and is also unique among the above variables in representing an *evaluation* of outgroup contact (in terms of its pleasantness), it may be that this effect itself represents a meaningful impact of the manipulation. Nevertheless, we include quality of contact among the covariates in the robustness check analyses reported later in this section.

Table 1a

Covariate means and standard deviations broken down by condition

	Condition	Mean	SD
Econ. status	Felt understanding	3.21	0.83
	Perspective getting	3.14	0.77
	Control	3.11	0.83
Age	Felt understanding	49.30	15.55
	Perspective getting	48.73	13.93
	Control	50.00	14.43
Contact quantity	Felt understanding	5.53	1.62
	Perspective getting	5.45	1.74
	Control	5.60	1.61
Contact quality	Felt understanding	5.78	1.41
	Perspective getting	5.41	1.51
	Control	5.56	1.46
Empathy	Felt understanding	1.69	0.78
	Perspective getting	1.60	0.85
	Control	1.64	0.81
Identification	Felt understanding	1.07	1.82
	Perspective getting	1.08	1.79
	Control	1.06	1.80

Table 1b

Religious denomination broken down by condition

	Condition		
	Felt understanding	Perspective getting	Control
Catholic	155	170	166
Protestant	236	234	245

Table 1c

Participant gender broken down by condition

	Condition		
	Felt understanding	**Perspective getting**	**Control**
Male	163	166	185
Female	223	237	224
Non-binary	3	1	1

Table 1d

Political party support broken down by condition

	Condition		
	Felt understanding	**Perspective getting**	**Control**
Unionist/Loyalist	113	114	120
Nationalist/Republican	102	91	98
Neutral	122	139	119
None	47	55	64

Main analyses: Direct effects of condition on intergroup outcomes

The main hypothesis-testing analyses followed the pre-registered plan. This involved 3 (Condition) X 2 (participant denomination: Catholic, Protestant) ANOVAs on felt understanding (as the main target of the manipulation), felt positive regard (as the proposed mediator), and the outcome variables of optimism, perceived quality of ingroup-outgroup relations, trust, and forgiveness. The means and standard deviations for each of these variables broken down by each combination of condition and denomination are reported in Table 2. The main effect of condition on each variable is also illustrated in Figure 1.

Felt understanding

The main effect of condition on felt understanding was highly significant, F (2, 1197) = 61.75, $p < .001$, $\eta^2_p = .09$, with participants in the felt understanding condition reporting higher felt understanding than did participants in the perspective getting ($t = 10.84$, $p < .001$) or control ($t = 7.65$, $p < .001$) conditions. The latter two conditions in turn differed, with higher felt understanding in the control condition ($t = 3.24$, $p < .001$). The main effect of denomination was also significant, with Protestant participants reporting more felt understanding than did Catholic participants, F (1, 1197) = 26.25, $p < .001$, $\eta^2_p = .02$. Importantly, denomination did not moderate the effect of condition, $F < 1$, $\eta^2_p < .001$.

A similar analysis on felt recognition of conflict experiences (similar to felt understanding, but more narrowly focused on ingroup experiences of violent conflict) showed a very similar pattern. The main effect of condition on felt understanding was highly significant, F (2, 1197) = 20.04, $p < .001$, $\eta^2_p = .03$, with participants in the felt understanding condition reporting higher felt recognition of conflict experiences than did participants in the perspective getting ($t = 6.16$, $p < .001$) or control ($t = 4.41$, $p < .001$) conditions. The latter two conditions in turn did not differ ($t = 1.77$, $p = .077$). The main effect of denomination was also significant, with Catholic participants reporting lower felt

recognition of conflict experiences than did Protestant participants, $F(1, 1197) = 37.33$, $p <$

.001, $\eta^2_p = .03$. Denomination did not moderate the effect of condition, $F(2, 1197) = 2.15$, p

$=.115$, $\eta^2_p = .004$.

Felt positive regard

The main effect of condition on felt positive regard was highly significant, $F(2, 1197)$

$= 16.52$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2_p = .03$: participants in the felt understanding condition reported feeling

more positively regarded by the outgroup than did participants in the perspective getting ($t =$

5.72, $p < .001$) or control ($t = 3.45$, $p < .001$) conditions. The latter two conditions in turn

differed, with higher felt positive regard in the control condition ($t = 2.30$, $p = .022$). The

main effect of denomination was also significant, with Protestant participants reporting more

felt positive regard than did Catholic participants, $F(1, 1197) = 23.48$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2_p = .02$.

Importantly, denomination did not moderate the effect of condition, $F(2, 1197) = 1.84$, p

$=.160$, $\eta^2_p = .003$.

Optimism

The main effect of condition on felt positive regard was highly significant, $F(2, 1188)$

$= 61.97$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2_p = .09$: participants in the felt understanding condition reported more

optimism regarding the future of ingroup-outgroup relations than did participants in the

perspective getting ($t = 11.03$, $p < .001$) or control ($t = 6.97$, $p < .001$) conditions. The latter

two conditions in turn differed, with higher optimism in the control condition ($t = 4.12$, $p <$

.001). The main effect of denomination was also significant, with Protestant participants

reporting more optimism than did Catholic participants, $F(1, 1188) = 6.50$, $p = .005$, $\eta^2_p =$

.005.

Both of these main effects were qualified by an unexpected interaction between the

two factors, $F(2, 1188) = 11.84$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2_p = .02$. Simple main effects analyses indicated

that the effect of condition was still significant among both Catholic ($F = 53.84$, $p < .001$, η^2_p

= .08) and Protestant ($F = 12.15$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2_p = .02$) participants, albeit stronger among

Catholic participants.

Perception of ingroup-outgroup relationship

The main effect of condition on the perceived quality of ingroup-outgroup relations

was highly significant, $F (2, 1176) = 10.99$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2_p = .02$: participants in the felt

understanding condition perceived Catholic-Protestant relations more positively than did

participants in the perspective getting ($t = 3.70$, $p < .001$) or control ($t = 4.38$, $p < .001$)

conditions. The latter two conditions in turn did not differ ($t = 0.68$, $p = .495$). The main

effect of denomination was not significant, $F (1, 1176) = 2.59$, $p = .108$, $\eta^2_p = .002$.

Denomination did not moderate the effect of condition, $F < 1$.

Trust

The main effect of condition on intergroup trust was highly significant, $F (2, 1196) =$

11.21, $p < .001$, $\eta^2_p = .02$: participants in the felt understanding condition reported more trust

than did participants in the perspective getting ($t = 4.72$, $p < .001$) or control ($t = 2.71$, $p =$

$.007$) conditions. The latter two conditions in turn differed, with higher trust in the control

condition ($t = 2.04$, $p = .042$). The main effect of denomination was also significant, with

Protestant participants reporting more trust than did Catholic participants, $F (1, 1196) = 7.99$,

$p = .005$, $\eta^2_p = .007$. Denomination did not moderate the effect of condition, $F (2, 1196) =$

2.56, $p = .078$, $\eta^2_p = .004$.

Forgiveness

The main effect of condition on forgiveness was not significant, $F (2, 1196) = 0.85$, p

$= .428$, $\eta^2_p = .001$. Inspection of the distribution of responses on this variable in panel F of

Figure 1 indicates that this absence of an effect may be due to a ceiling effect whereby high

mean scores across conditions left little room for an additional boost in the felt understanding

condition. The main effect of denomination was similarly small, but significant, with

Catholic participants reporting more forgiveness than did Protestant participants, $F (1, 1196)$ = 6.63, p = .010, η^2_p = .006. Again, the interaction was not significant, $F < 1$.

MANOVA

The pre-registered analysis plan also included a 3 X 2 MANOVA on the four outcome variables (trust, optimism, ingroup-outgroup relations, and forgiveness) to obtain a multivariate estimate of the effect of condition across the variables as whole. The multivariate main effect of condition was significant, λ = .90, $F(8, 2332)$ = 16.04, $p < .001$, as was the main effect of participant denomination, λ = .96, $F(4, 1165)$ = 11.93, $p < .001$. The interaction between these factors was also significant, λ = .97, $F(8, 2330)$ = 3.99, $p < .001$, driven by the interaction on optimism.

Secondary analyses: Robustness of effects to covariates

As per the pre-registered analysis plan, we also checked the robustness of the effects of the manipulation in the presence of other important predictors of our intergroup outcomes. These covariates included ingroup identification, the quantity and the quality of intergroup contact with the outgroup, and dispositional empathy.

Re-running the analyses above while adjusting for these four covariates simultaneously did not alter the effect of condition in terms of its significance ($ps < .001$, except for forgiveness, the effect on which remained non-significant), or its magnitude, which did not vary by more than η^2_p = .01 from the analyses without covariates reported above.

Main analyses: Indirect effects of condition on intergroup outcomes via felt positive regard

To test the indirect effect of condition on each outcome variable via felt positive regard, we tested a mediation model using the PATHj module in jamovi (Gallucci, 2021), with the four outcome variables as correlated outcomes, condition (dummy coded, with the

felt understanding condition as the reference condition) as the predictor, and felt positive regard as the mediator. Confidence intervals for the indirect effects were computed using 5000 bias-corrected bootstrap samples. The results are summarised in Figure 2.

These analyses indicated that the indirect effect of the felt understanding condition relative to the control condition was significant for optimism, $b = .19$, $se = .07$, 95% CIs .06, .33, $p = .008$, perceptions of the ingroup-outgroup relationship, $b = .16$, $se = .06$, 95% CIs .05, .29, $p = .007$, trust, $b = .23$, $se = .08$, 95% CIs .07, .40, $p = .007$, and forgiveness, $b = .12$, $se = .05$, 95% CIs .04, .21, $p = .007$. In each case, being in the felt understanding condition predicted a greater sense of being positively regarded by the outgroup community, which in turn predicted more positive responses for each outcome variable.

The indirect effect of the felt understanding condition relative to the perspective getting condition was similarly positive and highly significant for optimism, $b = .37$, $se = .07$, 95% CIs .22, .51, $p < .001$, perceptions of the ingroup-outgroup relationship, $b = .32$, $se = .06$, 95% CIs .20, .43, $p < .001$, trust, $b = .44$, $se = .08$, 95% CIs .28, .61, $p < .001$, and forgiveness, $b = .24$, $se = .05$, 95% CIs .15, .33, $p < .001$.

Six-week follow-up: direct effects

To test for any longer-lasting effects of the manipulation, we ran the same analyses again on the Time 2 responses of participants whose data could be matched with their Time 1 responses. Descriptive statistics for each variable are reported in Table 3.

Felt understanding and felt positive regard

The main effect of condition was still significant on felt understanding, $F (2, 313) = 3.39$, $p = .035$, $\eta^2_p = .02$, and on felt positive regard, $F (2, 313) = 3.19$, $p = .043$, $\eta^2_p = .02$. Felt understanding was higher in the felt understanding condition ($M = -0.18$; $SD = 1.22$) than in the perspective getting condition ($M = -0.66$; $SD = 1.13$), ($t = 2.60$, $p = .010$). The difference between the felt understanding condition and the control condition ($M = -0.49$; SD

= 1.23) was in the expected direction, but no longer significant, ($t = 1.27$, $p = .206$). Likewise, felt positive regard was higher in the felt understanding condition ($M = 0.33$; $SD = 1.42$) than in the perspective getting condition ($M = -0.19$; $SD = 1.44$), ($t = 2.53$, $p = .012$). The difference between the felt understanding condition and the control condition ($M = 0.10$; $SD = 1.54$) was in the expected direction, but no longer quite significant ($t = 1.21$, $p = .226$). The main effect of participant denomination also remained significant on felt understanding and felt positive regard, Fs $(1, 313) > 15.97$, ps $< .001$, η^2_ps $> .04$. with higher scores reported by Protestant participants on felt understanding, ($M = -0.26$; $SD = 1.21$ vs. $M = -0.81$; $SD = 1.11$), and felt positive regard, ($M = 0.33$; $SD = 1.47$ vs. $M = -0.43$; $SD = 1.36$). The interaction effect on these outcome variables was not significant, Fs $(2, 313) < 1.43$, ps $> .242$, η^2_ps $< .01$.

A similar analysis on the narrower feeling of recognition of conflict experiences indicated that while the means remained in the predicted direction, the main effect of condition was no longer significant, $F (2, 313) = 1.73$, $p = .179$, $\eta^2_p = .01$.

Outcome variables

While the means of the main effect of condition were in the predicted direction, the effect itself was not quite significant on optimism, $F (2, 313) = 1.41$, $p = .246$, $\eta^2_p = .01$, perception of the ingroup-outgroup relationship, $F (2, 313) = 2.01$, $p = .135$, $\eta^2_p = .01$, trust, $F (2, 313) = 2.67$, $p = .071$, $\eta^2_p = .02$, or forgiveness, $F < 1$. The main effect of participant denomination remained significant on optimism, $F (1, 313) = 5.92$, $p = .016$, $\eta^2_p = .02$, and trust, $F (1, 313) = 12.34$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2_p = .04$, with higher scores again reported by Protestant participants. The interaction effects were non-significant in each case, Fs < 1.

Six-week follow-up: indirect effects

We also ran the mediation analyses again on the Time 2 responses of participants whose data could be matched with their Time 1 responses. These analyses indicated that the

indirect effect of the felt understanding condition relative to the perspective getting condition remained positive and highly significant for optimism, $b = .38$, $se = .13$, 95% CIs .12, .65, $p = .005$, perceptions of the ingroup-outgroup relationship, $b = .32$, $se = .11$, 95% CIs .11, .55, $p = .004$, trust, $b = .46$, $se = .16$, 95% CIs .15, .77, $p = .004$, and forgiveness, $b = .27$, $se = .10$, 95% CIs .09, .49, $p = .006$. In each case, being in the felt understanding condition predicted a greater sense of being positively regarded by the outgroup community, which in turn predicted more positive responses for each outcome variable.

The indirect effect of the felt understanding condition relative to the control condition remained positive and of very similar magnitude to those observed at time 1, but were no longer significant due to the smaller sample size at the follow-up: optimism, $b = .17$, $se = .14$, 95% CIs -.12, .45, $p = .227$, perceptions of the ingroup-outgroup relationship, $b = .15$, $se = .12$, 95% CIs -.10, .38, $p = .228$, trust, $b = .21$, $se = .17$, 95% CIs -.14, .54, $p = .226$, and forgiveness, $b = .12$, $se = .10$, 95% CIs -.08, .33, $p = .231$.

Given the reduced statistical power to test the dummy-coded effects of the felt understanding condition relative to control and perspective getting conditions separately, we conducted a final variation of the indirect effects analyses whereby the felt understanding condition (contrast weight = .67) was compared to the perspective getting and control conditions combined (contrast weights = -.33). These analyses were also conducted in view of the fact that the perspective getting and control conditions did not differ in their direct or indirect effects (this contrast was also included in the model). These analyses indicated that the indirect effect of the felt understanding condition relative to the other two conditions was positive and significant for optimism, $b = .27$, $se = .12$, 95% CIs .04, .50, $p = .022$, perceptions of the ingroup-outgroup relationship, $b = .23$, $se = .10$, 95% CIs .04, .43, $p = .020$, trust, $b = .33$, $se = .14$, 95% CIs .05, .60, $p = .020$, and forgiveness, $b = .20$, $se = .09$, 95% CIs .03, .37, $p = .023$. In each case, being in the felt understanding condition predicted a

greater sense of being positively regarded by the outgroup community, which in turn

predicted more positive responses for each outcome variable.

Table 2

Outcome variable means and standard deviations broken down by condition and religious denomination in the main sample (N = 1203)

Religion	Condition	Outcome variable						
		Felt understanding	Conflict recognition	Felt positive regard	Optimism	Trust	Forgiveness	Ingroup-outgroup Relationship
Catholic	Felt understanding	-0.04 (1.16)	-0.74 (1.19)	0.11 (1.39)	4.57 (1.55)	1.01 (1.30)	1.58 (1.11)	0.09 (1.31)
	Perspective getting	-0.93 (1.19)	-1.34 (1.23)	-0.61 (1.21)	2.83 (1.35)	0.30 (1.25)	1.43 (1.06)	-0.33 (1.20)
	Control	-0.71 (1.11)	-1.33 (1.16)	-0.43 (1.41)	3.49 (1.47)	0.50 (1.39)	1.44 (1.17)	-0.41 (1.31)
Protestant	Felt understanding	0.36 (1.19)	-0.41 (1.43)	0.30 (1.36)	4.23 (1.55)	0.98 (1.49)	1.33 (1.33)	0.11 (1.26)
	Perspective getting	-0.64 (1.27)	-0.96 (1.27)	-0.15 (1.49)	3.55 (1.56)	0.68 (1.64)	1.26 (1.40)	-0.17 (1.29)
	Control	-0.31 (1.26)	-0.64 (1.40)	0.14 (1.59)	3.78 (1.53)	0.90 (1.66)	1.27 (1.50)	-0.21 (1.35)

Table 3

Outcome variable means and standard deviations broken down by condition and religious denomination at six-week follow up (N = 319)

Religion	Condition	Outcome variable						
		Felt understanding	Conflict recognition	Felt positive regard	Optimism	Trust	Forgiveness	Ingroup-outgroup Relationship
Catholic	Felt understanding	-0.73 (1.26)	-1.24 (1.22)	-0.16 (1.49)	3.65 (1.50)	0.67 (1.41)	1.44 (1.16)	-0.19 (1.31)
	Perspective getting	-0.99 (1.03)	-1.37 (1.14)	-0.60 (1.31)	3.39 (1.16)	0.42 (1.12)	1.50 (1.00)	-0.35 (1.16)
	Control	-0.65 (0.98)	-1.42 (1.29)	-0.50 (1.27)	3.53 (1.28)	0.32 (1.36)	1.17 (0.97)	-0.23 (1.01)
Protestant	Felt understanding	0.10 (1.08)	-0.30 (1.24)	0.58 (1.31)	4.12 (1.46)	1.39 (1.34)	1.60 (1.17)	0.11 (1.29)
	Perspective getting	-0.54 (1.13)	-0.95 (1.37)	-0.04 (1.42)	3.77 (1.46)	0.77 (1.64)	1.39 (1.38)	-0.27 (1.22)
	Control	-0.38 (1.35)	-0.71 (1.42)	0.37 (1.58)	3.74 (1.53)	1.04 (1.66)	1.53 (1.37)	0.02 (1.43)

Figure 1

Effect of condition on felt understanding (panel A), felt positive regard (panel B), optimism (panel C), perceptions of the ingroup-outgroup relationship (panel D), trust in the outgroup (panel E), and forgiveness (panel F). The black dot and error bars within each boxplot represent the mean and 95% CIs for that condition. Orange dots represent the distribution of individual responses within each condition.
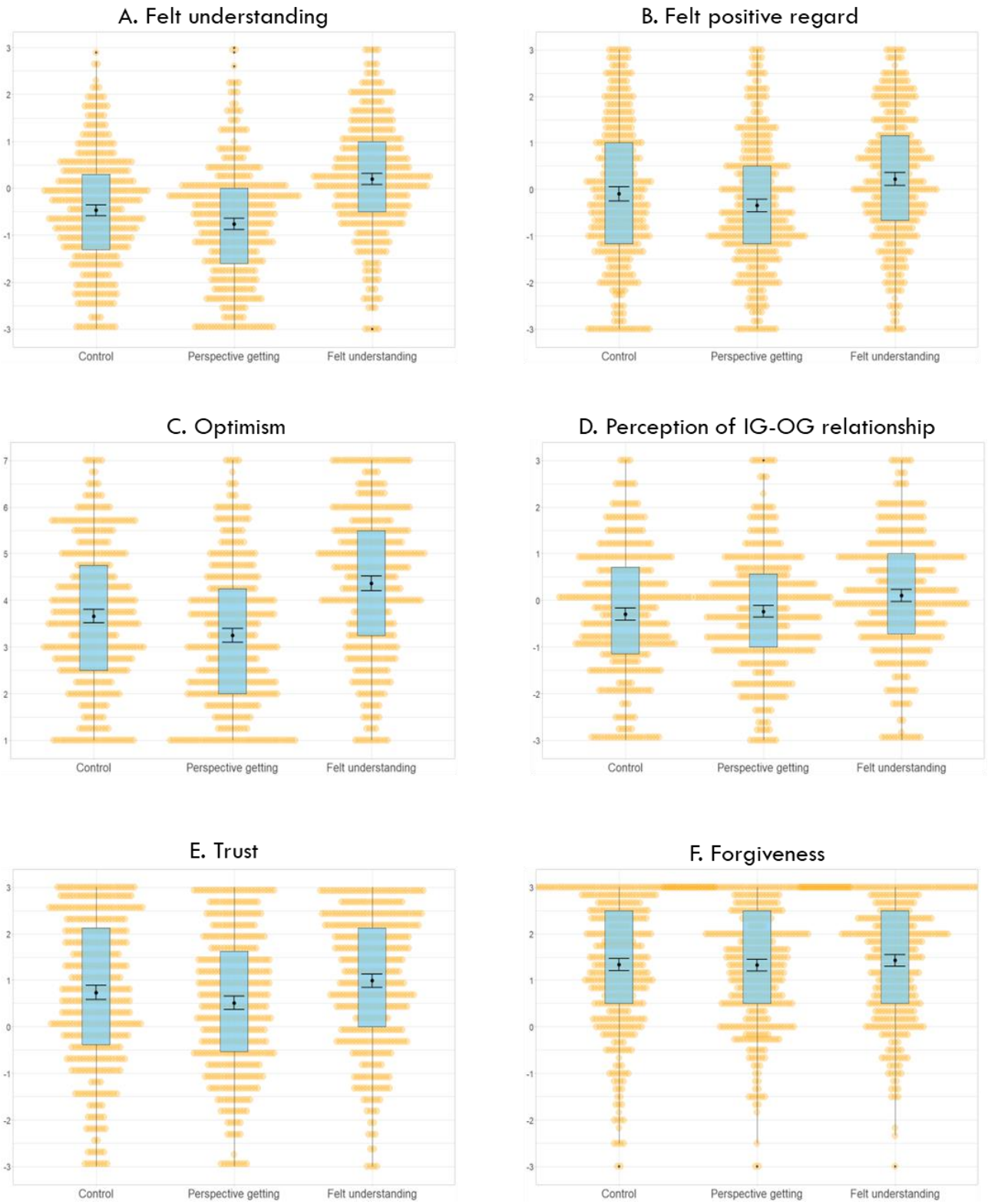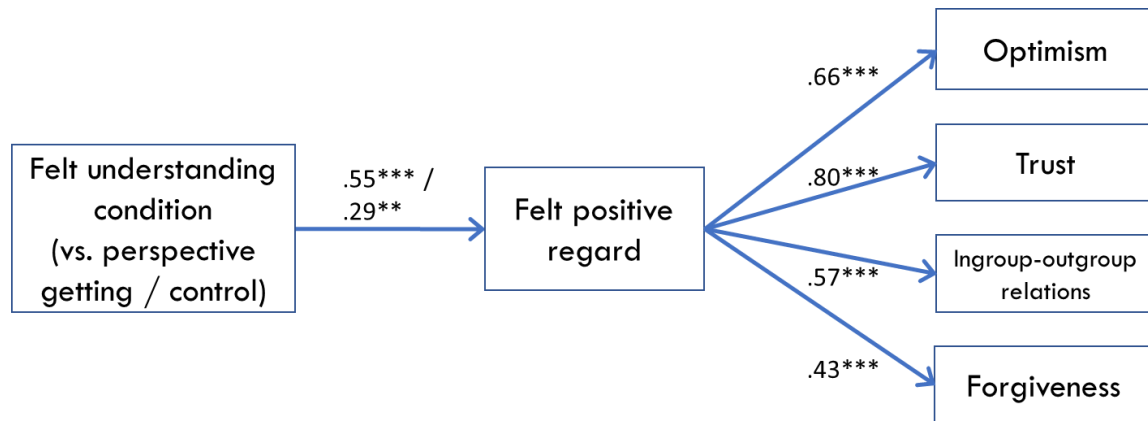
Figure 2

Indirect paths from condition (dummy coded) to each intergroup outcome variable via felt positive regard

Indirect effect estimates vs. perspective getting condition: $bs \geq .24$, 95% CIs [.15, .33]

Indirect effect estimates vs. control condition: $bs \geq .12$, 95% CIs [.04, .21]

***$p < .001$ **$p = .006$

Discussion

Our aim in this research was to develop a theory-informed procedure for improving relations between groups by fostering felt understanding, and which can scale up beyond dyadic or small-group communications. An initial stage of structured communication between Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland was used to develop intervention materials for the main field study, which tested the effect of reflected back perspectives – which summarise for ingroup members what outgroup members' believe is important to ingroup members – on a larger sample of Catholics and Protestants.

Results indicated that reading outgroup members' reflected back summaries of ingroup perspectives increased the extent to which participants felt understood and positively regarded by outgroup members. It also led to greater trust, optimism regarding relations between the groups, and more positive perceptions of the ingroup-outgroup relationship in the present. While there was no difference in forgiveness between conditions, this is likely attributable to ceiling effects (high mean scores across all conditions).

The distributions of responses on each outcome in Figure 1 indicate that (descriptively at least) there were also noticeably fewer people answering at the most extreme negative end of the response scale in the felt understanding condition. This suggests that not only was the felt understanding condition able to shift the overall mean response in a positive direction, but was also able to 'reach' the most negatively-inclined participants in the sample.

Consistent with previous research (Brik et al., 2023; Livingstone et al., 2024), there was also support for the hypothesised process underlying these positive effects: relative to the control and 'perspective-getting' conditions, the felt understanding condition indirectly predicted more positive responses on all outcomes via the perception that outgroup members regarded ingroup members positively. Finally, there was some tentative, but encouraging evidence that effects on felt understanding and felt positive regard, and indirect effects of

condition on other outcomes, were still discernible six weeks later (albeit primarily in relation to the 'perspective getting' condition).

Implications

Building on recent research regarding the positive role of felt understanding as a social psychological component of improving intergroup relations, the present findings provide evidence for how theory-informed interventions may be developed that foster intergroup felt understanding in conflict-affected societies. The results suggest that this can be achieved by structuring intergroup communication so that it involves an explicit 'reflecting back' step in which group members hear outgroup members communicate their understanding of ingroup perspectives. This approach draws upon theory and research on features of high-quality listening (Itzchakov et al., 2022, 2024) and on the importance of receiving unconditional understanding in unfreezing conflictual or problematic relationships (Rogers, 1989; Rosenberg, 2015), and works by targeting the specifically 'meta-meta' level of perception that characterizes felt understanding. That is, 'reflecting back' steps in communication provide a way of positively shaping group members' beliefs about outgroup perspectives on ingroup perspectives (as opposed to perspective-taking or perspective-getting per se; Galinsky & Moskowitz, 2000; Kalla & Broockman, 2023).

The results also indicate that the positive potential of this structured communication approach to developing felt understanding need not be confined to those directly involved in the initial stage of communication. Instead, the rich responses from an initial stage of structured communication between a small number of group members were developed into materials that could be presented to a much larger audience of members of each community. An intervention of this form can therefore be 'scaled up' to have much wider reach and impact beyond those involved in dyadic or small group dialogues. Relatedly, the form of materials in the present study – a relatively brief (~500 words) selection of quotes from

outgroup members, presented online – could be adapted into stronger, more impactful forms,

such videoed responses of outgroup members, and with repeated presentation to achieve

cumulative effects. These adaptations could help to overcome the partial deterioration of the

effects evident six weeks later in this study.

Limitations and future directions

Other possibilities for future research follow from the limitations of the present

research. For instance, it would be valuable to examine the effects of felt understanding-

focused interventions (1) on longer-term outcomes in greater detail than was possible here

(Kalla & Broockman, 2023), and (2) on behavior in subsequent unstructured interactions over

time.

Given the focus of this study on one context (Northern Ireland), it is also important to

replicate the research in other settings. This includes the value of examining these processes

in settings of more markedly unequal status and power relations, and in which there are clear

'victim' and 'perpetrator' groups. For instance, the needs-based model of reconciliation

(Shnabel & Nadler, 2008) suggests that these groups have different needs (a victim group

needing control/agency; a perpetrator group needing a repaired moral image), and it would be

important to test whether a method such as that used in this study could be adapted to meet

these different needs in structured dialogue.

Relatedly, it would be valuable to assess how complex appraisals of collective

victimhood (particularly competitive victimhood, which has been found to impede

reconciliation willingness; Bilali & Vollhardt, 2019; Vollhardt, 2020) might both constrain

and be modified by a felt understanding-focused intervention, which could conceivably touch

upon groups' respective experiences and perceptions of victimhood and suffering.

As a concluding comment, it is also important to acknowledge that the social

psychological processes examined here are only one aspect of peace-building, which can be

complex and protracted, and requires multi-level and multi-disciplinary perspectives

(Rouhana, 2004; Rouhana & Bar-Tal, 1998). With this perspective in mind, the contribution

of the present findings is in providing initial insights into practical ways in which felt

understanding, as an important psychological component of reconciliation, can be fostered in

a conflict-affected society.

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