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FlashReport

Increasing outgroup trust, reducing infrahumanization, and enhancing future contact intentions via imagined intergroup contact

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ABSTRACT

The present study was designed to test whether imagined intergroup contact (Crisp & Turner, 2009) affects attributions of human emotions to outgroup members and positive behavioral intentions toward the outgroup via increased outgroup trust. Italian fourth-graders took part in a three-week intervention, where they were asked to imagine meeting an unknown immigrant child in various social settings. One week after the last session, they were administered the dependent measures. Results revealed an indirect effect of imagined contact on both behavioral intentions and attributions of uniquely human emotions to outgroup members via outgroup trust. The theoretical and practical implications are discussed, and an integration of the imagined contact and infrahumanization literature is suggested.

Introduction

Extensive research has consistently demonstrated that intergroup contact is effective in improving relations between groups (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006) and has identified key underlying processes of the contact effects (see Brown & Hewstone, 2005). The current emphasis on *indirect* forms of contact, representing more flexible and dynamic operationalizations of actual contact (Dovidio, Eller, & Hewstone, 2011), has led to the development of a novel line of work that has gained significant attention by intergroup relations researchers: imagined contact (Crisp, Husnu, Meleady, Stathi, & Turner, 2010; Crisp, Stathi, Turner, & Husnu, 2009; Crisp & Turner, 2009). In the present paper, we extend the work on imagined contact by (a) testing the effectiveness of imagined contact on both subtle and explicit intergroup attitudes, and (b) examining outgroup trust as a novel and central mediator of imagined contact. Specifically, we evaluate the effects of imagined contact on trust, attributions of humanness and behavioral intentions toward immigrants among Italian elementary school children. Critically, and to the best of our knowledge, this work represents the first test of imagined contact as a way of reducing infrahumanization, and enhancing future contact intentions, through greater outgroup trust.

Imagined contact rests on the idea that simply imagining positive encounters with an outgroup member can ameliorate intergroup attitudes. There is substantial and growing evidence demonstrating the positive benefits of imagined contact for intergroup relations (e.g., Husnu & Crisp, 2010a; Stathi & Crisp, 2008; Stathi, Crisp, & Hogg, 2011; Turner & Crisp, 2010; Turner, Crisp, & Lambert, 2007; West, Holmes, & Hewstone, 2011). Current research has identified some mediating processes of the effects of this technique, such as intergroup anxiety, vividness of the imagined scenario, intergroup attitudes and dispositional attributions (for a review, see Crisp et al., 2010). In this study, we focus on outgroup trust as a fundamental underlying process of positive intergroup relations, especially in contexts of conflict and segregation. Outgroup trust is an important factor for the development of harmonious relations between groups and a mediator of the direct contact effects (Cehajic, Brown, & Castano, 2008; Tam, Hewstone, Kenworthy, & Cairns, 2009; Turner, Hewstone, & Voci, 2007). Trust is associated with feelings of transparency and certainty and implies positive expectations and confidence about others' behaviors and intentions (Kramer & Carnevale, 2001; Rousseau, Sitkin, Burt, & Camerer, 1998; Tropp, 2008). Although trust is difficult to achieve and requires many positive encounters in order to develop (Worchel, Cooper, & Goethals, 1991), once formed, it favors cooperation and benevolence between members of different groups (Lewicki & Wiethoff, 2000).

The development of trust has beneficial effects for children. For instance, it limits children's feelings of loneliness (Rotenberg et al., 2010) and is critical for psychological functioning and adjustment (Rotenberg, Boulton, & Fox, 2005). There is also evidence that trust is an essential component for friendship formation in children (Buzzelli,

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1988; Moyer & Kunz, 1975). The lack of trust can thus inhibit children's intentions of interacting with outgroup peers and worsen their evaluation. If mentally simulated interactions with the outgroup can foster feelings of trust, this, in turn, should allow the emergence of more positive intergroup attitudes, such as reduced infrahumanization and improved intergroup behavioral intentions. We believe that examining ways to enhance outgroup trust in classroom settings is of special importance. The school setting provides a context where children with different identities and backgrounds interact with each other, experience frequent and often unavoidable contact with outgroup peers, and can form attitudes toward diversity and different others.

Our first criterion variable concerns humanness attributions to outgroup members. Outgroup infrahumanization is the process leading to perceive the outgroup as less human than the ingroup (for reviews, see Haslam, Loughnan, Kashima, & Bain, 2008; Leyens, Demoulin, Vaes, Gaunt, & Paladino, 2007). Leyens and colleagues, for instance, found that participants tended to assign more uniquely human (secondary) emotions to the ingroup than to the outgroup. This differential attribution was not observed for more basic (primary) emotions that humans share with animals (e.g., Cortes, Demoulin, Rodriguez, Rodriguez, & Leyens, 2005). Denying humanness to the outgroup has pervasive detrimental effects on intergroup relations (e.g., Cuddy, Rock, & Norton, 2007; Goff, Eberhardt, Williams, & Jackson, 2008; Vaes, Paladino, Castelli, Leyens, & Giovanazzi, 2003). Notably, outgroup infrahumanization may be a result of automatic processes (Boccato, Capozza, Falvo, & Durante, 2008; Paladino et al., 2002), and can therefore be more difficult to change than blatant forms of discrimination. Initial evidence suggests that children can also exhibit the infrahumanization bias. Martin, Bennett, and Murray (2008) found that children aged 6–7 years and 10–11 years view the ingroup as more human than the outgroup in the sense that its members are perceived as superior in experiencing uniquely human emotions.

Research has shown that intergroup contact can restrain infrahumanization (Brown, Eller, Leeds, & Stace, 2007; Tam et al., 2007), and intergroup emotions, especially empathy and anxiety, may intervene in this process (Capozza, Trifiletti, Vezzali, & Favara, submitted for publication). In line with the general premise that imagined contact can be applied when direct contact is not feasible, for example due to lack of encounter opportunities with outgroups (Crisp & Turner, 2009), it is important to examine if we can rely on imagined interactions as a first step toward the enhancement of intergroup trust and humanness attributions. Our hypothesis is that imagined contact will favor both outgroup trust and humannness attributions to the outgroup. Enhancing initial evidence that intergroup trust is negatively related to infrahumanization (Andrighetto, Mari, Volpato, & Behluli, in press), we also expect that increased outgroup trust following imagined contact should foster attributions of humanness to outgroup members.

To the extent that imagined contact is considered a facilitator of real interactions with outgroup members (Crisp & Turner, 2009; Stathi et al., 2011), we highlight the importance of measuring intergroup behavioral intentions. Research conducted with adult samples demonstrated that imagined contact fosters positive outgroup behavioral intentions (e.g., Husnu & Crisp, 2010a). We aimed at extending these results, by showing that Italian children exposed to imagined contact would reveal greater interest for contact with immigrant peers, and that this effect can last at least 1 week. In line with research showing that outgroup trust is related to more positive behavioral intentions (Tam et al., 2009), we also expect that imagined contact will increase intergroup positive behavioral intentions through enhanced outgroup trust. Demonstrating that imagined contact fosters willingness to engage in subsequent intergroup encounters, via enhancing trust, would greatly support the role of this type of contact as a strategy for bringing groups with different identities together.

Method

Participants and procedure

Participants were 34 Italian fourth-graders (15 females; mean age = 9 years 5 months), randomly allocated to the experimental ($n = 17$) or the control ($n = 17$) condition. Children in the experimental condition took part in three intervention sessions, each lasting about 30 min. The interventions, conducted in groups of five to six children, were implemented once a week for three consecutive weeks by a research assistant. Participants were asked to imagine having a pleasant interaction with an unknown immigrant child who just arrived from a foreign country. In order to minimize the possibility of subtyping the imagined contact partner, so impairing the generalization process, the imagined intergroup context was systematically varied. Specifically, every week participants imagined to interact with a different immigrant child in a different contact scenario: at school (first session), in the neighborhood (second session), at the park (third session). To reinforce the effects of imagined contact, in each session participants were given 15 min to write down a description of the imagined encounter. They were asked to focus on the details of the imagined situation, such as the characteristics of the immigrant, the activities they performed, the things they said in order to become friends. This enhanced elaboration has been shown to strengthen the imagined contact effects (Husnu & Crisp, 2010a). An example of the instructions was the following:

> I would like you to take some minutes to imagine that an immigrant child that just arrived from a foreign country comes to your class and the teacher asks him/her to sit near you. He/she doesn't know what to say, but you quickly start to talk and have fun together. Think of how the immigrant child is, the things you do together in order to have fun, what you say to become friends.

Children also engaged in a 10-minute discussion with the research assistant, centered on what they just imagined. One week after the last session, participants were administered a questionnaire containing the dependent measures. Participants allocated to the control condition did not engage in any imagined contact session and were just asked to complete the questionnaire.

Measures

For all measures, a 5-step scale was used, ranging from 1 (*definitely not*) to 5 (*definitely*).

Outgroup trust

Two items were used (e.g., "Do you trust lending your best toy to an unknown immigrant child?"), adapted from Tropp, Stout, Boatswain, Wright, and Pettigrew (2006). Ratings were aggregated (alpha = .90), with higher scores indicating stronger trust.

Humanness attributions

We used two positive (hope, pride) and two negative (remorse, shame) uniquely human emotions, and two positive (pleasure, excitement) and two negative (anger, fear) non-uniquely human emotions. These were adapted from Demoulin et al. (2004), and selected with the help of the teachers, on the basis of which ones would be comprehensible for children. Participants indicated how much outgroup members are likely to feel each of the emotions presented. Scores were averaged to obtain single indices of uniquely (alpha = .74) and non-uniquely human emotions (alpha = .81).

Behavioral intentions toward the outgroup

We adapted three items by Cameron and Rutland (2006; see also Vezzali, Stathi, & Giovannini, in press). Participants were asked to

think whether they would be happy to meet an unknown immigrant child, would like to play with him/her, would invite him/her to go and have an ice-cream together. Ratings were aggregated (alpha = .79): higher scores reflect more positive behavioral intentions toward the outgroup.

Results

Means and standard deviations of measures are reported in Table 1. To test the hypotheses, planned independent sample *t*-tests and mediation analyses were conducted. In line with hypotheses, outgroup trust was higher in the imagined contact than in the control condition, $t(32) = 4.88$, $p < .001$. Similarly, behavioral intentions toward the outgroup were more positive in the imagined contact than in the control condition, $t(32) = 3.76$, $p = .001$. It is worth noting that both outgroup trust and behavioral intentions were reliably higher than the scale midpoint only in the imagined contact condition, $ts(17) > 6.66$, $ps < .001$.

Supporting the hypotheses, planned *t*-tests revealed that in the control condition participants assigned more non-uniquely than uniquely human emotions to outgroup members $t(16) = 2.07$, $p = .05$. However, the difference between the two types of emotions was non-significant in the experimental condition, $t(16) = 1.30$, $p = .21$.

Not surprisingly, there was no difference between conditions for non-uniquely human emotions, $t(32) < 1$. There was a tendency to assign more uniquely human emotions to the outgroup in the experimental compared to the control condition; however, this effect did not reach conventional levels of significance, $t(32) = 1.14$, $p = .26$ (see Table 1).

To investigate mediation effects, multiple regression was applied. Our hypothesis was that imagined contact would affect uniquely (but not non-uniquely) human emotions and outgroup behavioral intentions through outgroup trust. First, dummy-coded experimental condition (1 = imagined contact; 0 = control) was reliably associated with outgroup trust, $\beta = .65$, $p < .001$. Second, when both the experimental condition and outgroup trust were included in the regression equation, the path from outgroup trust to uniquely human emotions was significant, $\beta = .60$, $p < .01$, whereas the path from experimental condition to the criterion variable was unreliable, $\beta = -.20$, $p = .35$. To test if the mediation effect was significant, bootstrapping analyses were conducted by using the SPSS macros provided by Preacher and Hayes (2008). Since 0 was excluded from the 95% confidence interval (ranging from .16 to .89), the indirect effect was significant, $p < .05$. Thus, consistent with predictions, imagined contact enhanced attributions of humanness to the outgroup through outgroup trust. As expected, for non-uniquely human emotions, they were not associated neither with the experimental condition, $\beta = -.12$, $p = .59$, nor with outgroup trust, $\beta = .36$, $p = .12$.

Finally, when the experimental condition and the hypothesized mediator were simultaneously used as predictors of behavioral intentions toward the outgroup, the path from outgroup trust to behavioral intentions was significant, $\beta = .40$, $p < .05$, whereas the experimental condition did not affect the outcome variable, $\beta = .29$, $p = .12$. The indirect effect, calculated with bootstrapping procedures, was significant (95% confidence interval ranging from .06 to .96), $p < .05$.

Table 1
Effects of imagined contact on dependent variables (standard deviations are in parentheses).

Measure	Condition	
	Imagined contact	Control
Outgroup trust	4.18 (0.73)	2.47 (1.24)
Behavioral intentions toward the outgroup	4.29 (0.50)	3.41 (0.83)
Outgroup non-uniquely human emotions	4.46 (0.52)	4.34 (0.55)
Outgroup uniquely human emotions	4.37 (0.42)	4.16 (0.61)

Discussion

In the present study, we provided consistent evidence for outgroup trust as a new mediator of the effects of imagined contact by considering two different types of intergroup bias: one more subtle, attributions of humanness, and one more explicit, behavioral intentions toward the outgroup.

Our research extends previous findings concerning the effectiveness of contact on outgroup infrahumanization (e.g., Brown et al., 2007). Specifically, we showed that the mental simulation of positive intergroup interactions can foster the attribution of uniquely human emotions to the outgroup among elementary school children. This effect was indirect, through outgroup trust. Several authors argued that a direct effect is not a necessary condition for mediation to occur (e.g., Preacher & Hayes, 2008; Taylor, MacKinnon, & Tein, 2008). It is worth noting that there was a non-significant tendency for imagined contact to directly enhance the attribution of uniquely human emotions to the outgroup. Possibly, three intervention sessions were not sufficient to produce a significant influence on humanness attributions; alternatively, the effects weakened quickly, before data collection, which took place 1 week after the last session. Critically, the intervention was sufficiently powerful to increase outgroup trust that, once enhanced, led to the attribution of uniquely human emotions to outgroup members. By enhancing trust, imagined contact favors the perception that cooperation is possible and thus, in turn, the idea that outgroup members should be regarded as human as ingroup members. Similarly, enhanced trust resulting from imagined contact can potentially lead to outgroup members shifting closer to the self, and thus benefiting from the ample regard of the self as human. To the extent that infrahumaniziation is a widespread phenomenon with detrimental consequences on intergroup relations, we believe that systematically examining strategies that limit the denial of humanness to outgroups is of primary importance. Importantly, since people are often unaware of their infrahumanization tendencies (Boccato et al., 2008), these results help to rule out alternative explanations of imagined contact effects based on demand characteristics.

The finding that imagined contact, by enhancing outgroup trust, improved behavioral intentions toward the outgroup, further supports the idea that this strategy is useful as a pre-contact tool, so as to encourage people to approach outgroup members with positive intentions (Crisp et al., 2010). Our results also extend previous studies by showing that imagined contact is not a "one-shot solution," and can be seen as a first step for favoring future intergroup contact. Indeed, in line with suggestions by Crisp and collaborators, we incorporated imagined contact in a longer-term intervention by creating a program that includes three sessions of imagined contact.

One limitation of this study is that children in the control group did not engage in imagined contact. However, there is evidence that the imagined contact effects do not depend on demand characteristics (e.g., Turner & Crisp, 2010), and are not a function of a simple act of imagery (e.g., Turner, Crisp, et al., 2007, Study 1) or mere exposure to an outgroup category (e.g., Turner & Crisp, 2010, Study 2).

The present research increases the external validity of the imagined contact literature, by showing that imagined contact is an effective strategy for improving intergroup relations also outside the laboratory and when participants are elementary school children. Notably, whereas previous research examined the imagined contact effects immediately after the mental simulation task (but see Husnu & Crisp, 2010b, where the outcome variables were measured 1 day after the imagined contact session), we administered the dependent

variables 1 week after the last intervention session. Thus, prejudice-reduction strategies based on imagined contact can have relatively long-lasting effects and represent a powerful way to ameliorate intergroup relations. This is especially noteworthy since interventions based on direct contact are often unpractical and can be costly. Finally, our study shows that imagined contact, by promoting trust, limits subtle and dangerous forms of bias such as the differential attribution of uniquely human emotions to outgroup members.

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