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Imagined Intergroup Contact: A New Technique for Encouraging Greater Inter-Ethnic Contact in Cyprus

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Intergroup Contact Theory maintains that the most effective way to reduce prejudice and discrimination is through contact between groups. However, where actual contact is impractical, or unlikely, imagined intergroup contact (Crisp & Turner, 2009) may represent a viable alternative. This study tested imagined contact in a context defined by extremely low levels of contact, the inter-ethnically divided island of Cyprus. Turkish Cypriot participants who repeatedly imagined positive contact with Greek Cypriots subsequently reported greater intentions to engage in future contact. This article discusses the benefits of applying this new technique to contexts that, like Cyprus, historically have very low levels of actual contact.

Encouraging intergroup contact is a highly effective method for improving intergroup relationships (Allport, 1954; Oskamp & Jones, 2000; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). Yet, in the most segregated social contexts, the undoubted benefits of contact may be unrealized. There are many examples of communities for whom few opportunities for intergroup contact exist due to pervasive physical or social segregation. Cyprus is one example where the benefits of contact have remained unrealized. Despite the partial opening of the borders in 2003, only 1% of Greek Cypriots and 8% of Turkish Cypriots say that they frequently cross the "green line" that divides the

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island (United Nations [UN], 2007). Recent research has, however, identified a potential means of overcoming this problem in the form of *imagined intergroup contact* (Crisp & Turner, 2009). Regardless of whether perceivers have experienced direct contact with the outgroup, imagining intergroup contact can encourage more positive attitudes toward outgroup members. In this article, we extend research on imagined contact by further specifying the conditions under which it will be maximally effective and by applying the technique to the inter-ethnically divided island of Cyprus.

THE CYPRUS CONFLICT

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Cyprus is the third largest island in the Eastern Mediterranean, with a strategic location at the crossroads of Europe, Asia, and Africa. The British received Cyprus as a crown colony of Great Britain from the Ottoman Empire in the late 1880s until 1960 when the Republic of Cyprus was established. The first signs of trouble appeared throughout the anti-colonial struggles in the 1950s that led to Greek Cypriot aspirations for "Enosis" or union with Greece, which was retaliated by Turkish Cypriot desires of "Taksim" partition of the island, divided between Greece and Turkey (Hadjipavlou-Trigeorgis & Trigeorgis, 1993). The arrangement of the independent state soon fell apart, as the early 1960s saw periods of serious communal violence. In 1974, a Greek-inspired coup against President Makarios, in a last attempt at Enosis, eventually led to interethnic war. Initially, the violence was intra-communal, among Greek Cypriots alone. However, it soon involved Turkish Cypriots. Turkey, as a guarantor power by the 1960 agreements, sent troops to intervene. Years later, this is still regarded as an illegal invasion by Greek Cypriots, and as a peace operation by Turkish Cypriots. The result was a cease-fire line that left Turkish Cypriots in the northern one third of the island and Greek Cypriots in the south. Approximately 180,000 Greek Cypriots were forced to flee to the south, leaving villages, homes, and businesses behind. Approximately 50,000 Turkish Cypriots also became refugees during the violence (Dodd, 2005; Mehmet, 1992).

Today a UN mediation effort continues with UN soldiers remaining on the "Green Line," a UN buffer zone separating the two ethnicities. Despite many attempts over the years to establish an agreement between the two sides, nothing has yet prevailed. In April 2003, the Turkish Cypriot administration announced a new policy of opening up the borders, followed, in turn, by the Greek Cypriots, which has given the communities the opportunity to visit the "other side." Despite the removal of the physical border separating Greek from Turk, the two communities remain very much

segregated on their own side of the island; hence, the psychological border remains unbreached. This inevitably maintains and reinforces conflict between the two communities through the perpetuation of ignorance regarding the "other."

A number of unofficial interventions have been conducted on the island. In the early 1980s, the Middle East Institute sponsored an assessment of attitudes and how they might be changed, and arrangements to lessen the impact of negative attitudes on the conflict. Third-party facilitators were able to help participants redefine the conflict in terms of underlying concerns and areas of compatibility, allowing participants to establish trust, understand key issues, and establish a potential settlement (Stoddard, 1986). Another unofficial intervention resulted in four conflict analysis workshops in the early 1990s (Fisher, 2001). Subsequent to the workshop, participants were able to establish an annual bi-communal art exhibit, conduct a series of cross-line meetings with leaders, and eventually establish a joint steering committee to foster inter-communal interactions. The most recent developments include joining the forces of the Conflict Management Group and the Institute for Multi-Track Diplomacy with the World Peace Foundation to undertake a project designed to address the obstacles to negotiation. Influential Greek Cypriot and Turkish Cypriot citizens, some with connections to their respective leaders, have met in a series of joint brainstorming sessions led by third-party facilitators. Despite such interventions, the consistency of meetings, and their direct effectiveness and connection to decision and policymaking, has been limited (Fisher, 2001).

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INTERGROUP CONTACT THEORY

Intergroup Contact Theory maintains that the most effective way to reduce prejudice and intergroup discrimination is through contact between groups (Allport, 1954; Brown & Hewstone, 2005; Pettigrew, 1998). Empirical support for the hypothesis, summarized in a recent meta-analysis by Pettigrew and Tropp (2006), has confirmed that intergroup contact reduces prejudice, regardless of target group, age group, geographical area, or contact setting.

Despite the clear benefits of contact, these benefits can only be realized in contexts that afford the *opportunity* for contact. Segregation and lack of contact, although not the cause, may enhance mutual ignorance and thereby play an important role in establishing, maintaining, and intensifying conflict existing between communities (Whyte, 1990). Many examples exist where there are few opportunities for real and meaningful contact. For instance, in Belfast, Northern Ireland, few Catholics or Protestants reside in the "other" community, and only 5% of Northern Irish children attend mixed

Catholic–Protestant schools (Census, 2001). Cyprus represents a clear case where segregation prevents access to the benefits of contact. Despite the partial opening of the borders in 2003, the opportunity for reconnection, communication, and reconciliation has not been politically or socially legitimized enough to break down psychological barriers (Hadjipavlou, 2007).

IMAGINED INTERGROUP CONTACT

Mental imagery is the imitative representation of a possible event or events (Taylor & Schneider, 1989). It elicits emotional and motivational responses similar to the real experience (Dadds, Bovbjerg, Redd, & Cutmore, 1997), and neuropsychological studies have shown that it utilizes similar neurological mechanisms as memory, emotion, and motor control (Farah, 1989; Kosslyn, Ganis, & Thompson, 2001). Recent research has shown that imagining a particular *social* context can evoke cognitive and behavioral effects consonant with those experienced in the context itself. For instance, Garcia, Weaver, Moskowitz, and Darley (2002) demonstrated that simply imagining being in a crowded room led to significantly less helping behavior, in line with the typical bystander apathy effect (Darley & Latané, 1968; Latané & Darley, 1968). From this research emerged the idea that imagined contact may have an impact on intergroup attitudes.

Imagined intergroup contact is "the mental simulation of a social interaction with a member or members of an outgroup category" (Crisp & Turner, 2009, p. 234). There is growing empirical evidence that, in addition to being simple and easy to administer, imagined contact may have discernible benefits for intergroup relationships, particularly in settings where the chances of actual contact are low. For instance, in three studies, Turner, Crisp, and Lambert (2007) found that simply imagining contact with an outgroup member (an elderly man or a gay man) led subsequently to more positive evaluations of that outgroup. As with actual contact, this positive effect on intergroup attitudes was explained by reduced intergroup anxiety following the imagery task. Turner and Crisp (in press) observed similar effects on a measure of implicit attitudes of young toward elderly and of non-Muslims toward Muslims. Stathi and Crisp (2008) found that imagining contact elicited the projection of positive traits from the self to the other after imagining positive contact; and Abrams et al. (2008) showed that imagined contact can even reduce stereotype threat effects (Steele, 1997).

Imagined contact works via the same mechanisms as real contact. Specifically, when people imagine intergroup contact, they should engage in conscious processes that parallel the processes involved in actual intergroup contact. They may, for example, actively think about what they would learn about

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the outgroup member, how they would feel during the interaction, and how this would influence their perceptions of both that outgroup member and outgroup members more generally. In turn, this leads to more positive evaluations of the outgroup, similar to the effects of face-to-face contact (e.g., Islam & Hewstone, 1993; Paolini, Hewstone, Cairns, & Voci, 2004). It is important to note that it is not enough to just *think* about the outgroup, a process that can lead to the activation of negative stereotypes, *exacerbating* bias (Bargh, Chen, & Burrows, 1996). Rather, it is uniquely the mental simulation of the contact encounter that yields the positive effects. Supporting this assertion, Turner et al. (2007, Experiment 2) showed that imagined contact reduced bias compared to a condition in which participants were simply primed with the outgroup (by being asked to "just think" about the outgroup).

Finally, it is also important to note that previous imagined contact studies have ruled out informational load (Turner et al., 2007, Experiment 1), stereotype priming (Turner et al., 2007, Experiment 2), and positive affective priming and non-relevant social interaction (Stathi & Crisp, 2008, Experiment 2) as alternative explanations for the imagined contact effect, and have demonstrated the effects on implicit (millisecond response time) measures of attitude change (Turner & Crisp, in press). It is, uniquely, the mental simulation of positively toned intergroup contact that improves intergroup attitudes in these studies.

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A STUDY OF IMAGINED CONTACT

The aim of this research was to test the effectiveness of imagined contact for enhancing *intentions* to engage in future contact. Behavioral intentions are an important outcome variable to consider for contact research because they are the most proximal psychological variable to actual behavior. They represent our desire to attain a goal and where that goal is increased contact, then the intention should have a positive impact on intergroup relationships. The underlying assumption is that the likelihood of carrying out an action is, quite reasonably, based on the extent to which we intend to do so. Accordingly, Anderson (1983), for instance, found that those students who invented scenarios of themselves donating blood subsequently reported that they were more likely to donate blood, and expressed greater *intentions* to donate, than did students who had not imagined themselves doing so.

We also investigated the optimal form that the intervention should take. Although repeated exposure is likely to ensure greater effectiveness, it is not clear what form that repeated exposure should take. There are some reasons to expect that varying the context of the imagined scenario may enhance its effectiveness. The benefits of contextual diversity in exposure have been

shown in research on social learning. Specifically, Bandura and Menlove (1968) conducted research with a group of children who were markedly fearful of dogs to determine which variables facilitate vicarious extinction of fear (the extinction of avoidance behavior through the observation of modeled approach behavior). They hypothesized that exposing children to approach modeling displayed by diverse models would produce greater extinction of arousal reactions and reduced avoidance behavior. In the study, one group of children was presented with a graduated series of films in which a fearless peer model became progressively more intimate in his or her interactions with a dog. A second group was exposed to a similar sequence of graded modeling behavior, with a variety of models shown interacting positively with numerous dogs of *varying size* and *fearsomeness*. They found that children who were markedly fearful of dogs were more likely to overcome this fear and interact with potentially threatening dogs when they had been exposed to a *broader sampling* of models and aversive stimulus objects in comparison to those exposed to the single-modeling treatment condition. It seems to be the case that diverse modeling achieves greater effects because observers view the successful performance of a variety of models, all with differing characteristics and, therefore, feel that they too will be likely to carry out the same (fearful) behavior with success.

We, therefore, hypothesized that (a) imagined contact between Turkish Cypriots and Greek Cypriots would enhance intentions to engage in actual context and (b) that repeated exposure to the imagined contact script in *different* scenarios will be even more effective than repeated exposure to the same imaginary scenario. Our reasoning is that introducing contextual variability into the imagined scenario should provide a greater number of relevant accessible cues when judgments about future behaviors are made.

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METHOD

Participants

Ninety undergraduate students at the Eastern Mediterranean University in Northern Cyprus, 34 men and 56 women, aged between 17 and 26 ($M = 20$), were randomly allocated to one of three conditions: control, versus contextually diverse imagined contact, versus contextually homogeneous imagined contact.

Procedure

At the start of the study, the researcher told participants that they were to complete several tasks that involved imagining different scenarios, as well as

stating their opinions on various issues. Three sets of instructions were used. In the control condition, participants were asked the following:

> I would like you to take a minute to imagine you are walking in the outdoors. Try to imagine aspects of the scene about you (e.g., is it a beach, a forest, are there trees, hills, what's on the horizon).

In the experimental conditions, participants received the following imagined contact task instructions derived from previous versions of the task used successfully with outgroups (see Crisp, Stathi, Turner, & Husnu, 2008; Husnu & Crisp, 2009):

> I would like you to take a minute to imagine yourself meeting a Greek Cypriot stranger for the first time. While imagining this think specifically of *when* (e.g., next Thursday) and *where* (e.g., Ledra Palace) this conversation might occur. During the conversation imagine you find out some interesting and unexpected things about the stranger.

In the contextually homogeneous imagined contact condition, immediately after imagining this scenario, participants received the following instructions:

> I would now like you to take a minute to imagine yourself meeting *another* Greek Cypriot stranger for the first time *at the same time and place* where you imagined meeting the first. During the conversation imagine you find out some interesting and unexpected things about the second stranger.

In the contextually diverse condition participants were initially asked exactly the same as participants in the contextually homogeneous condition. However, they *then* received the following:

> I would now like you to take a minute to imagine yourself meeting *another* Greek Cypriot stranger for the first time *at a different time and place* to where you imagined meeting the first. During the conversation imagine you find out some interesting and unexpected things about the second stranger.

What differed between the two experimental conditions was, therefore, the phrase *at the same time and place* versus *at a different time and place*.

Dependent measures. Two questions were used to test intentions to engage in future contact. Participants were asked the following: "Next time you find yourself in a situation where you could interact with a Greek

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Cypriot person . . .'' (a) ''How likely is it that you would strike up a conversation?,'' and (b) ''How interested would you be in striking up a conversation?'': Responses ranged from 1 (*not at all*) to 9 (*very much*). The mean of these items was used as a composite measure of intentions ($\alpha = .89$).

RESULTS

A one-way analysis of variance revealed a significant difference between the three conditions, $F(2, 87) = 3.07$, $p = .05$ ($\eta^2 = .07$). Planned t tests revealed that intentions to engage in future contact were higher in the contextually diverse imagined contact condition ($M = 7.05$) compared to the control condition ($M = 5.77$), $t(58) = -2.19$, $p = .032$. By contrast, intentions in the contextually homogeneous imagined contact condition were only marginally significantly higher than intentions in the control condition, $t(58) = -1.73$, $p = .09$. Intentions were equally high, however, in the contextually diverse imagined contact condition as in the contextually homogeneous imagined contact condition ($M = 6.75$), $t(58) = .65$, $p = .519$.

These results show that those Turkish Cypriot participants who imagined contact with Greek Cypriots reported greater intentions toward future contact compared to those participants imagining a no-contact control scene. In addition, repeatedly imagining contact in different contexts enhances intentions to engage future contact more clearly than repeatedly imaging elaborated contact in contextually homogeneous settings. The precise pattern of differences suggests that both methods are effective, but that contextually diverse imagined contact is the more powerful approach. Contextually homogeneous contact, although having an equal effect on intentions as diverse contact, was not so clearly differentiated from the control condition.

DISCUSSION

The aim of the study was to determine whether imagined contact, a newly established tool for improving intergroup attitudes, would be effective in the Cyprus context. Turkish Cypriot participants were asked to repeatedly imagine either contextually homogeneous or contextually diverse contact scenarios with Greek Cypriots. Intentions to engage in future contact were more reliably enhanced when contact was imagined in different, as opposed to the same, contexts, although we note that both forms of imagined contact were effective.

Although these findings add to the support for the viability of imagined contact, we note some important limitations. In particular, we acknowledge that in this study our dependent measure was *intentions* to engage in future

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contact, but not actual contact itself. Although there are good reasons to think that intentions will be reflected in behavior (Ajzen, 1985), in order to test the generalizability of our findings, future research should (a) test effects on intentions across a wider range of social contexts and (b) examine the impacts of imagined contact on actual behavior. Finally, with respect to our measures, we note that intentions to engage in contact were assessed as an approach behavioral tendency; but, one could also ask the question as an *avoidance* tendency (e.g., "How less likely now are you to avoid Greek Cypriots?"). Previous research has shown that the two tendencies can originate from different psychological processes (e.g., Crisp, Heuston, Farr, & Turner, 2007); and ideally, future research should test this full spectrum of potential measures.

With respect to our sample, we only tested Turkish Cypriots in this study. We know that actual contact has different effects depending on the specific social characteristics of the group's concerns (e.g., minorities vs. majorities; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). Similarly, we tested a student population. Older Turkish (and Greek) Cypriots will have directly experienced the war, displacement, embargoes, political instabilities, and so forth and will, therefore, likely have different perspectives on segregation compared to younger groups. Ideally, future research should include not only Greek Cypriots but non-student populations and older target groups to explore the possibility that imagining contact will have qualitatively different effects depending on people's experiences and perspectives.

We acknowledge that it is unlikely that imagined contact will have the same powerful effect that more direct forms of contact can produce. Direct experiences have a stronger influence on attitude formation than indirect experiences (Fazio, Powell, & Herr, 1983). However, the real value in imagined contact may be as an important facilitating component of an envisaged and integrated intervention package (see Crisp & Turner, 2009). Imagined contact might, therefore, be useful as the *first stage* in a programmatic intervention that may, at a later stage, introduce actual contact—what Crisp and Turner referred to as a "continuum of contact interventions" (p. 238). This multi-method approach to encouraging more positive relationships may be particularly suitable in contexts such as Cyprus. Despite the partial opening of the borders, many Cypriots still report a low percentage of crossing to the other side of the island. A recent report by the UN (2007) stated that 39% of Greek Cypriots and 29% of Turkish Cypriots have not crossed the borders at all since they were opened in 2003. Webster and Timothy (2006) found that 57% of Greek Cypriots considered it "inappropriate" for Greek Cypriots to cross the border and stated "ethical constraints" to crossing—traveling to the other side of the island would demonstrate an implicit recognition of the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus, a political entity that they consider an illegal occupation

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regime, and spending money there would only fuel the economy of this illegal state. Imagined contact may challenge these intergroup anxieties (Stephan & Stephan, 1985) and encourage more positive expectations prior to introducing programs that involve actual contact.

To date, imagined contact has only been tested in the laboratory, but we believe it would readily transfer to educational settings, in Cyprus and beyond. The technique has the potential to be integrated with traditional educational interventions that aim to increase tolerance in schoolchildren (see Crisp et al., 2008). These traditional approaches often require the passive involvement of children as they usually include discussing cultural characteristics of different social and ethnic groups or discussing the problems of racist attitudes and behavior. In contrast, imagining contact could create an *active* involvement that triggers cognitive and affective processes that parallel the processes involved in actual contact. For instance, it may lead school children to think about what they would learn about their Turkish or Greek Cypriot counterparts, how they would feel during the interaction, and how their perceptions may change.

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CONCLUSION

In this study on the inter-ethnically divided island of Cyprus, Turkish Cypriot participants were asked to repeatedly imagine either contextually homogeneous or contextually diverse contact scenarios with Greek Cypriots. Although both forms of imagined contact had an effect, intentions to engage in future contact were most reliably enhanced when contact was imagined in diverse, as opposed to homogeneous, contexts. Theoretically, the findings add to accumulating work on imagined contact effects by further identifying task characteristics that yield maximally beneficial outcomes. Pragmatically, the findings begin to form a roadmap for the application of imagined contact in a range of settings where lack of opportunity for contact exists and psychological borders are prominent. In a context such as Cyprus, imagining contact may be a viable first step for policymakers and educators in their efforts to encourage greater peace and tolerance.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

Senel Husnu is a doctoral student at the University of Kent. She is conducting research on intergroup contact, particularly imagined contact in the context of Cyprus, the inter-ethnically divided Mediterranean island. She holds a BSc in Psychology and an MSc in Social Psychology from the Middle East Technical University, Turkey.

Richard Crisp is Professor of Psychology at the University of Kent. His current research focuses on the impact of mental imagery on attitudes and behavior, as well as the antecedents and consequences of social and cultural diversity. He read Experimental Psychology at the University of Oxford and received his PhD from Cardiff University. He is an Academician of the Academy of Social Sciences and past recipient the British Psychological Society's Spearman Medal.

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