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Reducing interethnic bias through real-life and literary encounters: The interplay between face-to-face and vicarious contact in high school classrooms



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ABSTRACT

Literary intergroup contact—reading about ingroup members' encounters with outgroup members—is a useful first step toward the reduction of intergroup bias in settings with limited face-to-face intergroup contact, such as ethnically segregated schools. What, however, happens to this bias-reduction potential of interethnic stories in classrooms rife with face-to-face interactions between ethnically diverse students? And does this interaction between literary and face-to-face contact function similarly 1) for ethnic-majority students and ethnic-minority students and 2) for affective and cognitive measures of interethnic bias? A between-subjects experiment was conducted among 977 students in 63 classrooms in a Belgian province with a history of Moroccan migration. Half of the classes read from a 'white-Belgian-majority' book (control group), the others from a 'Moroccan-Belgian' book (literary contact group). Multilevel regression analyses indicated two opposing trends: 1) more face-to-face contact with Moroccan classmates strengthened the effect of literary interethnic contact on self-identified Belgian students' attitude toward Moroccans, but 2) more face-to-face contact with Belgian-majority classmates reduced the effect of literary interethnic contact on the attitude toward Belgians of self-identified non-Belgian students. Moreover, the Moroccan-Belgian book was associated with a lesser awareness of discrimination against Moroccan youngsters for students who did not identify as Belgian in classes with few students of Moroccan descent, and for students who felt (very) Belgian in classes with relatively many students of Moroccan descent. The quality of face-to-face intergroup contact is offered as a post-hoc explanation.

Introduction

The educational system is nowadays no longer just expected to fulfill directly pedagogical goals, such as stimulating students' academic motivation and achievement. It is also frequently called upon to ensure that those students adopt the part of good citizens within a globalized, culturally diverse society (De Witte & Hindriks, 2017; Hussey, Fleck, & Warner, 2010). In other words, education is seen as a way to foster students' understanding and appreciation of "all kind of differences (cultural, racial, gender, and religious) that exist in local, regional, national, and global context" as well as their behaviors aimed to "resolve all kind of conflicts in a multicultural society in a peaceful way" (Doğanay, 2012, pp. 29–31).

According to Allport's (1954) seminal 'contact hypothesis,' face-to-face interactions between distinct sociocultural groups effectively reduce intergroup bias under certain conditions. However, the relatively homogeneous sociocultural composition of some classrooms and schools impedes face-to-face contact with outgroup members. In those cases, teachers may employ 'vicarious' contact

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strategies—letting their students ‘observe’ other ingroup members interacting with outgroup members, in real life or via the media—as a useful first step toward the reduction of intergroup bias (Vezzali, Hewstone, Capozza, Giovannini, & Wölfer, 2014).

The present study discusses an experiment among 977 students in 63 classrooms with varying ethnic compositions in the Belgian metropole of Antwerp, to examine the bias-reduction effects of 1) face-to-face interethnic contact in the classroom, 2) vicarious interethnic contact through book reading, and 3) the interaction between both contact strategies. In other words, the study asks 1) whether interethnic interactions in the classroom reduce interethnic bias, 2) whether reading about interethnic interactions reduces this bias, and most importantly 3) whether reading about interethnic interactions results in a lesser bias-reduction effect in classes already rife with face-to-face interethnic interactions. The answers to these questions can help teachers decide how to reduce interethnic bias in their classroom, depending on its specific sociocultural composition.

Face-to-face and vicarious intergroup contact

In 1954, Allport formulated his ‘contact hypothesis.’ This states that face-to-face contact between members of different socio-cultural subgroups effectively reduces intergroup bias, if four key situational conditions are fulfilled: equal status, common goals, intergroup cooperation and the support of authorities. Pettigrew and Tropp (2006) confirmed that intergroup contact was associated with lower levels of bias (mean $r = -0.22$) in 94% of the 696 samples they synthesized. This bias-reduction effect was found across diverse methods, such as surveys and experiments (with and without control groups), and across different contact measures (observed versus self-reported). Moreover, the effect held for biases against various sociocultural groups, including ethnic outgroups (Allport’s original focus), the elderly, and the physically disabled.

Still, samples which did not meet the four conditions deemed necessary by Allport also displayed processes of bias reduction. The one crucial factor underlying the bias-reduction potential of face-to-face intergroup contact instead seemed to be that “the contact situation offered participants the opportunity to become friends” (Pettigrew, 1998, p. 76). In other words, the reduction of intergroup anxiety—the feelings of threat and uncertainty that people experience in intergroup contexts—appeared to be more decisive than Allport’s conditions, although the latter may obviously contribute to the development of intergroup friendships (i.e., having a common goal or being of equal status increases the likelihood of people becoming friends, but it is not a necessary condition for such friendships) (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006).

Segregated societal contexts may however severely limit people’s opportunities and/or inclination to engage in intergroup friendships. When power struggles fuel conflicts, strong intergroup barriers can transform friendly conversations into constrained discussions (Pettigrew, 1998). Therefore, Wright, Aron, McLaughlin-Volpe, and Ropp (1997, p. 74) examined how intergroup bias could be reduced when face-to-face outgroup contact is lacking. One mechanism they proposed is that of ‘vicarious’ contact through the observation of fellow ingroup members’ outgroup friendships.

These past decades, the bias-reduction effects of vicarious contact have been extensively researched, especially experimentally (e.g., Cameron, Rutland, Hossain, & Petley, 2011; Mazziotta, Mummendey, & Wright, 2011; West & Turner, 2014). The mass media are one source of such contact: studies for instance showed that watching positive interracial interactions in TV shows (Graves, 1999) or documentaries about undocumented immigrants’ experiences (Cadenas, Cisneros, Todd, & Spanierman, 2016) reduced viewers’ outgroup bias.

Some researchers have interpreted the ‘observation’ of intergroup encounters even more freely, by investigating the bias-reduction potential of written media such as newspapers and novels. Vezzali, Stathi, and Giovannini (2012) for instance discovered that—compared to control groups which either read books unrelated to interethnic themes, or read no books—students who read books about interethnic interactions endorsed less negative intergroup attitudes, were less biased in their intended behavior toward immigrants, and showed a greater desire for future contact.

Similarly, Johnson, Jasper, Griffin, and Huffman (2013) tested the unique power of narrative contact for bias reduction. Their participants read a narrative excerpt about a Muslim woman’s contact with outgroup members, a one-page summary of that excerpt, or a history of the automobile. Although the first two conditions both reduced explicit Arab-Muslim bias, only the first condition also reduced implicit bias and increased outgroup empathy.

Moreover, Vezzali, Stathi, Giovannini, Capozza, and Trifiletti (2015) showed that reading Harry Potter novels improved students’ attitudes toward three different stigmatized groups (immigrants, homosexuals and refugees) if they identified with Harry (the positive protagonist) and not with Voldemort (his nemesis). The students thus generalized Harry’s positive attitudes and behaviors toward stigmatized fantasy groups (e.g., house elves and ‘mudbloods’) to real-life outgroups.

Finally, reading about intergroup interactions even seems to help students be global citizens in segregated contexts in which reducing intergroup bias may encounter resistance: Husnu, Mertan, and Çiçek (2016) found that although Turkish Cypriot children reported very low positive face-to-face contact with Greek Cypriots, reading stories about Turkish-Greek Cypriot friendships improved their outgroup attitudes, intended behavior, and trust.

The interplay between face-to-face and vicarious contact

Vicarious intergroup contact through the mass media or literature may thus function as a pre-contact tool, a safe haven which simulates future face-to-face encounters (Johnson et al., 2013). It helps overcome psychological barriers of face-to-face intergroup contact, such as anxiety, uncertainty, and negative stereotypes (Mazziotta et al., 2011). Hence, it likely promotes Pettigrew’s (1998) crucial determinant of bias-reduction processes: granting individuals the opportunity to form intergroup friendships. West and Turner (2014) confirmed that, compared to a control condition, participants displayed less anticipatory stress about interacting with a

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