



Imagined contact with atypical outgroup members that are anti-normative within their group can reduce prejudice[☆]



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ABSTRACT

Can imagining contact with anti-normative outgroup members be an effective tool for improving intergroup relations? Extant theories predict greatest prejudice reduction following contact with typical outgroup members. In contrast, using subjective group dynamics theory, we predicted that imagining contact with anti-normative outgroup members can promote positive intergroup attitudes because these atypical members potentially reduce intergroup threat and reinforce ingroup norms. In Study 1 ($N = 79$) when contact was imagined with an anti-normative rather than a normative outgroup member, that member was viewed as less typical and the contact was less threatening. Studies 2 ($N = 47$) and 3 ($N = 180$), employed differing methods, measures and target groups, and controlled for the effects of direct contact. Both studies showed that imagined contact with anti-normative outgroup members promoted positive attitudes to the outgroup, relative both to a no contact control condition and (in Study 3) to a condition involving imagined contact with an ingroup anti-normative member. Overall, this research offers new practical and theoretical approaches to prejudice reduction.

Intergroup contact theory suggests that positive contact between individual members of different groups can improve intergroup relations (Allport, 1954; Oskamp & Jones, 2000; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). But in segregated social contexts, the potential benefits of contact may remain unrealized because direct contact is unlikely to occur. There are many examples of communities where few opportunities for intergroup contact exist. For example, UK Census data (2001 Census data) show that Catholics and Protestants have low percentages of mixed residency in Belfast while in the inter-ethnically divided island of Cyprus, only 8% of Turkish Cypriots and 1% of Greek Cypriots regularly cross the “green line” that divides the island (UNFICYP, 2007).

Recent research has identified a potential means of overcoming this problem. Regardless of whether people have experienced direct contact with an outgroup, *imagining* positive intergroup contact can foster improved outgroup evaluations (Stathi & Crisp, 2008; Turner, Crisp, & Lambert, 2007). Imagined intergroup contact is defined as, “the mental simulation of a social interaction with a member or members of an outgroup category” (Crisp & Turner, 2009, p. 234). Imagined intergroup contact has been proposed as a safe and effective way to capitalize on the benefits of contact where opportunities for contact are challenging or impossible. The majority of imagined contact studies

have examined imagined contact with an outgroup member who may be assumed to be typical of their category. Positive effects have been found on intergroup attitudes (Stathi & Crisp, 2008; Turner et al., 2007; Turner & Crisp, 2010), intentions (Crisp & Husnu, 2011; Husnu & Crisp, 2010; Husnu & Crisp, 2011) and behavior (Turner & West, 2012; Vezzali & Stathi, 2016).

This paper reports three studies testing a new theoretically grounded idea; that imagined contact with an outgroup member is particularly likely to have a positive effect if that member is an *anti-normative* (thus, atypical) rather than a normative member. Specifically, we contend that there should be a positive effect of imagined contact with an outgroup member but whose attitudes or actions deviate from the outgroup's prescriptive norms and toward the ingroup's prescriptive norms. This possibility would critically modify the conventional wisdom that the best psychological vehicle for reducing prejudice is intergroup contact with typical outgroup members (see Brown, Vivian, & Hewstone, 1999).

1. Typicality and intergroup contact

Somewhat anticipating our theoretical position, Brewer and Miller

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(1984) argued that intergroup contact is most effective when the people involved view one another not as group members but as individuals (a decategorization process), which is likely to be easier if they are not highly stereotypical of their group. However, according to Hewstone and Brown's (1986) mutual intergroup differentiation model, intergroup contact is most likely to create positive effects on stereotyping (e.g. perceptions of outgroup homogeneity) and attitudes if contact occurs between *typical* members of each group. Otherwise, the positive experiences and knowledge gained about the outgroup from contact with a particular member cannot be generalized to the rest of the group. For example, Brown et al. (1999) had English participants interact with a German confederate who either showed stereotypically German traits in his self-description or showed anti-stereotypic traits. Contact with the former led to more positive effects than contact with the latter.

More recent theories have suggested that contact may be more fruitful if it helps to create a new common superordinate ingroup, or if there is the possibility of a dual identity (i.e., both subgroups retain their distinctiveness but also recognize that they share a superordinate category – see Pettigrew & Tropp, 2011; Gaertner & Dovidio, 2000). Importantly, these more recent approaches recognize that generalization can only occur if ingroup-outgroup memberships are salient during the contact experience. Based on this tenet, we theorize a third route for effective contact. Even when intergroup categorization remains intact, imagined contact with *atypical* outgroup members could provide a viable vehicle for improving intergroup relations.

2. Social norms and deviance

According to Festinger (1950), groups are highly motivated to ensure that group members conform. Deviant behavior and expressing anti-normative attitudes can challenge a group's social reality (Abrams, Marques, Bown, & Henson, 2000; Begue, 2001; Marques, Abrams, & Serodio, 2001). According to subjective group dynamics theory (Marques, Abrams, Paez, & Hogg, 2001), group members reinforce their social identity by selectively upgrading group members who conform to, and downgrading those who deviate from, important ingroup norms. Thus, there is an important dynamic that links relations with individual group members to relations between the groups and the members' social identity.

When ingroup and outgroup norms are incompatible and imply oppositional perspectives, group members will generally prefer anti-normative deviant outgroup members over anti-normative deviant ingroup members, even when both types of deviant express objectively identical attitudes. For example, studies have shown that an outgroup member who espouses a neutral position (mid-way between the norms of the two groups), is evaluated equally or more positively compared to an ingroup member espousing the same position (Abrams, Marques, Bown, & Dougill, 2002; Abrams, Rutland, Pelletier, & Ferrell, 2009). Moreover, this effect arises precisely because the deviant outgroup member, in moving toward the position of the ingroup, reinforces the validity of ingroup norms (Abrams et al., 2000) and invokes a challenge rather than threat response (Frings, Hurst, Cleveland, Blascovich, & Abrams, 2012). Also, importantly, deviance should only have this effect when it is relevant to the ingroup's norms, unlike the mere deviation from stereotype manipulated by Brown et al. (1999).

Research on anti-normative (sometimes termed “oppositional”) deviance has not tested the effects of imagined contact with such a deviant on prejudice toward the individual or the group as a whole. An important question, examined in Study 1, is whether imagined contact with an outgroup anti-normative deviant does promote a positive response to that target, relative to imagined contact with a normative outgroup member. It is then necessary to address whether the effect of such contact goes beyond merely generating positive affect, and stimulates a more favorable response to the outgroup as a whole (see Study 2).

It is conceivable that imagining contact with any group member

who espouses a neutral position vis a vis the ingroup and outgroup norms might model more positive responses toward the outgroup. Therefore, it is important to separate the effect of imagining a conciliatory position per se, from specific effects of whether that position is expressed by an imagined ingroup or outgroup member. Based on subjective group dynamics (SGD) theory it should matter very much whether that person is an ingroup member or an outgroup member. Validation of ingroup norms by an anti-normative outgroup member should reduce the sense of threat to the ingroup's norm. Because anti-normative outgroup members tend to be evaluated favorably, imagined positive contact with such a group member should generate a positive affective response and reduced sense of threat that could generalize to the outgroup, softening antipathy toward it. In contrast, imagined contact with an anti-normative ingroup deviant is less likely to generate a positive response because it also presents a threat to ingroup validity (Abrams et al., 2000). This issue is examined in Study 3.

The present studies span different intergroup contexts to test our predictions¹. Study 1 examines ingroup/outgroup attitudes to immigration and tests the hypothesis that imagined contact with an anti-normative outgroup member will generate more positive responses toward that individual than will imagined contact with a normative (typical) outgroup member. This sets the scene for more positive responses toward the group. Study 2 uses the intergroup context of resource competition between psychology versus economics students. We test the prediction that imagining contact with an ingroup-favoring (anti-normative) outgroup member improves evaluations of the outgroup as a whole (i.e. generalizes). To test whether imagined contact must be with an antinormative outgroup member to be most effective, Study 3 recruited North American Christian MTURK participants to compare effects of imagined contact with an anti-normative ingroup (Christian) or an outgroup (Muslim) member versus a no-imagined contact condition. This study also tests whether the effects of imagined contact are present after adjusting for prior direct contact.

3. Study 1

An assumption that is implicit in much imagined contact research is that people generally imagine a typical or representative exemplar of an outgroup when they follow the instructions of an imagined contact task. However, as an initial step in this research it is important to examine whether or not an instruction to imagine an outgroup member who holds an anti-normative attitude does indeed lead participants to imagine someone who is more atypical of the group than does instructions to imagine someone who is normative.

A further question is whether evaluative responses arising from imagined contact with an anti-normative outgroup member are associated with reduced threat. It is known that imagined contact with a normative outgroup member can reduce threat such as intergroup anxiety (Vezzali & Stathi, 2016) but there are additional ways that an anti-normative outgroup member may reduce threat. SGD theory suggests that a reduction in threat could arise from an anti-normative outgroup member's contribution to validating the ingroup's norm. Therefore, we examined how imagined contact related to construal of the situation and threat. Exposure to outgroup antinormative deviants has been shown to increase physiological challenge rather than threat reactions (Frings et al., 2012), and therefore we expected that construal would be more positive and anxiety lower following imagined contact with an anti-normative than with a normative outgroup member.

To test these predictions, we drew on a paradigm used in previous studies of psychology students' reactions to ingroup and outgroup deviant members. Specifically, studies by Abrams et al. (2000) and by

¹ Additional measures of group homogeneity were not included in all studies, and were tangential to the hypotheses for this paper. They revealed no effects and are not included in the analyses presented in this paper. Details are available on request from the first author.

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