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## Fantasia: Being emotionally involved with a stereotyped target changes stereotype warmth<sup>☆</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

Dimensions of stereotypes, warmth and competence, may respond differentially to perceivers' emotional involvement. Two studies tested the effect of being emotionally involved with a fictional immigrant target on stereotypic warmth but not competence dimension. Emotional involvement with a target affects the target's perceived trustworthiness, warmth-related attributes, but not competence. Emotional involvement was operationalized as a personal variable, fantasizing tendency (tendency to empathically engage with fictitious characters) and a situational variable (emotion-focused instructions to adopt the target's perspective). After reading an immigrant's blog, Study 1 participants with a strong tendency to become involved with characters, if also instructed to focus on targets' emotional reactions, rated an immigrant as warmer than did all other combinations, but perceived competence did not change. In Study 2, priming the perceived competitive intent of the immigrant's group (an anti-warmth predictor) impeded involvement with the target and decreased perceived warmth. Priming perceived cooperative intent (a warmth predictor) replicated Study 1's results. Together, the studies show preliminary support for a specific *emotional involvement-warmth* link.

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*Which way home*, an Academy Award nominee for best feature documentary, showed “the personal side of immigration through the eyes of children who face harrowing dangers with enormous courage and resourcefulness as they endeavor to make it to the United States” (Cammisa, 2009). Such narratives (films, novels, blogs, TV shows, and news) show social groups' situations (i.e., immigration to the United States) conveying information and sympathy. However, the depth of perceivers' experience with such narratives may determine how they perceive the social group members.

The current research aims to show that becoming emotionally involved with a fictitious character belonging to a stereotyped group changes one specific and fundamental stereotype dimension, namely the target's perceived warmth (i.e., friendliness, sincerity, and trustworthiness), leaving untouched another dimension, the target's perceived competence (intelligence and ability). The next section describes the few extant studies of mentalizing characters in the intergroup domain and derives our specific hypothesis.

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## 1. Fantasia: emotional involvement with fictitious characters

People's experience of literary narratives enhances their social cognitive abilities (Kidd & Castano, 2013). Several constructs could account for a general tendency to be so affected by a narrative. *Transportation* or absorption into a story leads to becoming involved with its protagonist (Green & Brock, 2000). Experiencing a narrative may generate *psychological assimilation* with (becoming a part of) the collective described within the narrative (Gabriel & Young, 2011). *Experience-taking* of a target may be caused by spontaneously assuming the identity of a character, changing self-judgments, attitudes, and behavior (Kaufman & Libby, 2012). Characters' traits portrayed in narratives have even been ascribed to the self (Sestir & Green, 2010), indicating the bond built between reader and character.

Our focus here will be on the effect of becoming emotionally involved with individual characters described in a narrative. In this paper, *involvement* is defined as an emotional bond established between reader and character that results from readers focusing exclusively on characters' feelings and emotions. Whereas *transportation* is a process by which individuals' thoughts and attention focus on the situation described in a narrative and includes three components –cognitive (*I found my mind wandering while reading the narrative*), emotional (*I was emotionally involved in the narrative*), and imagery (*I had a vivid mental image of the character*), our focus here is only on the emotional bond between reader and the specific character's feelings (*I was emotionally involved with the character*). Different from *psychological assimilation* and *experience-taking*, emotional involvement with a target does not imply becoming part of target's collective or identifying with target's group.

Involvement with a character was operationalized as both a *dispositional* variable through the Fantasy subscale included in the Interaction Reactivity Index (IRI; Davis, 1980), and as a *situational* variable through emotion-focused instructions to adopt the target's perspective (Batson et al., 1997; Davis, Conklin, Smith, & Luce, 1996). The Fantasy subscale measures the tendency to empathically fantasize with fictitious characters (e.g., "*I really get involved with the feelings of the characters in a novel*", "*When I watch a good movie, I can very easily put myself in the place of a leading character*"). This involvement requires considering the target's mind. To the best of our knowledge, the Fantasy scale from the IRI (Davis, 1980) is the only measure covering specifically the tendency to imagine another's emotions through narratives, novels, films, etc.

## 2. Involvement with a stereotyped target: emotional involvement-warmth link in stereotype content

The main outcomes related to reading narratives are positive judgments of characters that result from being transported into narratives (Green & Brock, 2000) and belief changes based on information included in fictional stories (Kaufman & Libby, 2012; Prentice, Gerrig, & Bailis, 1997; Wheeler, Green, & Brock, 1999).

The effects of narratives portraying stereotyped characters have not been fully addressed. Among the exceptions (Hodson, Choma, & Costello, 2009), prejudice toward homosexuals decreased through simulation of being a member of this minority. In a related way, perspective-taking reduced expression and accessibility of general stereotypes (Galinsky & Moskowitz, 2000) and improved overall attitude toward the stereotyped group (Batson et al., 1997; Batson, Chang, Orr, & Rowland, 2002; Dovidio et al., 2004; Kaufman & Libby, 2012; Vescio, Sechrist, & Paolucci, 2003). However, besides the decreased prejudice and accessibility of stereotypes, it is not clear whether the stereotype contents change, our goal here.

Given that stereotyped targets are perceived primarily in terms of warmth (intention) and competence (ability) dimensions, according to the stereotype content model (SCM; Fiske, Cuddy, Glick, & Xu, 2002; Fiske, Cuddy, & Glick, 2007), it is relevant to test whether the effects of being emotionally involved through narratives with a stereotyped target is restricted to one of these dimensions. Theoretically, being emotionally involved with characters may lead to the understanding of characters' thoughts and intentions, which should imply perceived trustworthiness and sincerity (warmth dimension) but not perceived ability (competence dimension). How can emotional involvement with a character foster just perceived warmth and not perceived competence?

Two convergent lines of research support the *emotional involvement-warmth* link: emotional expressivity and sharing. From a social-functional approach, emotions influence social interaction among individuals because they serve as a form of communication (Parkinson, 1996). Emotional expressions give individuals information about other's emotions and intentions (Ames & Johar, 2009; Darwin, 1872/[Darwin, 2009]2009; Ekman, 1993; Fridlund, 1992; Knutson, 1996) and emotional expressivity—accuracy with which an individual displays emotions has been proposed as a marker for an individual's trustworthiness and cooperation (Boone & Buck, 2003; Schug, Matsumoto, Horita, Yamagishi, & Bonnet, 2010). Thus, through emotional expressivity, individuals show their intention, and if they do so accurately, that conveys trustworthiness. As the Warmth dimension of social perception relies on judgments about other's intentions, emotional expressions will selectively affect this dimension, whereas Competence, perceived ability, will be intact.

In addition, emotional similarity among individuals enhances mutual understanding (Preston & de Waal, 2002) and attraction (Bell, 1978; Gibbons, 1986; Sabatelli and Rubin, 1986). Individuals feeling similar emotions perceive each other's intentions and motivations more accurately (Hatfield, Cacioppo, & Rapson, 1994; Keltner & Kring, 1999; Levenson & Ruef, 1994) and also trust each other more (Anderson, Keltner, & John, 2003). So, perceiving targets' emotional responses and feeling similarly to them will enhance their perceived trustworthiness. That is, targets' apparent warmth will increase.

We predict that those explicitly asked to become involved with characters' feelings and emotions will perceive them as specifically more sincere or trustworthy, because targets express reliable signals, so target and observer share the same emotions, whereas they will not necessarily perceive them as more intelligent or capable (Competence dimension). We propose that when individuals try to infer others' intents, becoming emotionally involved with the target facilitates trust.

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