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Emotion expression and intergroup bias reduction between Muslims and Christians: Long-term Internet contact

Fiona A. White [a,*], Hisham M. Abu-Rayya [b,c], Ana-Maria Bliuc [d], Nicholas Faulkner [d]

[a] School of Psychology, The University of Sydney, Australia
[b] Faculty of Social Welfare and Health Sciences, University of Haifa, Israel
[c] School of Psychological Science, La Trobe University, Australia
[d] School of Social Sciences, Monash University, Australia

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ABSTRACT

The Internet can play a critical role in improving intergroup relations. The current field experiment investigated how emotions expressed by participants in intergroup contact sessions—in the form of a synchronous online chat program—predicted a reduction in intergroup bias. Here 102 Muslim and 103 Christian high-school students spent eight Internet sessions in either a Dual Identity Electronic(E)-Contact (DIEC) program integrating interfaith information and intergroup contact, or a Control program involving within-faith information and ingroup contact. Participants also completed pre- and post-program measures of intergroup bias. Using Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count (LIWC), a computerised text analysis program, we objectively analysed data from across the eight Internet sessions, and found that groups in the two conditions expressed emotions differently. That is, the DIEC chat groups used more affect and positive emotion words, and less anger and sadness words than the Control chat groups. Mediation analyses showed that anger and sadness mediated the intervention effect on T2, T3 and T4 intergroup bias. In other words, DIEC chat groups' reduced expressions of anger and sadness were related to reduced short- and long-term intergroup bias. These findings highlight the significant role that structured Internet interactions can play in creating positive and long-lasting intergroup relations.

1. Introduction

Prejudice reduction research, with an emphasis on cooperative intergroup contact (Allport, 1954) and the development of intergroup friendship (Pettigrew, 1998), has a long and rich history. To date, however, the majority of prejudice reduction research has relied on participant self-reports of cooperation and friendship, rather than on objective validation of their actual experience in contact interventions. In addition, previous prejudice reduction research has mainly tested short-term contact interventions (i.e., one or a few sessions, see Cameron, Rutland, & Brown, 2007; Cameron, Rutland, Hossain, & Petley, 2011; Houlette et al., 2004). These short programs may not provide sufficient time for the conditions of cooperation and friendship to develop, and for effective intergroup contact to take place (Pettigrew, 1998; Pettigrew, 2008). Thus, there is a need for researchers to investigate the dynamic processes that mediate the success of the contact situation on reducing intergroup bias in the short- and long-term (Dovidio, Gaertner, & Saguy, 2009).

The Internet provides researchers with a valuable opportunity to directly examine these intergroup processes objectively—especially in instances where there are growing tensions between physically segregated groups. One such example is the current global disharmony between Muslims and non-Muslim groups. Nowadays, graphic and sustained media coverage of global events such as the terrorist attacks of September 11 (2001), the Bali bombings (2002), the Sydney Siege (2014), and the Paris terrorist attacks (2015) saturate people's living rooms and consciousness, aggravating pre-existing biases and anxiety towards religious outgroups. This growing international animosity towards Muslims prevails even in multicultural societies that see themselves as open and welcoming to culturally diverse groups. For example, in Australia, there is a perception that Islam is a threat to the Australian way of life, and as a consequence, prejudice towards Muslims is deep-rooted (Abu-Rayya & White, 2010; Pedersen, Aly, Hartley, & McGarty, 2009). Australian Muslims are perceived as culturally inferior, devalued or the 'dangerous other', and incompatible with or radically different from the non-Muslim

Australian culture (Dunn, Klocker, & Salabay, 2007), with over 50% of non-Muslim Australians reporting never having contact with Muslims (Ryan & McKinney, 2007). Thus, effective intergroup bias reduction strategies need to be developed to promote cooperative intergroup contact as a first step to resolving these tensions, particularly in the form of early interventions within school settings to teach children communication strategies needed to be cooperative adults.

Importantly, new technological developments in virtual communication provide researchers with the opportunity to develop contact strategies that 'bridge the gap' of physical segregation (Alvídrez, Piñeiro-Naval, Marcos-Ramos, & Rojas-Solís, 2015). Carefully designed and theory-driven Internet contact strategies are one way to promote intergroup harmony for younger populations such as within classroom settings. In addition to their role in promoting healthy intergroup relations, Internet contact strategies can also be used as a valuable source of data for research. For example, the language exchanged in Internet chat discussions between ingroup and outgroup members can provide researchers with rich data about how individuals feel towards one another in an intergroup contact situation. Analysis of the emotions reflected in the language exchange may teach us about the underlying mechanisms of how an intergroup contact strategy aiming at bias reduction works.

Taking this into account, the aim of the current study is to investigate the extent to which the type of emotion, as expressed in online text-language between Muslim and Christian high-school students, is associated with reductions in intergroup bias in the short- and long-terms. Specifically, the valence and the extent of Muslim and Christian participants' emotion disclosure across an 8-week prejudice-reduction program—the Dual Identity E-Contact (DIEC) program, developed and validated by White and Abu-Rayya (2012)—will be examined. In doing so, this will be the first experiment to: (i) examine the types of emotion expressed across a long-term (8-week) internet contact intervention aimed at fostering cooperation and friendliness, and reducing intergroup bias, and (ii) identify the extent to which positive and negative emotions mediate the effect of the Internet contact intervention on intergroup bias reduction in the short- and long-terms.

1.1. Computer-mediated communication (CMC) and intergroup bias reduction

With the expansion of the Internet and computer mediated communication (CMC), especially amongst young populations of 'digital natives', research is needed to fully understand how CMC can be integrated into interventions to maximally improve the quality of social interactions and reduce intergroup bias (for a critical review, see White, Harvey, & Abu-Rayya, 2015). In fact, there is a growing number of research studies testing Allport's (1954) contact hypothesis via online communication to reduce outgroup prejudice since one of the initial proposals by Amichai-Hamburger and McKenna (2006). For example, Mollov and Schwartz (2010) reported a preliminary case study during which Israeli and Palestinian University students participated in a number of email exchanges together over a 2-month period. They implemented Allport's (1954) contact conditions into their program which required students to discuss and educate the outgroup member in regards to their religious practices. Mollov and Schwartz noted that most of the exchanges were friendly, with both groups collaborating in a cooperative way to learn and teach the other about their respective religious holidays.

Likewise, an analysis of the Soliva Connect program, one of the longest lasting online videoconferencing education programs, revealed that quantitative and qualitative feedback from participating students and teachers was generally positive. The program,

first established in 2003, today globally connects students from over 100 universities and 27 countries to a "….community of peers who engage in facilitated, sustained and substantive dialogue, and build respectful relationships across national, cultural, religious and ideological boundaries" (Soliya Connect Program, 2013). In a similar vein, Walther, Hoter, Ganayem, and Shonfeld (2015) tested a sample of college students who identified as either religious Jews, secular Jews or Arab Muslims, who worked together in a mixed religious group of six on an online collaborative project for one year. The course design integrated three out of four of Allport's contact conditions: equal status, support from an institutional authority and cooperative pedagogies. The findings revealed that both Arab Muslims and Jews disliked each other less after the online contact program compared to pre-contact. Also, virtual groups who identified as religious were less prejudiced towards outgroups than were control participants.

Importantly, Walther et al. (2015), argue that more research is needed to discern the communication mechanism or mediator by which intergroup contact operates to reduce prejudice, suggesting a greater focus on the messages used within CMC. Emotion expression in the messages communicated online potentially holds the key.

1.2. Emotion, cooperation and improved intergroup relations

Researchers still know relatively little about what happens during the actual intergroup contact experience to explain the subsequent reduction in prejudice. It is possible that emotions, or emotions disclosure, more specifically, play a key role. Research on emotion disclosure shows that sharing positive emotions increases the quality of social interactions (Augustine, Mehl, & Larsen, 2011), and that of interpersonal relationships (Gable, Reis, Impett, & Asher, 2004). Sharing negative emotions was found to also have positive effects such as decreasing stress produced by suppressing negative feelings and allowing a reappraisal of negative experiences (Pennebaker, 1997).

In the context of intergroup contact research, Miller, Smith, and Mackie (2004) found that self-reported negative and positive emotions experienced during intergroup contact mediated the association between contact and prejudice (however, this study did not directly manipulate contact, but instead relied on participants' memories of how they felt during past contact situations). Also, research by Esses and Dovidio (2002) showed that positive emotions towards an outgroup predicted willingness to engage in intergroup contact with that group.

1.3. Long-term intergroup bias reduction involving Muslim and Christian students: the DIEC program

The theoretical framework underpinning the DIEC program involves an integration of Allport's (1954) and Pettigrew's (1998) contact conditions, and Dovidio et al.'s (2009) dual identity recategorization tenets. Here intergroup contact was implemented through a design using a new electronic contact (or E-contact) paradigm that operationalised all four of Allport's (1954) optimal conditions for successful contact—including equal numbers of Christian and Muslim students, a common goal, the opportunity for friendliness and familiarity between participants, and support for the program by the school authorities (White, Abu-Rayya, & Weitzal, 2014). During E-contact, ingroup and outgroup members never physically meet or see one another during the Internet sessions but interact via online text using a synchronous chat tool. The text-only and online (rather than face-to-face) nature of E-contact ensures that the intergroup contact remains indirect, yet the synchronous nature of the Internet chat maintains the spontaneity of 'live' interactions and creates the advantage of