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The role of multicultural and colorblind ideologies and typicality in imagined contact interventions



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ABSTRACT

Recent studies have demonstrated that simply imagining a positive interaction with an outgroup member reduces prejudice, especially if the outgroup member is typical of the whole outgroup. In this research, we tested how a multicultural vs. colorblind mindset might impact the efficacy of imagined contact with a typical or atypical outgroup member. Specifically, we tested the interactive effects between ideologies (multiculturalism vs. colorblindness) and the typicality of the outgroup member (typical vs. atypical) in the imagined encounter. Results revealed that participants exposed to the multicultural ideology who imagined an encounter with an atypical outgroup member expressed fewer positive perceptions (warmth and competence) toward both primary and secondary outgroups compared with respondents exposed to the multicultural ideology who imagined an interaction with a typical outgroup member, and compared with respondents exposed to a colorblind ideology (irrespective of typicality of the outgroup member). The study highlights the importance of considering the interaction between cultural ideologies and typicality during intergroup contact when designing interventions aimed at promoting positive intergroup perceptions.

Introduction

Migration, ethnic and cultural diversity, and their impact on societies and workplaces are contemporary debated within many western societies (Green & Staerklé, 2013). Diversity research has examined the potential of multiculturalism and colorblindness as strategies and policies to promote positive intergroup relations and harmony. There is a strong debate regarding which of these two ideologies is more effective in reducing intergroup bias among social psychologists (e.g., Guimond, de la Sablonnière, & Nugier, 2014; Sasaki & Vorauer, 2013) and in the political discourse, as for example David Cameron, the former UK prime minister, declared in 2011 that multiculturalism has failed (BBC News, 2011). Although there is a wealth of studies considering the effects of exposure to these ideologies (e.g., Richeson & Nussbaum, 2004; Wolsko, Park, Judd, & Wittenbrink, 2000), research is only beginning to test how a multicultural or colorblind mindset impacts the effectiveness of prejudice-reduction interventions based on intergroup contact theory (Allport, 1954; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2011). With this study, we aimed at filling this gap by investigating how exposure to a specific form of diversity experience (multiculturalism vs. colorblindness) can impact the effectiveness of the imagined contact intervention (Crisp & Turner, 2012).

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Multicultural and colorblind ideologies

Multiculturalism and colorblindness are ideologies aimed at promoting positive intergroup relations and harmony. The multiculturalism approach stresses the importance of recognizing cultural differences between groups and giving value to these differences (e.g., Guimond, 2010; Verkuyten, 2005). The colorblindness approach, on the other hand, sustains that the specific characteristics of groups should be abandoned in order to treat people equally as individuals rather than as members of particular groups (e.g., Plaut, 2010; see also Miller, 2002). Although both ideologies are predicted to promote tolerance, research considering their impact on prejudice-reduction has provided mixed results (for reviews see Park & Judd, 2005; Rosenthal & Levy, 2010; Sasaki & Vorauer, 2013). While some studies have found that both multiculturalism and colorblindness are associated to positive outgroup attitudes (e.g., Levin et al., 2012), other studies have suggested also negative effects of these ideologies on prejudice (for multiculturalism see e.g., Morrison, Ybarra, & Plaut, 2010; for colorblindness see e.g., Vorauer, Gagnon, & Sasaki, 2009). Notable is the finding by Wolsko et al. (2000) that participants primed with multicultural ideologies report positive feelings toward minorities, but simultaneously heightened awareness of stereotypes associated with the group.

As proposed by Crisp and Turner (2011), diversity experiences can influence how people experience and react to subsequent events. This suggests that a multicultural or a colorblind mindset might influence responses to experiences such as intergroup contact. Specifically, a multicultural mindset might lead to focus on differences during intergroup encounters (Wolsko et al., 2010), while a colorblind mindset might lead to focus on similarities (Rosenthal & Levy, 2010). In this study, we will examine how the focus on differences vs. on similarities induced by priming of ideologies may impact the imagined intergroup contact effect.

Imagined intergroup contact and typicality

A growing body of research has demonstrated the benefits of mental imagery in various areas such as health and personality psychology, consumer research, clinical therapy, and sports (see Crisp, Birtel, & Meleady, 2011). Crisp and Turner (2012) have thus argued that these benefits can also extend to the prejudice domain, and, in particular, that imagery related to intergroup contact can promote tolerance and positive intergroup relations. Research has now widely supported the beneficial effects of imagining a positive encounter with an outgroup member on prejudice reduction and positive intergroup behavior (e.g., Husnu & Crisp, 2010, 2015; Vezzali, Capozza, Giovannini, & Stathi, 2012; for a meta-analysis see Miles & Crisp, 2014). For example, Husnu and Crisp (2015) found that Turkish Cypriots who imagined a pleasant encounter with Greek Cypriots reported more positive outgroup attitudes compared to Turkish Cypriots who imagined walking outdoors. In this vein, Brambilla, Ravenna, and Hewstone (2012) examined the effects of imagined contact with members of outgroups that differ in warmth and competence stereotypes derived from the stereotype content model (SCM; Fiske, Cuddy, Glick, & Xu, 2002). Specifically, Italian students were invited to imagine an encounter with a member of an immigrant group which is stereotyped in Italian society as warm but incompetent (Peruvians), as competent but cold (Chinese), as both incompetent and cold (Albanians), or as both competent and warm (Canadians). The authors found that imagined contact was effective in improving the stereotype that was negative for each specific outgroup, i.e. imagined contact improved competence perceptions of Peruvians, warmth perceptions of Chinese, and competence and warmth perceptions of Albanians.

Recent studies have also identified characteristics of the imagined contact manipulation that enhance the efficacy of this intervention. Notable for an optimal imagined contact situation is the mutual intergroup differentiation model (MIDM; Hewstone & Brown, 1986), proposing that intergroup salience and typicality of the outgroup member during the contact situation promote the generalization of the beneficial effects of contact from the outgroup member involved in the contact situation to the whole outgroup (see also Brown & Hewstone, 2005). Specifically, typicality refers to characteristics of the outgroup member that are likely to enhance the perception of the outgroup member as typical and representative of own group. When an intergroup encounter happens with an outgroup member who is typical and representative of own group, the risk of subtyping is lower, i.e. of considering the positive characteristics of the outgroup member discovered during intergroup contact as an exception, leaving unaltered the evaluation of the whole outgroup (see Richards & Hewstone, 2001).

An experiment by Stathi, Crisp, and Hogg (2011; Study 3) investigated the role of typicality of the outgroup member during an imagined contact intervention. British students were invited to imagine an encounter with a British Muslim described as dressing in a traditional way, avoiding alcohol, and practicing strictly Islamic religion (typical British Muslim) or with a British Muslim described as dressing in Western clothes, drinking alcohol, and not practicing strictly Islamic religion (atypical British Muslim). The authors found that imagined contact with a typical British Muslim increased contact self-efficacy compared to imagined contact with an atypical British Muslim (see also Pagotto, Visintin, De Iorio, & Voci, 2013 for an imagined contact experiment applying the MIDM).

Building on the MIDM and findings by Stathi et al. (2011; Study 3), we manipulated the degree of typicality of the outgroup member during the imagined intergroup encounter and extended the study by Stathi et al. considering the role of ideologies in shaping the typicality effect.

The current study

In this experimental study we tested the interactive effects of priming a multicultural vs. colorblind ideology (Wolsko et al., 2000) and of imagining contact with a typical vs. atypical outgroup member (Stathi et al., 2011; Study 3). Outgroup attitudes were measured as warmth and competence perceptions (SCM; Fiske et al., 2002). While previous research on imagined contact has mainly focused on prejudice and future contact intentions as outcomes, only one study suggested that imagined contact can improve warmth and competence perceptions (Brambilla et al., 2012). We extended this study by testing the role of ideologies and of typicality.

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