Intergroup contact in computer-mediated communication: The interplay of a stereotype-disconfirming behavior and a lasting group identity on reducing prejudiced perceptions ☆

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ABSTRACT

The present study investigated the impact of online intergroup contact on prejudiced and stereotyped perceptions toward an outgroup. Informed by research on contact in computer-mediated communication, a model of contact in which individual outgroup members displayed a stereotype-disconfirming (vs confirming) behavior in virtual teams made up of ingroup members was tested. Moreover, this hypothesized model of contact was examined across two visual conditions of group identification: one in which a pre-existing ethnic category (i.e, lasting membership) was made salient, and one without salient group identities. Results showed that when participants were conscious of their lasting identities, the enacted disconfirming behavior reduced prejudiced perceptions by the mediation of perceived attraction towards the individual outgroup member. Conversely, stereotyped perceptions were not affected by this behavior. These findings suggest that the generalization of the contact effect in CMC is more likely to occur in attitudinal variables than in cognitive ones, and as long as participants are aware of intergroup memberships when participating in short online interactions.

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1. Introduction

Current perspectives on intergroup contact focus on the contact that takes place in settings other than face-to-face (FtF) encounters (Harwood, Paolini, Joyce, Rubin, & Arroyo, 2011; Schiappa, Gregg, & Hewes, 2005). In this regard, the exclusive features of computer-mediated communication (CMC) such as its accessibility and lower costs for interactions can offer some advantages for intergroup contact over non-mediated meetings. The limited social cues conveyed in this medium may occlude differences in status that otherwise would be more evident in offline interactions (e.g., ethnicity, socioeconomic status), thus leading to form impressions of more balanced intergroup exchanges (Amichai-Hamburger & McKenna, 2006). In addition, as this type of communication does not involve any physical risk, group members might experience less anxiety and fewer negative expectations about meeting the

outgroup member (Harwood, 2010). In this way, contact opportunities may become more feasible even for groups with a long history of conflict (Ellis & Maoz, 2007).

In spite of the potential benefits of virtual communication for contact, it remains unclear whether the processes involved in reducing latent intergroup bias in offline interactions work in the same way in CMC. Research in the contact literature suggests that interactions with individual outgroup members who behave in such a manner that disconfirms group stereotypes, and who nevertheless are regarded as *typical* members of their respective groups, result in positive evaluations of the whole outgroup by favoring changes in prejudiced and stereotyped perceptions (Johnston & Hewstone, 1992; Weber & Crocker, 1983; Wilder, 1984). For these changes to occur, both intergroup boundaries and group membership must be made salient during the contact in order to foster the individual-to-group generalization effect (Hewstone & Brown, 1986). Moreover, research has recently moved on from cognitive to affective bases to better predict contact outcomes (e.g., Pettigrew, Tropp, Wagner, & Christ, 2011; Turner, Tam, Hewstone, Kenworthy, & Cairns, 2013). The meta-analytic study of Pettigrew and Tropp (2008), for example, revealed that affective variables such as empathy and anxiety reduction were stronger mediators of contact on prejudice reduction than the cognitive-oriented variable of knowledge.

For its part, the CMC literature has mainly provided evidence on the group identity processes that take place in virtual environments (Postmes, Spears, Sakhel, & de Groot, 2001; Spears, Postmes, Lea, & Wolbert, 2002). Based largely on the social identity model of deindividuation effects (SIDE), this approach suggests that when the users' individual information is occluded (i.e., personal information) and a social identity is emphasized in a virtual interaction (i.e., ethnicity, gender, religious group, etc.), personal differences tend to be blurred and the social group category becomes salient. As such, these depersonalized perceptions would lead them to see themselves and others as prototypical members of the virtual group, thereby increasing social attraction (Lea, Spears, & de Groot, 2001). Former outgroup members could be cognitively assimilated into this local group "leading to heightened feelings of attachment and camaraderie among the participants" (Amichai-Hamburger & McKenna, 2006, p. 835), and consequently, to lowered negative attitudes or animosity resulting from group categorizations.

Research in SIDE, however, has been inconsistent in supporting group effects in terms of attraction to ingroup members (e.g., Lea et al., 2001; Postmes, Spears, & Lea, 2002, study 1; Walther, 2009). Results in similar studies suggest that the cognizance of subgroup membership (i.e., knowing about members of the local group who share membership in other different groups) leads to more negative outgroup stereotypes when interacting in depersonalized rather than in personalized CMC exchanges (Postmes & Spears, 2002; Postmes et al., 2002). On the other hand, Wang, Walther, and Hancock (2009) purported that perceived attraction to group members depend on users' behavior rather than their in/out group membership. These findings imply that social identification may not be sufficient alone to increase positive perceptions regarding group members, which in turn might contribute to reduce bias towards the outgroup resulting from cognizance of subgroup membership, but that the involvement of some kind of active behavior by group instances might be necessary.

On the purpose of verifying the potential benefits of intergroup contact in a CMC, the present study investigated how the interplay between group identification and the behavior of individual outgroupers might contribute to reduce biased perceptions towards the entire outgroup. Specifically, a stereotype-disconfirming behavior was introduced in a contact setting of ethnic majorities and minorities, in which social structures play an important role in stereotyping outgroups and the expectations regarding its members. Furthermore, in order to clarify *how* contact may affect outcome variables in virtual interactions, this paper focuses on two mediators: the affective variable of attraction and the cognitive variable of typicality. Likewise, in order to address *when* a generalization of the contact effect may take place, this model is tested across two levels of group identity salience: one in terms of a personal identity and one in terms of a pre-existing ethnic category.

2. Literature review

2.1. Contact in CMC: awareness of lasting group identities

Whilst empirical investigation on the bias-reducing effect of CMC-contact is scarce, promising results in changing attitudes have been obtained in correlational studies (Schumann, Linden, & Klein, 2012; Tynes, Giang, & Thompson, 2008). Moreover, the work of other scholars maintains that offline intergroup bias could actually be transferred to online interactions; for example, Finchilescu (2010) reported increases in stereotypes and anxiety in Caucasian students when participating in a simulated interethnic CMC-contact in South Africa, whereas Weisband, Schneider, and Conolly (1995) suggested that group status differences in computer-mediated channels work in a similar way to offline contexts. Hence, it seems pertinent to examine how and when CMC-contact can reduce negative intergroup perceptions.

Theoretical assumptions in the SIDE model, derived from the social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986), invoke group identity dynamics in CMC in a similar way to FtF interactions (Lea & Spears, 1991; Postmes & Baym, 2005). The SIDE model accounts for effects of depersonalization of online participants: when users in a CMC remain anonymous (i.e., visually unidentifiable), and a social identity is salient, members' interpersonal differences tend to be blurred, while perceptions of groupness are expected to increase. Categorization processes lead to a cognitive distinction between ingroups and outgroups and, because of this division, intragroup similarities and intergroup differences become exaggerated: thus, members tend to favor ingroup and to dislike outgroup members. Depersonalized perceptions of the self and others lead them to see themselves as identical or interchangeable in terms of the salient identity, thereby increasing attraction to prototypical ingroup members (Lea & Spears, 1995). It is this type of attraction, resulting from a positive group identification, that makes it possible to compare the effect of sharing common group goals in offline (Allport, 1954) and online settings (Amichai-Hamburger & McKenna, 2006).

In relation to CMC, a social identity is the extent to which users identify with a preexisting category such as gender or nationality. Previous studies have managed to trigger social identification by hiding personal information about participants (e.g., blocking each participant's name or photo) while making salient a group category by introducing ostensible numbers, logos or codes shared by all participants. Conversely, displaying individual visual cues (e.g., photos of faces) was thought to diminish group identification as users focused their attention on idiosyncratic characteristics rather than on depersonalized perceptions of group members. This categorization of the self and others in terms of the ad-hoc group was designated a *transient* group membership, whereas the preexisting wider social identity was called *lasting* group membership (Lea, Spears, Watt, & Rogers, 2000; Lea et al., 2001).

In line with the contact approach, Amichai-Hamburger and McKenna (2006) referred to the theoretical capacity of CMC to reduce prejudice as long as subgroup constituents (i.e., former outgroupers) within a singular group pursue superordinate goals and experience identification with a wider social category that is made salient. Scholars in offline contact have termed this model recategorization, which meets stipulations of making salient intergroup membership within a superordinate category for generalization purposes (Gaertner & Dovidio, 2000). From a SIDE point of view this would represent a paradoxical circumstance in which members of the local group are cognizant of the subgroup (outgroup) membership of certain virtual partners.

Lea, Spears, and Watt (2007) were successful in creating attraction and cohesion in virtual group members by varying the target of lasting identification. Male and female participants in this study comprising groups consisting of British and Dutch people tended to categorize themselves according to their respective gender or nationality (lasting memberships) when each category was made salient in discussion topics across two levels of interaction (personally identifiable and anonymous). For nationality, attraction and cohesion effects were only found in the anonymous condition whereas the same effects were found for gender in the personally identifiable one. According to the authors, some categories such as gender are easier to be visually cued (e.g., most people distinguish between male and female) than other abstract categories such as nationality. Nevertheless, the introduction of an international topic in the anonymous condition (e.g., talking about British food) led members to see themselves in terms of their lasting identity. Moreover, knowing that people of different gender and nationalities took part within a same online group did not boost negative