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The role of national identity, religious identity, and intergroup contact on social distance across multiple social divides in Turkey

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A B S T R A C T

Using a nationally representative dataset from Turkey, we examined the effects of national identity, religious identity, religious practice, and intergroup contact on social distance towards disliked groups along ethnic (Turks vs. Kurds), religious (Sunnis vs. Alevis) and ideological divides (supporters vs. opponents of the *Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*, AKP). We used structural equation modeling (SEM) to examine two mechanisms (via perceived threat and empathy) through which ingroup identification and intergroup contact influence social distance toward disliked groups. Perceived threat, but not empathy, mediated the effect of national identification on higher social distance towards Kurds, AKP supporters and AKP opponents. Both perceived threat and empathy mediated the effects of religious practice on distance towards Alevis. Intergroup contact had both direct and indirect effects (via threat and empathy) on social distance. Multigroup SEM showed that contact's effects did not vary across outgroup targets. By contrast, the effects of national and religious identity on social distance varied depending on the outgroup target. The findings highlight the importance of considering identity content and meaning attached to social categories in making predictions about the influence of identification with different social categories.

The study of intergroup relations in social and political psychology has contributed to our understanding of societal conflict by shedding light on the drivers of intergroup conflict and tensions. A growing body of literature has examined the consequences of ingroup identification with groups at different levels of inclusiveness (e.g., Wohl & Branscombe, 2005) and of intergroup contact (e.g., Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006) in predicting attitudes toward outgroups in conflict. Typically, this research has examined one set of intergroup relations or conflict at a time, often in a context or a target group chosen by the researchers. Intergroup tensions, however, exist across multiple social groups simultaneously, such as ethnic, religious, or ideological divides. Such contexts raise questions about the implications of identification with different groups, and of intergroup contact, for societal polarization (e.g., social exclusion). When conflict exists along different fault lines, the same group (e.g., religious) can serve as a superordinate, a cross-cutting, or an exclusive identity. Importantly, the meaning attached to social groups also matters. Some groups are judged positively, while others are seen as threatening. Therefore, ingroup identification should have different implications depending on both the boundaries and the content of group identity.

In the present research, we examined the influence of identification with two important groups—national and religious—as well as the level of intergroup contact social distance along three main societal divisions in Turkey: the ethnic divide (Turks vs. Kurds), the religious divide (Sunni vs. Alevis), and the ideological divide (supporters vs. opponents of the *Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi* (AKP)–*Justice*

and Development Party, which leads the current government in Turkey). This study adds to the literature in several ways: (1) by testing important predictions of the influence of ingroup identification on social distance; (2) by examining two mechanisms through which national and religious identity, and intergroup contact, influence social distance: specifically, the mediating effects of perceived threat and empathy; (3) by examining whether the effects of ingroup identification and intergroup contact on social distance are similar across different outgroup targets.

Identification with categories at different levels of inclusiveness across conflict fault lines

In competitive or conflict contexts, identification with a social category that is distinct and non-overlapping with an outgroup is typically associated with negative attitudes toward that outgroup (e.g., Mummendey, Klink, & Brown, 2001). However, predicting the role of the strength of identification with various groups in real world contexts is complicated, as individuals categorize themselves in multiple groups (e.g., ethnic, religious, ideological), each drawing different boundaries and with different implications about who belongs to the ingroup. When these social categories overlap (e.g., when ethnic and religious categories overlap), inter-group differentiation and prejudice are more likely to increase. In contrast, crossing categories can reduce ingroup/outgroup distinctions and increase social identity complexity, thereby reducing group members' negative attitudes toward each other (Brewer, 2001; Hewstone, Rubin, & Willis, 2002).

However, cross-cutting social categories may not help in reducing negative attitudes when one category is dominant, or when groups perceive themselves under threat, such as in conflict contexts (e.g., Brewer, 2000). Distinct groups can also be categorized within the same superordinate category. In their influential Common Ingroup Identification Model (CIIM), Gaertner & Dovidio, 2000 proposed that re-categorizing distinct subgroups into an inclusive superordinate category should produce positive attitudes toward outgroups. When this re-categorization occurs, former outgroups are considered ingroup members at the superordinate level (Gaertner & Dovidio, 2000), and the privileges that are typically extended to ingroup members are also extended to the former outgroups. That is, common ingroup categorization can bring outgroup members closer to the self, increasing empathy and reducing negative attitudes. Growing evidence suggests that re-categorization of ethnic, religious, or political subgroups into an inclusive superordinate category, such as the national group, is associated with more positive attitudes toward previously antagonistic outgroups (e.g., Čehajić, Brown, & Castano, 2008; Licata, Klein, Saade, Azzi, & Branscombe, 2011; Noor, Brown, & Prentice, 2008).

Factors beyond social category boundaries, such as the content of ingroup identity, can also influence the relation between ingroup identification (i.e., identification with a specific social category) and outgroup attitudes (Reicher & Hopkins, 2001). National and religious identities are socially and historically constructed, and often reflect the majority group's norms and values. For instance, majority group members' attitudes toward minority groups included in a superordinate category might depend on the degree to which the outgroup is perceived as threatening to the ingroup's values, norms and beliefs (Branscombe, Ellemers, Spears, & Doosje, 1999; Jetten, Spears, & Manstead, 2001; Voci, 2006; see meta-analyses by Jetten, Spears, & Postmes, 2004; Riek, Mania, & Gaertner, 2006). If, due to historical and social circumstances, a subgroup is viewed as threatening to the representation and construction of the superordinate identity, then higher identification with the superordinate group should be associated with more negative attitudes toward this subgroup.

In sum, depending on the content and boundaries of group identity, we expect that higher ingroup identification should influence perceived threat from an outgroup (e.g., Cohrs & Asbrock, 2009; Falomir-Pichastor & Mugny, 2009; Nickerson & Louis, 2008), which in turn should be positively associated with the level of social distance. In addition, superordinate identities should increase perceived closeness between the self and other, and would therefore increase empathy (Gaertner & Dovidio, 2000). Therefore, the strength of ingroup identification should increase empathy if the target group is included in the ingroup, but it should reduce empathy if it is excluded from the ingroup. These in turn should reduce social distance. We discuss the role of empathy in more detail below.

The role of intergroup contact

Allport (1954) first suggested that frequent and equal-status intergroup contact should reduce negative attitudes and feelings toward out-groups. Since then, a large body of literature has provided evidence of the positive impact of intergroup contact on intergroup attitudes (for reviews see Pettigrew & Tropp, 2013; Pettigrew, Tropp, Wagner, & Christ, 2011). For instance, Pettigrew and Tropp's (2006) influential meta-analysis of over 500 studies conducted in multiple nations and different intergroup contexts revealed that intergroup contact reduces prejudice toward outgroups. Notably, a large body of literature has shown the positive effects of intergroup contact, even when conditions outlined by Allport (1954) were not met (i.e., equal status, common goals, cooperation, and support from authorities). Considering the importance of intergroup contact for intergroup relations and especially with regard to social exclusion in society, we assessed whether the level of intergroup contact reduces social distance toward disliked groups in Turkey. We also examined whether the influence of intergroup contact on social distance is mediated by perceived threat. In addition, we assessed the mediating effect of empathy.

Extensive research shows that emotional and cognitive (also referred to as perspective taking) empathy is associated with reduction in prejudice and with positive intergroup attitudes (for a review see Stephan & Finlay, 1999). Because of its positive effects, empathy is often explicitly incorporated in intergroup intervention programs and trainings to improve intergroup relations (e.g., Burton, 1987; Fisher, 1994; Kelman, 1990). Important for the present study, Pettigrew and Tropp (2008) showed that the positive effects of contact on prejudice reduction were partially mediated by increased empathy. Empathy allows group members to transform and expand their sense of self to include members of other groups (Aron & McLaughlin-Volpe, 2001).

Based on this, in the present study, we hypothesized that intergroup contact would increase empathy for but reduce threat from