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Intergroup contact versus conflict in Catalan high schools: A multilevel analysis of adolescent attitudes toward immigration and diversity

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ABSTRACT

Western educational systems are often insufficiently prepared for the ethnic, religious, and linguistic diversity resulting from immigration. In Catalonia, one of the wealthiest regions of Spain, a diverse, recent, and large-scale immigration coincides with a popular nationalist movement and increasingly salient national identifications. Focusing on a context where ethnic, national, religious, and linguistic divisions intersect daily, our aim was to determine if both beneficial and detrimental effects of intergroup contact exist by measuring three separate dependent variables, xenophobia, appreciation of diversity, and attitudes toward immigrant rights, among native ($n = 1219$) and nonnative ($n = 379$) students during their last year of compulsory education (10th grade). Multilevel modeling, with students nested within 82 classrooms in 30 high schools throughout Catalonia, revealed effects of national identifications, frequency of contact, socioeconomic status, and classroom ethnic composition. Results provide strong support for intergroup contact theory in that classrooms with higher proportions of immigrant students demonstrated less xenophobia and more positive attitudes towards immigrant rights overall. Implications of classroom characteristics were qualified by national identification and intergroup interactions. Simultaneously, modest detrimental implications of intergroup contact were unveiled in that higher proportions of immigrants in a classroom predicted lower appreciation of diversity; immigrants were more likely to embrace diversity when they were a minority in the classroom, though native and immigrant students were both low on appreciation of diversity in majority-immigrant classrooms. Findings also highlight the critical importance of national identification in a context where national identities are often contested.

Over the last half century, immigration has sharply increased in many European countries, altering the demographic landscape of its regions and rapidly increasing overall ethnic heterogeneity. Questions of immigration are at the forefront of political discussions throughout the Western world. A case in point is the recent surge of anti-immigrant parties and the outcry against the influx of refugees from war-torn Syria. Within these debates, xenophobia and hostility toward immigrants, especially if they are of a different race or religion, act as critical barriers to social cohesion (see McPherson, Smith-Lovin, & Cook, 2001).

Challenges to positive intercultural relations regularly occur in educational systems whose teachers and overall organizations are often unprepared for ethnic, religious, and linguistic diversity (e.g., Deusdad Ayala, 2009; Gibson & Carrasco, 2009; Gutiérrez, Morales, & Martínez, 2009; Hopkins, & Stern, 1996; Villegas, Strom, & Lucas, 2012). Schools are often the first place where children

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and parents engage in intercultural and/or interethnic encounters. These interactions shape relations between established and newly-arrived communities. However, whereas these contacts offer opportunities for mutual appreciation, they also harbor a potential for conflict. Both of these trends are contemplated within competing strands of theory, namely, intergroup contact theory (Allport, 1954; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006) and various incarnations of intergroup conflict theory (Blalock, 1967; Bobo, 1999), including the recent constrict theory (Putnam, 2007).

In this research, we investigate intergroup relations focusing on xenophobic attitudes, appreciation of diversity, and attitudes toward immigrant rights within high schools in Catalonia, an autonomous region within Spain, where a large-scale and recent rise in non-European immigration is one of the highest in the European Union (Hjerm, 2001; Koopmans, 2010; OECD, 2009, 2015). We test two dominant theories, or families of theories, against each other: intergroup contact theory, the idea that intergroup relations will improve through mutual contact (e.g., Allport, 1954; Tropp, 2006, 2008;), and what we refer to as “conflict theory”, namely, the notion that close proximity of different groups will encourage intergroup divisions (e.g., Blalock, 1967; Bobo, 1999). Though such competitive tests have been undertaken before (e.g., Savelkoul, Scheepers, Tolsma, & Hagendoorn, 2010), we argue that the Catalan educational system provides a unique context for such an investigation. Immigration to the region has brought a great deal of socioeconomic, linguistic, and religious diversity with many young immigrants mainly from northern Africa, South America, Asia, and Eastern Europe (Garreta Bochaca, 2006). Moreover, and complicated by the recent economic crisis, Catalonia is characterized by an increasingly sharpening conflict between two competing national identities, the regionally national Catalan identity and the official national identity of Spain, of which Catalonia is part (see García, 2013; Muñoz & Tormos, 2015). In contrast to other European contexts with similar identity constellations (e.g., Belgium), there are claims that one of the national identities, specifically the Catalan identity, is inherently open to incorporating immigration (e.g., Erickson, 2011; Woolard, 2016). Therefore, we hypothesize that national identity moderates the consequences of intergroup contact (Crisp & Beck, 2005; Munniksma et al., 2015). We use multilevel modeling to investigate the implications of self-reported contact experience as well as the classroom composition (proportion of immigrants vs. natives) in which these intergroup contacts took place, while simultaneously examining other potentially relevant variables such as gender, immigrant background, and socioeconomic status.

1 Intergroup contact theory

The basic tenet of intergroup contact theory is that contact with outgroups reduces tension and improves intergroup attitudes. The original “contact hypothesis” by Allport (1954) specified that equal status, common goals, intergroup cooperation, and authoritative support, are necessary conditions for the reduction of prejudice through intergroup contact. In a meta-analysis of 515 studies, Pettigrew and Tropp (2006) confirmed the importance of these four preconditions, but demonstrated that not all are necessary for intergroup contact to yield desirable consequences. The more of them are present, however, the more likely it is that intergroup contact will reduce prejudice. In subsequent meta-analytic work, Pettigrew and Tropp (2008) showed the prejudice-reducing effects of intergroup contact were mediated by increased knowledge about the outgroup, a reduction of intergroup anxiety, and an increase in empathy and perspective taking.

Occasionally, negative intergroup interactions render group boundaries more salient and intergroup attitudes more negative (e.g., Paolini, Harwood, & Rubin, 2010). On balance, however, intergroup contact tends to have positive consequences for intergroup relations, evidenced by large-scale representative surveys (e.g., Schmid et al., 2012; Sigelman & Welch, 1993), longitudinal studies (e.g., Christ et al., 2010; Eller & Abrams, 2004), laboratory experiments (e.g., Cook, 1978; Ensari & Miller, 2002; Gaertner et al., 1999), and large-scale field interventions (e.g., Deutsch & Collins, 1951; Nesdale & Todd, 2000).

2 Intergroup contact in European schools

Despite the seemingly overwhelming support for contact theory, findings in school settings are often complex and multifaceted (e.g., Schofield & Eurich-Fulcer, 2001). Particularly in European school settings, results are surprisingly tenuous and varied. In many instances, high levels of intergroup contact predict better interethnic relations (e.g., Brown, Eller, Leeds, & Stace, 2007; Van Houtte & Stevens, 2009), though occasionally worse intergroup relations (e.g., Vervoort, Scholte, & Scheepers, 2011), with some studies providing evidence for both (e.g., Binder et al., 2009; Stark, 2011).

Beyond the larger societal environment (macro context), school and class compositions represent critical micro contexts in which interactions between native and immigrant students occur. The proportion of native versus immigrant students in a classroom, for instance, may help shape the overall class climate, increase (reduce) opportunities for intergroup interaction, and lower (heighten) the risk of untoward behavior (e.g., Van Geel & Vedder, 2010; Van Houtte & Stevens, 2009; Verkuyten, Thijs, & Bekhuis, 2010).

Moreover, opportunities for, and implications of, intergroup contact may vary between immigrants and natives. Van Houtte and Stevens (2009) observed that, due to free school choice, many native Flemish students in Belgian secondary schools attended ethnically homogeneous schools, whereas most non-native students attended schools alongside at least some native students. Furthermore, when majority and minority groups are engaged in intergroup contact, beneficial implications are stronger among majority groups—a consistent finding among both student and adult populations (Tropp & Pettigrew, 2005; see also Binder et al., 2009).

One might conclude that intergroup contact findings in European schools are, so far, mixed. Part of the heterogeneity of findings might stem from varying methods of intergroup contact assessment (see Thijs & Verkuyten, 2014 for a comprehensive review). Some research focuses on the ethnic composition of the classroom or the school, with the implication that intergroup contact is more likely to occur when diversity is high. Other studies focus primarily on self-reports of intergroup interaction. With the ethnic composition of one's social environment defining opportunities for intergroup contact, self-reports of intergroup contact and ethnic composition

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