



Comparing direct and imagined intergroup contact among children: Effects on outgroup stereotypes and helping intentions

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ABSTRACT

We conducted an experimental intervention aimed at comparing the effectiveness of direct and imagined intergroup contact. Italian elementary school children took part in a three-week intervention with dependent variables assessed one week after the last intervention session. Results revealed that direct and imagined intergroup contact, compared to control conditions of direct and imagined intragroup contact, had an additive impact when it came to reducing negative stereotypes of immigrants and fostering future helping intentions toward this group. The theoretical and practical implications of the findings are discussed.

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There is extensive evidence showing that direct, face-to-face contact between members of different groups can foster intergroup tolerance (Allport, 1954; Hodson & Hewstone, 2013; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2011). Recent research, however, has demonstrated that simply mentally simulating an interaction with an outgroup member can also improve outgroup attitudes (“imagined intergroup contact”; Crisp & Turner, 2009, 2012). Although imagined intergroup contact proved to be a successful strategy for improving intergroup relations (for a meta-analysis, see Miles & Crisp, 2014), a hitherto unanswered question remains: does imagined intergroup contact have a weaker, stronger or similar effect to direct intergroup contact? In this research, we provide what is the first direct comparison of imagined and direct intergroup contact approaches with children. In doing so, we provide, for the first time, further specification as to whether the two approaches have an additive or interactive impact on intergroup perceptions.

1. Imagined intergroup contact

Imagined intergroup contact is defined as “the mental simulation of a social interaction with a member or members of an outgroup category” (Crisp & Turner, 2009, p. 234). There is now a sizable literature demonstrating the effectiveness of this indirect contact strategy (for reviews, see Crisp, Husnu, Meleady, Stathi, & Turner, 2010; Crisp & Turner, 2009, 2012; Vezzali, Crisp, Stathi, & Giovannini, 2013). Recently, Miles and Crisp (2014) conducted a meta-analysis on imagined intergroup contact, including 71 independent tests and 5770 participants. Results showed that this strategy had an average effect of

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$d_+ = .35$. Moreover, this positive effect extended to a wide range of outcome variables, including explicit outgroup attitudes (e.g., Turner, Crisp, & Lambert, 2007), implicit outgroup attitudes (Turner & Crisp, 2010), emotions (e.g., Birtel & Crisp, 2012), behavioral intentions (e.g., Husnu & Crisp, 2010), and behavior (e.g., Turner & West, 2012). Findings also showed that effects were consistent across different target-groups, age-groups and situational contexts.

Relevant to the present study, results from the meta-analysis by Miles and Crisp (2014) demonstrated especially large effects for child samples, $d_+ = .81$. Indeed, although not numerous, now there are various studies demonstrating that imagined intergroup contact is an effective strategy for reducing prejudice among children (Cameron, Rutland, Turner, Holman-Nicolas, & Powell, 2011; Stathi, Cameron, Hartley, & Bradford, 2014; Vezzali, Capozza, Giovannini, & Stathi, 2012; Vezzali, Capozza, Stathi, & Giovannini, 2012; Vezzali et al., in press, Study 1). For example, Vezzali, Capozza, Giovannini, et al. (2012) conducted a 3-week experimental intervention asking Italian elementary school children to imagine a positive encounter with an unknown immigrant child in various social situations. Results revealed that, compared to a control condition where no intervention was applied, children in the imagined intergroup contact condition revealed stronger intentions to meet outgroup members and less implicit prejudice, as assessed one week after the last intervention session.

Vezzali et al. (in press, Study 1) sought to demonstrate that, in line with predictions derived from the common ingroup identity model (Gaertner & Dovidio, 2000, 2012), enhancing the salience of a superordinate identity that includes the ingroup and the outgroup during imagined contact would strengthen the efficacy of this strategy. Italian elementary school children were asked, over the course of four weeks, to imagine working as members of the same group with an outgroup member (i.e., an immigrant child) and take part successfully with him/her in various competitions (e.g., a cooking competition at school). Results indicated that this common ingroup imagined intergroup contact was more effective than standard imagined intergroup contact (i.e., imagined intergroup contact where a common identity was not made salient) in improving behavioral intentions toward the outgroup. Specifically, although the effects of common ingroup imagined intergroup contact did not significantly differ from those of a standard imagined intergroup contact condition, this was the only condition which had reliable effects compared to the control condition (where children imagined *intragroup* contact). Specifically, common ingroup imagined intergroup contact, relative to the control condition, increased helping intentions toward the outgroup, assessed one week after the last intervention session, and these effects persisted one week later, when helping intentions were again assessed.

Despite the rapidly growing research on imagined intergroup contact, studies conducted until now have tested separately the effects of direct and imagined intergroup contact, thus, making difficult to know whether imagined intergroup contact is as effective as direct intergroup contact. One exception is the study by Giacobbe, Stukas, and Farhall (2013). The authors randomly assigned university students to imagine or have actual contact with a person with a diagnosis of schizophrenia (who was a confederate, in the actual intergroup contact condition). Compared to control conditions where imagined and direct contact were with age-matched control person, both imagined and direct intergroup contact improved (from pre-test to post-test) attitudes toward people with schizophrenia, without reliable differences between the two strategies.

We aimed to build upon the Giacobbe et al.'s (2013) study in some important ways. First, in the prior research actual intergroup contact was with a confederate and not with a real outgroup member, thus, limiting the ecological validity of the results. Second, actual intergroup contact consisted of a single session lasting 15–20 min, so one could argue that its effects may not have had sufficient time to sink in, resulting in an underestimation of its effectiveness. Third, dependent variables were measured straight after the experimental session. To the extent that indirect experiences such as imagined intergroup contact may be less resistant to change and fade away more quickly than direct experiences (Fazio, Powell, & Herr, 1983), the results of this study did not account for the comparative strength of the contact strategies over time. Finally, the design employed by Giacobbe et al. (2013) did not allow to test whether direct and imagined intergroup contact have interactive or even additive effects, since the two contact strategies were not manipulated orthogonally. In our study, we aimed to build upon the previous research by addressing the above questions.

2. The present research

We conducted an experimental intervention in a natural setting among elementary school children with the aim to compare the effectiveness of two especially strong forms of direct and imagined intergroup contact, and to test the effects of their combination on outgroup stereotypes and positive behavioral intentions.

Participants were Italian elementary school children; the outgroup was that of immigrants. To test our hypotheses, participants worked cooperatively in small groups of 3–6 children. We designed our intergroup contact interventions (both direct and indirect) based on principles recommended by the common ingroup identity model, in order to strengthen the efficacy of our manipulation (Gaertner & Dovidio, 2000, 2012). Specifically, we orthogonally manipulated direct and imagined contact in a 2×2 experimental design. Direct contact was manipulated by asking children to work on a task in ethnically heterogeneous or homogeneous groups (Guerra et al., 2010; see also Guerra, Rebelo, Monteiro, & Gaertner, 2013). This way, we had an experimental direct contact intergroup condition where participants experienced *intergroup* contact (i.e., they worked in heterogeneous groups), and a control direct contact condition, where participants experienced *intragroup* contact (i.e., they worked in homogeneous groups). Imagined contact was manipulated by asking children to imagine a story where they impersonated characters belonging to one group or to two groups cooperating together as a single group. In particular, children were assigned to an *intergroup* imagined contact condition (i.e., after categorizing them as distinct groups, they were asked to work together as a single group), or to an *intragroup* imagined contact condition (i.e., they worked as a single group).

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