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An experimental comparison of direct and indirect intergroup contact☆,☆☆,☆☆☆

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ABSTRACT

Indirect forms of intergroup contact, such as extended and vicarious contact, are thought to provide a promising alternative to direct contact, but very few studies have compared the effectiveness of these two types of contact to confirm this claim. Furthermore, Wright, Aron, McLaughlin-Volpe, and Ropp (1997) postulated, but did not test, that the usefulness of extended (or vicarious) over direct contact lies in these forms of indirect contact being likely to elicit less anxiety and more group salience at the time of the interaction, both of which are beneficial for contact. The present paper reports two experiments comparing the effects of direct and vicarious contact on: (i) outgroup attitudes and anxiety for future contact both immediately after contact (posttest) as well as a week later (delayed posttest), and (ii) their elicited interaction-induced anxiety and group salience. Both studies were conducted in Cyprus, with Greek Cypriot participants and the Turkish Cypriot community as the outgroup. Results did not support Wright et al.'s postulations. They furthermore showed that direct contact had a relative advantage over vicarious contact in leading to more positive outgroup attitudes at posttest, but that attitudes reverted to pretest levels for both conditions at delayed posttest. Vicarious, unlike direct, contact, did, however, lead to a persistent reduction of anxiety for future contact, thus suggesting that the greatest utility of indirect forms of contact may lie in their emotionally preparing individuals for subsequent face-to-face interactions.

1. Introduction

Sixty years of research on intergroup contact has yielded strong support for the hypothesis first proposed by Gordon Allport (1954), that intergroup contact can, under certain conditions (e.g., equal status of participating parties and cooperation towards a common goal), lead to prejudice reduction (see Pettigrew & Tropp's, 2006, meta-analysis). Yet, in the real world, intergroup contact may be scarce for multiple reasons. Contact may, for example, be unfeasible due to a lack of opportunities for contact as is the case in segregated contexts. Moreover, contact may not be pursued because of psychological barriers, like intergroup anxiety (Stephan & Stephan, 1985), that make individuals apprehensive about intergroup encounters. If, however, intergroup contact is as central to prejudice reduction as research suggests, then what happens in these situations in which direct intergroup contact is not possible? Researchers have proposed that indirect contact, which does not require face-to-face interactions between members of different groups, may provide a means to reap some of the benefits of contact in segregated settings (Dovidio, Eller, & Hewstone, 2011; Hewstone & Swart, 2011).

The earliest study of indirect contact by Wright, Aron, McLaughlin-Volpe, and Ropp (1997) contended that there are two possible ways of attaining effects similar to those of direct contact without having to have a face-to-face interaction with the outgroup member. According to Wright et al., (i) knowing, or (ii) observing, an ingroup member having a close relationship with an outgroup member can lead to more positive intergroup attitudes. These two processes were later termed *extended* contact or *extended* friendships and *vicarious* contact, respectively (Dovidio et al., 2011). In their seminal study, Wright et al. showed: (1) that self-reported extended friendships (controlling for participants' own direct friendships) were associated with reduced prejudice; (2) that experimentally manipulated extended contact following an induction of intergroup conflict led to participants reporting more positive attitudes towards the outgroup than the attitudes they reported immediately

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after intergroup conflict was created: and (3) that observing a positive as opposed to a neutral or a negative interaction of an ingroup member with an outgroup member (vicarious contact) led participants to evaluate the outgroup more positively.

The majority of studies that proceeded to test the extended contact hypothesis typically asked participants to report how many ingroup members (normally friends, relatives, or colleagues) they know who have outgroup friends. Zhou, Page-Gould, Aron, Moyer, and Hewstone (under review) have recently completed a meta-analysis on studies investigating the relationship between extended contact and intergroup attitudes. Their sample comprised 116 studies with 251 effect sizes from 47,497 participants; the reported aggregate relationship between extended contact and intergroup attitudes was $r = 0.25$, 95% CI [0.22, 0.280, which reduced to $r = 0.17$, 95% CI [0.14, 0.19] after controlling for the contribution of direct friendship.

A recent comprehensive narrative review of the literature (Vezzali, Hewstone, Capozza, Giovannini, & Wölfer, 2014) investigated the effects of both extended and vicarious contact and found ample support for both of them. Both knowing an ingroup member who has outgroup friends (e.g., Andrighetto, Mari, Volpato, & Behluli, 2012; Tam, Hewstone, Kenworthy, & Cairns, 2009) as well as watching a friendly intergroup interaction (Mazziotta, Mummendey, & Wright, 2011; Ortiz & Harwood, 2007) were found to lead to more positive intergroup attitudes and more positive intergroup behavioral intentions. This paper examines the effects of one form of indirect contact, *vicarious contact*, on outgroup attitudes (Studies 1 and 2a) and anxiety for future contact (Study 2). In our research we operationalized vicarious contact as observing a friend, who is an ingroup member, having an interaction with an outgroup member. This means that our instance of vicarious contact is very close to extended contact since in both cases the indirect contact with the outgroup is mediated via a member of the ingroup, who is also a friend, but with the focus on *observing* (vicarious contact) rather than *knowing* about (extended contact) the intergroup contact.

1.1. What is the utility of indirect types of contact over direct contact?

Wright et al. (1997) proposed that group memberships are more salient during extended and vicarious contact than direct contact, as an observer of an intergroup encounter is more likely to perceive the encounter as more of an intergroup than an interpersonal event, in which the observer watches one member of the ingroup interact with an outgroup member. Perceiving group salience facilitates the generalization of the positive effects of contact from the individual outgroup member to the outgroup as a whole (Brown & Hewstone, 2005). Further, Wright et al. argued that observing or learning about an intergroup interaction is less anxiety-provoking, because the individual does not need to have a face-to face encounter with a member of a feared, disliked, or unknown outgroup. Thus, intergroup anxiety experienced at the time of contact would be less likely to undermine extended or vicarious contact than direct contact.

Although Wright et al.'s (1997) postulations about group salience and interaction-induced anxiety were never explicitly tested, their demonstration that contact need not be face-to-face to reduce prejudice ignited a great deal of interest. There have subsequently been numerous tests confirming the effectiveness of indirect types of contact, particularly extended friendships, in reducing prejudice (Vezzali et al., 2014). The promise of indirect contact has even led some researchers (e.g., Eller, Abrams, & Gomez, 2012) to ask whether indirect forms of contact could provide *sustainable alternatives* to direct contact.

Little has been done, however, to test whether the effect of indirect forms of contact, like extended or vicarious contact, can be as powerful or as lasting as the effects of direct contact to justify such claims. Feddes, Noack, and Rutland (2009) compared the longitudinal effects of direct and extended friendships between German and Turkish school children on outgroup evaluation. They found, cross-sectionally, that both types of friendships were associated with more positive evaluations of the outgroup, but that longitudinally, there was an effect *only for direct*, and not extended, friendships. Christ et al. (2010, Study 2) conducted a longitudinal study to examine the relationship between Catholics and Protestants recruited from mixed and segregated neighborhoods in Northern Ireland. They found that extended contact measured at Time 1 led, one year later, to increased attitude certainty (in addition to increased willingness to help and support the outgroup, but *only* for respondents in segregated settings), thus showing that, in this study and over time, extended contact can have as much impact on outgroup attitudes as direct contact does, when opportunities for direct contact are not in place. There has, however, been no study comparing the effects of direct and vicarious contact on measures of prejudice reduction.

It could of course be argued that the primary function of indirect forms of contact, like extended and vicarious contact, is not as an alternative to direct contact, but rather as a pre-contact tool (Crisp, Husnu, Meleady, Stathi, & Turner, 2010; Crisp & Turner, 2013). Extended contact has been proposed as a stepping stone to direct contact (Eller et al., 2012; Gomez, Tropp, & Fernandez, 2011; Turner, Hewstone, Voci, Paolini, & Christ, 2007a). Wölfer et al. (under review), showed in four longitudinal studies that extended friendships predicted direct friendships at a subsequent time point, and that this effect was mediated by lower intergroup anxiety. There is also evidence that vicarious contact leads to greater preparedness for actual contact (Mazziotta et al., 2011).

1.2. This research

We sought to address two points that in our opinion had been left underexplored in the intergroup contact literature. The first point pertained to Wright et al.'s (1997) hypotheses concerning group salience and interaction-induced anxiety. According to Wright et al., extended or vicarious as opposed to direct contact should: 1) elicit less anxiety at the time of the interaction because the observer of the interaction is not directly involved in it; and 2) be more likely to be perceived as an intergroup rather as an interpersonal event, and so it should elicit higher group salience. To our knowledge, we test these hypotheses for the first time. The second point concerned directly comparing in a controlled environment (experimental setting), the size as well as the duration of the effects of direct and indirect (vicarious) contact.

To test these hypotheses, we conducted two experiments (Studies 1 and 2a) that both used a pretest-intervention-posttest experimental design, with random allocation of participants to the experimental and control conditions, and with the variables of interest measured before and after the experimental treatment. To test the hypotheses derived from Wright et al.'s (1997) first point, we included, in both experiments, measures tapping how participants perceived the interaction at posttest, in terms of anxiety and group salience. To address their second point, we compared direct and vicarious contact in terms of their effectiveness in improving outgroup attitudes (Studies 1 and 2); and in reducing anxiety for future contact (Study 2). To determine and compare the duration of these effects, we included in Study 2a a follow-up measure, a delayed posttest, one week after the immediate posttest. This allowed us to assess whether any effects of the intervention remained or faded away a week after contact had taken place.

We conducted both studies in Cyprus, a post-conflict society characterized by extreme levels of segregation. The two main communities, Greek Cypriots (majority: 77%) and Turkish Cypriots (minority: 18%) have been living on opposite sides of the island since 1974. This has restricted both opportunities for and actual intergroup contact between them. The participants in all studies were students of Greek Cypriot origin, and the outgroup (Turkish Cypriots) was kept constant across studies.