



## Perspective-taking mediates the imagined contact effect



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### ABSTRACT

We investigated the potential for mental imagery to reduce intergroup bias in Cyprus, an island that has suffered from interethnic tension for over 40 years. Seventy-three Turkish Cypriots were asked to imagine a scenario in which they interacted with Greek Cypriots, compared to those imagining an outdoor scene. Subsequently, participants in the imagined contact condition reported more positive outgroup evaluations. Mediation analysis showed this relationship was explained by increased levels of perspective-taking. The findings highlight theoretical and practical possibilities for future imagined contact research.

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## 1. Introduction

Imagined intergroup contact (Crisp & Turner, 2009) is a new indirect contact strategy for promoting tolerance and more positive intergroup relations. Research on imagined contact has shown that it can reduce prejudice toward a number of groups in a variety of social contexts (for a recent narrative review see Crisp & Turner, 2012; for a meta-analysis see Miles & Crisp, 2014). It is thought to be a particularly useful tool in contexts defined by little opportunity for real or meaningful contact (Turner, Crisp, & Lambert, 2007). Once such context is that of Cyprus where inter-ethnic conflict and discord is pervasive. By using the imagined contact approach we attempted to promote more positive interethnic attitudes, and assessed a new explanatory process: *perspective-taking*.

### 1.1. Intergroup contact

Positive intergroup contact is one of the most effective ways to reduce prejudice and intergroup discrimination (Brown & Hewstone, 2005; Pettigrew, 1998). This is especially thought to be the case if the contact situation embodies equal status, common goals, co-operation, and institutional sanctioning (Allport, 1954). An extensive meta-analysis by Pettigrew and Tropp (2006) of over 500 studies have found a highly significant effect of contact on prejudice, regardless of target group, age group, geographical area or contact setting.

Despite the clear advantages to contact, it can only be used in contexts where there is the possibility and opportunity for contact (e.g., Phinney, Ferguson, & Tate, 1997; Turner, Hewstone, & Voci, 2007). However, there exist many instances of conflict around the world where there is little opportunity for contact, such as in Northern Ireland; the Middle East and

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Cyprus (Hewstone et al., 2006; Husnu & Crisp, 2010b). One potential solution to this problem is to use indirect contact interventions which do not necessitate face-to-face contact. One such intervention is imagined contact.

### 1.2. Imagined 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 substantial evidence showing that imagined contact, especially when positively toned, has beneficial effects on intergroup relations. For instance, it improves intergroup attitudes (Husnu & Crisp, 2010a; Turner, Crisp, et al., 2007), enhances projection of positive traits to the outgroup (Stathi & Crisp, 2008), outgroup trust (Pagotto, Visintin, De Iorio, & Voci, 2012; Vezzali, Capozza, Stathi, & Giovannini, 2012), perceptions of outgroup variability (Turner, Crisp, et al., 2007; Turner, Hewstone, et al., 2007), self-efficacy concerning future outgroup contact (Stathi, Crisp, & Hogg, 2011), fosters more positive intentions to have contact with the outgroup (Husnu & Crisp, 2010a, 2010b), and reduces the attribution of negative outgroup stereotypes (Brambilla, Ravenna, & Hewstone, 2012; Cameron, Rutland, Turner, Holman-Nicolas, & Powell, 2011; Stathi, Tsantila, & Crisp, 2012). Recent research has also revealed that the positive effects of imagined contact spread to subtle forms of bias such as reduced implicit prejudice (Turner & Crisp, 2010; Vezzali, Capozza, Giovannini, & Stathi, 2012) and subtle, non-verbal behaviors (Birtel & Crisp, 2012; Turner & West, 2012).

This research has established several moderators and mediators of imagined contact. Moderators mainly include group based characteristics of the outgroup with which participants imagined contact (e.g., ethnic group, nationality, mental illness, disability, age, sexual orientation, religion, or weight) and design-based characteristics (e.g., valence of contact scenario, content and fluency of instructions or elaboration) (see the recent meta-analysis of over 70 imagined contact studies by Miles & Crisp, 2014). Additionally, identified mediators include intergroup anxiety (Birtel & Crisp, 2012; Husnu & Crisp, 2010a; Turner, Crisp, et al., 2007; Turner, Hewstone, et al., 2007), outgroup trust (Turner, West, & Christie, 2013; Vezzali, Capozza, Giovannini, et al., 2012; Vezzali, Capozza, Stathi, et al., 2012), infrahumanization of the outgroup (Vezzali, Capozza, Giovannini, et al., 2012; Vezzali, Capozza, Stathi, et al., 2012), dispositional attributions (Crisp & Husnu, 2011), fluency (West & Bruckmüller, 2013) and vividness (Husnu & Crisp, 2010a). The aim of the current research was to establish the role of a candidate mediator that has received much support in other areas of conflict reduction, but has yet to be tested for imagined contact: *perspective-taking*.

### 1.3. Perspective-taking

Perspective-taking is the process of seeing the world from another's vantage point; that is, putting oneself in another's shoes (Galinsky, Ku, & Wang, 2005). Research by Galinsky and Moskowitz (2000) have shown that perspective-taking and empathy can be useful tools in decreasing negative stereotype content and evaluation accessibility in intergroup situations. Furthermore, research shows that empathy for outgroup members (the affective component of perspective-taking) results in improved attitudes (Stephan & Finlay, 1999). A series of studies by Batson et al. (1997) showed that participants who empathized with members of stigmatized groups such as people with AIDS and the homeless demonstrated more positive attitudes toward members of the group. Additionally, Finlay and Stephan (2000) demonstrated that those Anglo American students who imagined themselves experiencing the emotions of an African American stranger (empathy-induced condition) while reading about everyday incidents of discrimination against African Americans, demonstrated more positive attitudes toward African Americans in general compared to those who did not receive empathy-inducing instructions.

In intergroup contact research Harwood, Hewstone, Paolini, and Voci (2005) have found that perspective-taking, or being able to see things from the other's point of view and putting oneself “in their shoes”, is a crucial determinant connecting contact with a grandparent to out-group attitudes. Additionally, research into the predictors of intergroup forgiveness has found that intergroup contact was positively related to outgroup attitudes, perspective-taking, and trust among a group of Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland (Hewstone, Cairns, Voci, Hamberger, & Niens, 2006). Supporting this role of perspective-taking in contact effects, in their meta-analysis of the three most studied mediators of contact effects (increased knowledge of the outgroup; reduced anxiety about the contact situation, and increased empathy and perspective-taking) Pettigrew and Tropp (2008) found evidence that increased empathy and perspective-taking was a critical mediator in reducing prejudice and had a stronger effect than increasing knowledge about the group.

## 2. This research

In this research we investigated whether the process of perspective-taking would be as important for imagined contact as it is for direct contact, as demonstrated in the studies reviewed above. We did this within a study examining the potential for imagined contact to reduce outgroup prejudice in the context of the prolonged conflict in Cyprus. The ‘Cyprus Problem’, as it is known today, arose from communal differences between Greek and Turkish Cypriots which culminated in war in 1974. The resulting cease-fire left Turkish Cypriots in the northern one-third of the island and Greek Cypriots in the south, mediated by UN soldiers along the ‘Green Line’, which separates both sides. Over the years, and despite many attempts, an agreement has never been reached and Nicosia is recognized as the last divided capital in Europe. In April 2003, both sides

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