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THE SILVER LINING BETWEEN PERCEIVED SIMILARITY AND INTERGROUP DIFFERENCES: INCREASING CONFIDENCE IN INTERGROUP CONTACT[1]

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Abstract: Positive intergroup contact and cross-group friendships are known to have numerous benefits for intergroup relations in diverse schools. However, children do not always spontaneously engage in cross-group friendships, choosing rather to spend time with their ingroup peers. Several factors have previously been identified that influence children's confidence in contact and subsequent development of cross-group friendships, including perceived intergroup similarity and reconciliation of intergroup differences. However, inducing perceived similarity may pose a threat to the person's social identity and increase the need for distinctiveness. Therefore, it remains unclear how one should manipulate perceived similarity and group boundaries when designing interventions that prepare school children for successful contact. Moreover, eliminating perceived group boundaries need not lead to the generalization of improved attitudes towards the outgroup. An optimal balance of inclusion and differentiation between the groups should be determined so as to make way for beneficial cross-group friendships. Based on a literature review, we provide recommendations for designing prejudice reduction interventions in schools from the perspective of intergroup similarity.

Key words: intergroup contact; cross-group friendships; similarity; prejudice reduction; school interventions

Introduction

Children and young adults spend a significant amount of time in school, where they have the opportunity to meet peers from different backgrounds and social groups. Provided that this contact is positive, it has the potential to reduce the bias between different groups and improve intergroup relations (Allport, 1954). This simple idea is the basic assumption in intergroup contact theory, which has gained considerable empirical support over the past couple of decades (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006), and still represents a dominant approach in social psychology. Schools provide a naturalistic environment in which researchers and practitioners can collaborate and test intergroup contact interventions outside the laboratory.

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In fact, positive intergroup contact can be especially effective in schools, since educational settings are likely to fulfill all the conditions for optimal contact initially proposed by Allport (1954). In the classroom, children typically have *equal status*, they often work together to achieve *a common goal* in tasks that require *cooperation,* and their interaction is encouraged by teachers and *supported institutionally* (Tropp & Prenovost, 2008). When these conditions are met, attending a diverse and integrated educational environment can have many significant benefits for children (Killen, Crystal, & Ruck, 2007). However, if the school does not nurture an optimal climate for harmonious intergroup relations, diversity can result in a negative experience, especially for minority group children (e.g. Benner & Kim, 2009). Several studies have also found a connection between diversity and lower community trust (Alesina & La Ferrara, 2002; Putnam, 2007). Therefore, contact alone is not sufficient for good intergroup relations, and in addition to the specific optimal conditions it requires, we need to ensure that people, and especially children, are prepared for future contact with the outgroup. In recent years, the popularity of prejudice reduction methods based on *indirect* contact has grown, and empirical evidence has proven that these types of interventions can be successfully applied in early education, making children "contact-ready" (e.g. Cameron & Turner, 2010; Di Bernardo, Vezzali, Stathi, Cadamuro, & Cortesi, 2017).

Promoting confidence in contact and cross-group friendships

The potential of friendships was quickly identified in intergroup relations research (Pettigrew, 1997), and contact in the form of cross-group friendships was shown to promote greater reductions in intergroup prejudice (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2008). Moreover, cross-group friendships were found to decrease intergroup anxiety (e.g. Page-Gould, Mendoza-Denton, & Tropp, 2008) and increase trust towards the outgroup (Davies, Tropp, Aron, Pettigrew, & Wright, 2011). However, children do not always choose to establish contact with their more diverse peers, and they typically show a preference for their ingroup members (e.g. Aboud, Mendelson, & Purdy, 2003). Even though cross-group friendships have gained notable attention in prejudice reduction research, the emphasis has usually been on their frequency and how they related to intergroup attitudes. After decades of research, little is still known about the conditions that lead to the initiation of cross-group friendships in the first place and their subsequent successful maintenance. A recent model proposed by Turner and Cameron (2016) shows a promising attempt to map all the conditions for increasing children's *confidence in contact* which in turn makes them "contact-ready" and may promote the formation of cross-group friendships in school settings. According to the model, schools should primarily cultivate a positive and open social context, and classroom interventions should mainly focus on expanding children's socio-cognitive abilities (such as empathy and perspective taking skills), as well as reducing intergroup anxiety and increasing perceived intergroup similarity. This would help children experience positive expectations regarding contact and positive attitudes towards the outgroup, as well as improve their social skills and intercultural competence. Indirect contact methods, such as extended, vicarious or imagined contact, have already proven effective in preparing people for future contact (Dovidio, Eller, & Hewstone, 2011). Increasing confidence in contact is therefore hypothesized to result in

successful intergroup relations while providing numerous personal benefits for students, such as higher self-esteem and cognitive flexibility.

However, Turner and Cameron's (2016) model fails to address the potential risks inherent in manipulating intergroup similarity and tackling perceived cross-group boundaries. More precisely, the model introduces the idea that initial expectations of difference are one of the factors contributing to a lack of confidence in contact, and emphasizes the importance of interventions focused on increasing perceived similarity and the reconciliation of differences. According to Turner and Cameron (2016), people who are confident in contact perceive intergroup similarity while also retaining a secure and accepted identity. However, inducing both perceived intergroup similarity and a secure identity cannot be accomplished easily, since the former may trigger a threat to the person's social identity (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), and/or increase the need for distinctiveness (Brewer, 1993). Findings from empirical studies on intergroup similarity and dissimilarity have been rather inconclusive. Surprisingly increasing perceived similarity may sometimes backfire and encourage ingroup favoritism (Diehl, 1988; Jetten, Spears, & Manstead, 1996; 2001).

Moreover, this controversy has gained little attention in prejudice reduction research with children and, interestingly, while there have only been a few attempts to increase similarity as part of prejudice reduction methods (e.g. Aboud & Fenwick, 1999; Houlette et al., 2004), more studies have been concerned with measuring perceived similarity after the intervention and as an indicator of improved intergroup attitudes and relations (e.g. Stathi, Cameron, Hartley, & Bradford, 2014; Stathi & Crisp, 2008; Wright & Tropp, 2005). For this reason, the present paper aims to highlight the importance of carefully maneuvering intergroup similarity and group boundaries when designing and implementing prejudice reduction interventions in school settings. In this paper, we will argue that 1) similarity is not always beneficial to intergroup relations and it is extremely context-depended, and 2) inducing perceptions of intergroup similarity or a common identity does not necessarily lead to the generalization of improved attitudes to the whole outgroup. The conclusions derived from the literature review will be used to propose specific recommendations for practitioners and researchers working with diverse school environments.

Intergroup similarity or distinctiveness?

Turner and Cameron (2016) argue that children typically assume that they are more different from their outgroup peers, and perceived differences might limit everyday interactions and cross-group friendships. Hence, interventions that increase perceived similarity may help promote confidence in contact and increase cross-group friendship opportunities. This assumption is consistent with the similarity-attraction hypothesis (Byrne & Griffitt, 1973) which refers to the tendency of individuals to be attracted to others who are similar to themselves. Similarity in terms of personal identities can draw people together (e.g. Selfhout, Denissen, Branje, & Meeus, 2009), mainly by decreasing anxiety during interaction; however, inducing similarity in intergroup context does not always lead to the expected results.

According to social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), people are motivated to achieve and maintain a positive social identity, which is part of the individual's self-concept derived from group membership. Therefore, people strive to achieve a sense of

ingroup superiority relative to the outgroup and tend to see their ingroup as being positively distinct from other groups. Optimal distinctiveness theory (Brewer, 1993) builds on social identity theory and argues that optimal identity satisfies both the need for inclusion within the ingroup and the need for differentiation through distinctions between the ingroup and the outgroup. According to this theory, threats to ingroup inclusion and intergroup distinctiveness may motivate individuals to emphasize intergroup boundaries and even increase bias. For example, Ojala and Nesdale (2004) tested whether children's attitudes towards bullying are moderated by the perceived distinctiveness threat and ingroup norms. They found that children considered bullying more acceptable when it was directed at an outgroup member who was similar to the ingroup, and therefore possibly a threat to the ingroup and motivating to increase distinctiveness.

In another, somewhat counterintuitive, study Danyluck and Page-Gould (2018) investigated the effect of intergroup similarity versus dissimilarity on cross-group friendships formation. They manipulated perceived similarity between interaction partners from different ethnic groups and recorded their physiological and behavioral responses during the cross-group interaction. They found that people who were primed with perceived dissimilarity, instead of similarity, experienced physiological synchrony with their partner, a measure believed to reflect a shared internal state. Moreover, the participants who were primed to perceive dissimilarity acted in a more affiliative way towards their outgroup partners, which predicted friendship initiation. On the other hand, the similarity condition seemed to have no effect on any of the tested variables.

The answer to these inconclusive results may lie in the context in which intergroup similarity is induced or the type of similarity primed. Brown (1984) found that similarity led to intergroup attraction only when primed in a cooperative context, and not when primed in a competitive one. On the other hand, West, Magee, Gordon, and Gullett (2014) showed that perceived similarity in self-revealing attributes improved dyadic- and group-level cross-group interactions by reducing feelings of anxiety and increasing interest in sustaining cross-group contact. They argue that in the case of cross-group interactions, the attributes of similarity should have two basic characteristics: they must be perceived as *self-revealing* and the basis of similarity should be *peripheral* to the goals of the interaction, meaning that the attributes should not be perceived as being important to the success within any given interaction context. Similarly, McDonald et al. (2017) distinguished *emotional* similarity from attitudinal, or value, similarity and they found that when participants were made to believe that an individual member of the outgroup or the outgroup as a whole had similar emotions, it led to increased humanization in the outgroup members and improved intergroup attitudes.

The context in which similarity is induced can also make a difference to intergroup boundaries, which indirectly contribute to the perceived similarity. The next section shows how recategorizing initial group memberships may improve outgroup attitudes and intergroup relations.

Common ingroup identity

Perceived similarity can also be manipulated by priming a shared identity perspective and transforming individual representation from two separate groups into one inclusive

superordinate identity. According to the common ingroup identity model (CIIM, Gaertner & Dovidio, 2014) calling attention to existing common superordinate group memberships may reduce intergroup bias by extending the positive evaluations and favoritism initially projected to the ingroup members to the members of the new superordinate group as well. For example, Vezzali et al. (2015) showed that greater perceptions of belonging to a common ingroup after a natural disaster (superordinate group as witnesses of the earthquake) promoted more positive and supporting relations between majority and minority children in Italy. However, Gaertner and Dovidio (2014) acknowledge that eliminating initial group boundaries entirely would reduce the possibility of the improved attitudes being generalized to the whole outgroup in a different context. Maintaining a dual identity; that is, preserving the salience of initial group memberships and establishing a new superordinate category, might on the other hand solve the problem of generalization (González & Brown, 2003).

The mutual intergroup differentiation model (MIDM) also proposed that the salience of the original groups should be preserved in the contact situation (Hewstone & Brown, 1986). In addition to the simultaneous activation of both subordinate and superordinate categories, the proponents of this model emphasize that instead of eliminating group differences, each group's areas of expertise should be recognized and valued. Therefore, equal value should be bestowed on the characteristics of each group. Unlike the CIIM model, which argues that the shared identities and one-group representation would elicit positive attitudes but that they would not be generalized, MIDM predicts that this type of categorization would threaten the distinctiveness of the group and, in fact, increase bias. In order to test this empirically, Hornsey and Hogg (2000) conducted two experiments comparing the two models in a noncontact situation. Maths-science and humanities students were given the task of making proposals for planning a town park. They were told that "previous studies had shown that university students can sometimes see problems in ways that trained professionals cannot and that we were interested in aggregating their responses as *university students* and comparing these responses with those of town planners" (p. 245). The results showed that the university students, who were categorized only at the superordinate level (i.e. primed with one-group representation as students of the university, as opposed to the town planners, by circling the group they belonged to), showed a stronger preference for their original subgroups and higher levels of intergroup bias than those who were categorized only at the subgroup level (primed to categorize as either maths-science or humanities students). On the other hand, participants who were encouraged to focus on the subgroup and superordinate group simultaneously demonstrated a lower level of intergroup bias. Therefore, the integrity of the original subgroup identity must not be threatened if the effects of the superordinate category are to be maximized and a negative outcome avoided. The negative effects of recategorization are also believed to be associated with initial ingroup identification. For example, Crisp, Stone and Hall (2006) showed that recategorizing subgroup identities into one superordinate group increased bias only in participants who identified strongly with their ingroup.

One of the few studies to examine subgroup and superordinate categorization in school children was conducted by Cameron et al. (2006). They used an extended (indirect) contact method, which consisted of children reading several stories that portrayed friendships between majority and refugee children. In one condition, the category memberships of

the story protagonists were deemphasized, and their individual identities were stressed (decategorization); in the second condition the superordinate (school) category membership was emphasized (common ingroup identity); while in the third condition, the subgroup identities of the protagonists as majority members and refugees were salient and their common school identity (dual identity) was also highlighted. Compared to the control group (children who were exposed to no stories), outgroup attitudes were significantly more positive in all the experimental conditions; however, the dual identity model was most successful in improving attitudes, and the effect was moderated by subgroup identity.

Conclusions and implications for practice

Attending diverse schools can have many benefits for young people (Davies, Tropp, Aron, Pettigrew, & Wright 2011; Killen, Crystal, & Ruck, 2007) and cross-group friendships have been shown to effectively reduce prejudice (Turner, Hewstone, Voci, Paolini, & Christ, 2007). Providing the optimal conditions for preparing school children for contact is important to successful intergroup relations. For this reason, we need to identify the most effective strategies for managing diversity in schools.

Many successful indirect contact school-based interventions for prejudice reduction already incorporate perceived similarity on some level (Di Bernardo et al., 2017), whether the experimental manipulation includes imagining an outgroup member and finding out they have something in common, or priming the perception that many ingroup members have friends who are outgroup members. However, the inconsistency of the empirical findings seems to indicate that inducing perceptions of intergroup similarity can have both positive and negative consequences, depending on the many different factors. Moreover, even if we were to decide to avoid manipulating similarity altogether, participants in these interventions seem to spontaneously reflect on similarity even when they are not directly primed to do so. In our previous research, a qualitative analysis of participants' imagined interactions with a Roma minority member showed that they had a tendency to imagine that their interaction partner was somewhat different from the rest of the outgroup (Lášticová, Andraščiková, & Kočišová, 2015). Therefore, it seems that similarity is an important factor to consider in intergroup relations research, and we should not undermine the potential it has in improving outgroup attitudes.

But how can we capitalize on the benefits of intergroup similarity and shared identity without threatening social distinctiveness while making sure the positive effects are generalized to the other members of the outgroup? Even if we were to successfully prime participants into positively perceiving similarity between them and an outgroup member, the improved attitudes would not necessarily generalize to the whole outgroup, as they might categorize this particular member as different from, or not typical of, their initial outgroup. In past research we tested the effectiveness of imagined contact based on a common ingroup identity, where school children imagined cooperative and successful interaction with a Muslim immigrant student. The qualitative analysis of the children's written imagined interactions showed that they tended to emphasize the similarities between themselves and their interaction partner; however, overall the intervention had no effect on their attitudes and helping intentions towards Muslims in general (Poslon, 2017; see also Poslon, Pavlíčková, & Lášticová, 2017).

Based on the literature review presented above, we can conclude that 1) inducing perceived intergroup similarity can benefit outgroup attitudes in the right context, and especially, if the social identity is not threatened; 2) intergroup similarity can be induced by manipulating intergroup boundaries, under the condition that the initial memberships remain salient; and 3) group differentiation should also be acknowledged in terms of the unique contribution each member makes and that is recognized and valued.

Interventions based on similarity and/or group boundaries should therefore be designed carefully. Similarities between the self and the outgroup member should be emphasized only on the personal level, so as not to threaten the social identity, and they ought not to be based on attributes that might trigger social comparison (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). When manipulating group boundaries, inducing a perception of shared identity under a superordinate category can lead to improved attitudes towards the outgroup; however, both subordinate group memberships should be preserved in order to allow for generalization. Making sure that children do not view themselves as being more prototypical of the superordinate group than the outgroup member can also prevent the negative consequences of decategorization (Hornsey & Hogg, 2000). For example, children should not be primed into considering who is a more representative student of their school, and real or imagined group activities should emphasize the unique contribution of each member to the superordinate group or cooperative task. The task could make the children reflect on what interests they might have in common with an outgroup peer and at the same time what each of them could learn from one another.

A very simple manipulation of similarity was proposed by Ioannou, Hewstone, and Al Ramiah (2017) that aims to prevent the threat of distinctiveness and avoids manipulating the categories altogether. Based on the mutual intergroup differentiation model, they came up with an imagined contact simulation in which participants had to imagine a scenario with "balanced similarity", a positive interaction with an outgroup member who "was in some ways similar, and in other ways dissimilar, to them" (p. 430). The results showed that this type of condition was more effective in improving intergroup attitudes than the conditions emphasizing differences only, or similarities only, or the standard imagined contact scenario (without any similarity manipulation). A simple intervention such as this may in fact fulfill the need for outgroup differentiation and reduce the anxiety of future interaction with an outgroup member.

Apart from perceived intergroup boundaries, the settings in which the stimulation or task is administered can make a considerable difference to the success of the intervention. Perceived intergroup similarity may have different consequences when induced in highly prejudiced individuals, or in people who identify strongly with their ingroup (Crisp, Stone, & Hall, 2006; Jetten, Spears, & Manstead, 2001). In school-based interventions with children, the existing school climate and social norms may also influence the valence of the actual or indirect contact. Negative peer norms can limit the development of cross-group friendships (Aboud & Sankar, 2007) and teachers' (Grütter & Meyer, 2014) and parents' (Miklikowska, 2016) attitudes towards diversity may shape children's behavior. Therefore, before implementing prejudice reduction methods, researchers and practitioners should make sure the school climate nurtures an open and positive environment in which intergroup friendships have the opportunity to flourish.

Taken together, these findings suggest that there is no one-size-fits-all solution to designing prejudice reduction interventions. Both emphasizing similarities and embracing differences can have different consequences depending on the context of the intergroup relations. The nature of the relations between the targeted groups and the frequency and quality of the existing contact between them should be taken into consideration. More studies are needed in order to understand whether the same similarity-based mechanisms underlie intergroup attitudes across different cultures and targeted minority or disadvantaged groups. For example, Osbeck, Moghaddam, and Perreault (1997) found that greater perceived similarity was associated with a greater willingness to associate with different ethnic outgroups in Canada, but the relationship between these variables was stronger when minority group members were the target. Future research should also address whether similarity is perceived differently across cultures that emphasize individuality, compared to highly collectivist cultures (Hofstede, 2011), since cross-cultural differences in self-concept (e.g. Bochner, 1994) may affect the vulnerability to the distinctiveness threat. Studying the role of similarity in intergroup relations from the psychological perspective could also have important implications for policy making and managing cultural diversity on the societal level. Colorblind ideology based on assimilation on the one hand and multiculturalism on the other rely on different assumptions regarding the emphasis on similarities or differences in majority-minority relations. Knowing in which cases it is safe to highlight these group boundaries is essential if we are to create and nurture harmonious intergroup relations.

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