

RESEARCH ARTICLE

How the interplay of imagined contact and first-person narratives improves attitudes toward stigmatized immigrants: A conditional process model

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Abstract

This article assesses the mechanisms whereby first-person narratives featuring stigmatized immigrants improve outgroup attitudes and encourage intergroup contact among prejudiced individuals. We rely on a 2 (imagined contact vs. control) \times 2 (similar vs. dissimilar message protagonist) experiment on a systematic sample of native British adults. Results show that encouraging imagined contact prior to reading a short testimonial featuring an immigrant protagonist who is similar to the recipients in terms of social identity enhances identification with the protagonist, thereby improving outgroup attitudes and encouraging intergroup contact, and especially strongly among those who are prejudiced toward immigrants (i.e., high on modern racism). Theoretical and practical implications of the findings for the work on imagined contact, narrative persuasion, and identification, as well as for public communication campaigns, are discussed.

In recent years, research on narrative persuasion has made important contributions by identifying the mechanisms underlying the effects of narratives and investigating how to increase their persuasiveness. This knowledge is now used to develop interventions aiming to solve various social problems, ranging from public health to immigrant integration (Chung & Slater, 2013; Cohen, Tal-Or, & Mazor-Tregerman, 2015; Igartua & Vega, 2016; Müller, 2009; Murphy, Frank, Chatterjee, & Baezconde-Garbanati, 2013; Wojcieszak, Azrout, Boomgaarden, Alencar, & Sheets, 2017; Wojcieszak & Kim, 2016).

This article contributes to this field by examining whether and how narrative messages can be used as tools for improving people's attitudes toward stigmatized groups, such as immigrants. Theoretically, this study combines the work on the processes underlying narrative persuasion with the research on reducing prejudice, and—more specifically—with the work on imagined intergroup contact. These literatures are incorporated toward addressing a practical question, namely how can short testimonials featuring a stigmatized immigrant improve outgroup attitudes and encourage intergroup contact among individuals who are negative toward the immigrant population? The overarching aim is to understand the conditional process by which a combination of imagined contact and similarity of an immigrant portrayed in a message can

influence attitudes and behavioral intentions through identification with the protagonist and at different levels of prejudice.

To test these indirect and conditional effects, we rely on an experiment on a systematic sample of native British adults ($N = 417$) assigned to (i) imagine either a positive interaction with an immigrant or an unrelated outdoor scene, before reading a short testimonial in which a stigmatized immigrant was portrayed as (ii) either similar or dissimilar in terms of social identity to the British message recipients. We start by outlining work on imagined intergroup contact, and then describe the research on narrative persuasion in general and identification in particular to show that it is crucial to enhance identification with outgroup characters in order to improve intergroup attitudes. These literatures are then linked with the work on prejudice to propose that a combination of imagined contact and similarity can strengthen identification and improve attitudes especially among highly prejudiced individuals.

Imagined Intergroup Contact and Outgroup Attitudes

Interpersonal contact between individuals from different social groups is, in some conditions, effective in

improving outgroup attitudes (Allport, 1954; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). Few people, however, have direct, meaningful, and repeated interactions with various outgroups, especially if they hold negative attitudes toward these groups. Solving this problem, recent evidence suggests that positive effects emerge even if intergroup contact is indirect (Harwood, 2010).

This study focuses on one such form of indirect contact, *imagined contact*, defined as “the mental simulation of a social interaction with a member or members of an outgroup category” (Miles & Crisp, 2013, p. 4). Experiments typically instruct participants to think about a positive intergroup encounter (vs. imagining an experience unrelated to an outgroup) and later observe the effect of these instructions on attitudes, emotions, or behavioral intentions toward the outgroup (Crisp, Husnu, Meleady, Stathi, & Turner, 2010; Turner & Crisp, 2010; Turner, Crisp, & Lambert, 2007). A recent meta-analysis shows that such instructions have a host of positive effects on outgroup-related outcomes (Miles & Crisp, 2013). These effects are stronger for behavioral intentions than for attitudes likely because imagined contact can prepare people for approaching intergroup interactions with an open mind, positive outlook, and reduced anxiety (Miles & Crisp, 2013). For this reason, using imagined contact as a “warm-up” stage for future contact could be particularly beneficial in the case of stigmatized outgroups, and also among prejudiced individuals, as detailed below (Crisp & Turner, 2012).

To date, very few studies have applied the theoretical perspective of imagined contact to communication research (e.g., Harwood, 2010; Harwood *et al.*, 2017), and—to our knowledge—no work has examined whether imagined contact influences the effects of media or message exposure. Yet this theoretical perspective is relevant to communications and media effects not only because imagined contact constitutes a communicative process, as it entails visualizing an interaction with another person (Harwood, 2010). Also, and perhaps most importantly, given its usefulness in preparing people to engage with outgroup members with an open mind, imagined contact can be an effective prelude to other forms of intergroup encounters, such as mediated exposure to outgroup members. In other words, inasmuch as “imagined contact might be usefully applied immediately before an intervention that involves extended or direct contact” (Crisp & Turner, 2009, p. 238), imagining an intergroup interaction prior to exposure to messages about outgroups can open people up to these messages and facilitate positive changes in attitudes. It is thus of theoretical and practical interest to assess whether encouraging people to imagine intergroup interaction matters in this context.

Narrative Messages and Outgroup Attitudes

The second relevant body of research focuses on how media messages can improve outgroup

attitudes. The work most germane to the current study examines narratives, or coherent and temporally ordered stories that describe individual experiences related to an issue (Green & Brock, 2000). Narratives can range from audio-visual productions, such as television series or full-feature movies, to such simpler formats as testimonials or personal stories shared on social media or used in public media campaigns. Such messages influence narrative-consistent beliefs, attitudes, behavioral intentions, and—most strongly—actual behaviors (see meta-analysis by Braddock & Dillard, 2016). For instance, watching a movie about the experiences of immigrants generates support for immigration (Igartua, 2010) and viewing fictional dramas that feature minority groups in a positive light predicts positive outgroup attitudes, especially when people identify with the characters (Ortiz & Harwood, 2007).

Rather than relying on movies or television series, this project zooms on messages that can feasibly be encountered online or in public communication campaigns, namely on short stories delivered by an affected individual (e.g., Braverman, 2008; de Wit, Das, & Vet, 2008). The specific focus is on first-person testimonials describing the experiences of a stigmatized immigrant in his new country and on the mechanisms that explain *how* and *when* (boundary conditions) such messages can generate effects.

Similarity and Identification

Research on narrative persuasion shows that identification with characters is a crucial explanatory mechanism underlying narrative effects (Cohen *et al.*, 2015; de Graaf, Hoeken, Sanders, & Beentjes, 2012; Hoeken & Fiekkers, 2014; Igartua, 2010; Igartua & Barrios, 2012; Igartua & Vega, 2016). Identification is a cognitive-affective process that takes place during narrative reception and encompasses sharing the character’s feelings, understanding his/her perspective and motivations, internalizing his/her goals, and temporarily losing self-awareness (imagining being the character, taking on his/her identity, and merging with the character) (Cohen, 2001; Igartua & Barrios, 2012; Moyer-Gusé, 2008).¹ Research shows

¹Identification shares some similarities with empathy, in that the dimensions of identification include emotional empathy, or sharing the emotions of the character, and cognitive empathy, or understanding the perspective of the character. That said, the two other dimensions of identification (goal internalization and loss of self-awareness) are not required for empathy, and also the items used to measure identification (e.g., Cohen, 2001; Igartua & Barrios, 2012) are distinct from those used to measure dispositional empathy (e.g., Davis, 1983) and from those used as manipulation checks of experimentally induced empathy (e.g., Batson, Chang, Orr, & Rowland, 2002; Batson *et al.*, 1997; Wojcieszak & Kim, 2016). Although these two concepts are related, identification is broader than and empirically distinct from empathy (see also, Cohen, 2001).

that identification lowers resistance to persuasion, thereby fostering attitude change (de Graaf et al., 2012; Moyer-Gusé, 2008; Moyer-Gusé, Chung, & Jain, 2011; Slater & Rouner, 2002). There is less work, however, on the factors that enhance identification (but see de Graaf et al., 2012; Tal-Or & Cohen, 2010). In order to better understand narrative effects, we need systematic research on what features of narrative messages increase identification and its impact among specific groups of audiences.

This study examines *similarity* between the protagonist and the audience as crucial to enhancing identification (de Graaf, 2014; Hoeken, Kolthoff, & Sanders, 2016). Similarity describes a process through which a message receiver assesses the extent to which he or she shares certain traits with the protagonist, such as objective features (e.g., gender or nationality) or psychological or subjective characteristics (e.g., personality, beliefs, or values). Both objective and perceived similarity increase identification and, indirectly, change attitudes (see de Graaf, Sanders, & Hoeken, 2016). It is sometimes noted that similarity is a prerequisite for identification (Cohen, 2001).

Applying these findings to messages about stigmatized outgroups poses two challenges. For one, stigmatized characters provoke less identification (Igartua & Frutos, 2017) and less perspective-taking (Chung & Slater, 2013) than characters coming from one's ingroup. Second, attitudes toward stigmatized groups are often negative, and so a prejudiced person is yet less likely to identify with their members. For instance, those high on modern racism identified the least with immigrant characters in a fictional movie despite the fact that those characters were portrayed favorably (Igartua & Frutos, 2017).

Bringing Together Imagined Contact, Similarity and Prejudice

The crucial question, therefore, is how to foster similarity and identification with a stigmatized protagonist in a personal testimonial intended to improve outgroup attitudes, *and* how to do so among prejudiced audiences. We argue that—for those audiences—similarity will be particularly likely to stimulate identification in a specific *exposure condition*, namely when it is combined with training one's imagination through imagined intergroup contact before reading a testimonial featuring an immigrant similar in terms of social identity, as we detail below.

When it comes to similarity effects, social identity and self-categorization theories (Tajfel, 1982; Turner, 1985) suggest that people tend to categorize those who are similar to them in some ways as in-group members and those who are different on some

characteristics as the out-group.² These categorizations have concrete consequences: People react with more positive affect, think more favorably about, and are more willing to cooperate with the ingroup than the outgroup (Gaertner, Dovidio, Anastasio, Bachman, & Rust, 1993). Germane here, in- or outgroup categorization is context dependent, such that—depending on some cues—others can be seen as one's ingroup or outgroup (Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987). Building on this notion, the Common Ingroup Identity Model (CIIM; Gaertner et al., 2000) shows that re-categorizing members from separate groups as members of a superordinate group, that is, showing that the former in- and outgroup share some commonalities, minimizes outgroup bias. Applying this work to messages about outgroups suggests that a source that is in some ways similar to the recipient should be seen more as an in-group member, with consequent positive effects on attitudes.

This study focuses on one particular aspect of similarity between message source and message recipient that may be especially relevant to stigmatized outgroups and prejudiced individuals. We advance the concept of *similarity in terms of social identity*, which refers to emphasizing that an outgroup member shares some attitudinal, psychological, and behavioral characteristics that touch on the social identity that forms the basis for the in- and outgroup distinction. For instance, an immigrant might enjoy the host country's typical food or be a fan of a national sports team. Although portraying an immigrant as similar in terms of social identity should be effective among all message recipients, the beneficial effects on identification, outgroup attitudes, and behavioral intentions should be especially pronounced among those who are most negative toward the outgroup portrayed in a message. This is because those individuals prefer that immigrant groups assimilate and adopt the customs and cultural identity of the host society, whereas the less prejudiced prefer immigrants to uphold the elements of their home culture as well (e.g., Rojas, Navas,

²Emphasizing that an outgroup member is similar on some relevant characteristics to the ingroup could, in some situations, exacerbate outgroup bias. Because people derive self-esteem from positively distinguishing their own ingroup from outgroups (Tajfel, 1982; Turner, 1985), doing so could threaten one's distinct social identity and lead to more negative outgroup attitudes (see Brown & Lopez, 2001). For example, immigrants that are similar in terms of work-related skills can be seen as competition and thus trigger feelings of material threat (e.g., Zárate, García, Garza, & Hitlan, 2004). This effect, however, is likely to emerge when the status of the ingroup is low or when people want to reduce identity uncertainty (see Knobloch-Westerwick & Hastall, 2010). Because this is not the case in our study, in that we examine the attitudes that native citizens (whose identity status is relatively certain and "superior") hold toward stigmatized immigrants (whose identity is less secure and status lower), similarity in terms of social identity should not backfire. It is also worth noting that—unlike CIIM that transforms perceived group boundaries from "us" and "them" to a more inclusive "we"—similarity in terms of social identity casts the outgroup member within the boundaries of the ingroup.

Sayans-Jiménez, & Cuadrado, 2014). Also, research suggests that minority groups perceived as similar are seen as less threatening (van Osch & Breugelmans, 2012), and it is precisely the reduction of outgroup threat that is crucial to improving outgroup attitudes among prejudiced individuals (see Stephan & Stephan, 2000). It follows that emphasizing that an immigrant values and interiorizes some defining characteristics of the host society in both public and private areas should resonate particularly strongly with the prejudiced audience. In sum, because similarity in terms of social identity brings to the forefront what people have in common with others, it should foster identification.

When it comes to imagined contact, intergroup contact in general works well (and often best) among intolerant persons, such as those high on authoritarianism, social dominance, and political conservatives (Hodson, 2011). Imagined contact in particular is also found to improve outgroup attitudes even among people who are negatively predisposed toward a group, partly because it reduces anxiety typically associated with intergroup interactions, and perceived outgroup threat (Birtel & Crisp, 2012; see also Asbrock, Christ, Duckitt, & Sibley, 2012).

The current research goes beyond testing *direct* (or simple moderating) effects of similarity and imagined contact, and instead considers imagined contact as an *exposure condition* (i.e., a particular psychological state, in which people receive the message; Tukachinsky, 2014). Because identification is an imaginative process that leads to the (temporary) adoption of someone else's point of view (Cohen, 2001), efforts to improve this process before exposure can increase identification. Some prior work that examines exposure conditions in which people read or watch media content focuses on creating certain mental states among message receivers (e.g., through perspective taking instructions, e.g., Sestir & Green, 2010) or altering aspects of media messages (e.g., shifting the narrative voice, e.g., Kaufman & Libby, 2012). This work indeed finds that these conditions increase identification and thereby facilitate media effects (Tukachinsky, 2014).

The current study builds on this work, introducing imagined contact as another exposure condition that can facilitate identification when combined with similarity in terms of social identity. We argue that the combination of imagined contact *and* similarity will exert especially strong *joint* effects among prejudiced individuals. That is, when those individuals are "trained" to imagine a positive encounter with an immigrant and then read a testimonial featuring an immigrant similar in terms of social identity, they will develop greater identification with the character, which—in turn—will influence their attitudes and behavioral intentions.

Overview and Hypotheses

The aim of this study is to generate new knowledge about narrative persuasion processes and their

application to prejudice reduction in the context of immigration, taking into account both the research on narrative persuasion and the social psychological research on imagined intergroup contact. More specifically, this study examines how to enhance identification with a stigmatized immigrant in order to improve attitudes and encourage future intergroup interactions among prejudiced audiences.

Although prejudice can be conceptualized in different ways, the current study examines modern racism, which is a subtle form of prejudice linked to ambivalent reactions toward outgroups (McConahay, Hardee, & Batts, 1981). As direct expressions of prejudice are declining due to social censure, traditional racist attitudes and behaviors manifest in more covert forms, "hidden" in arguments related to "fairness" and "reverse discrimination" (see Morrison & Kiss, 2017). People who exhibit high levels of modern racism think that discrimination is no longer an issue for various outgroups, that those outgroups "ask for too much" and make unfair demands, and that various institutions devote excessive resources to protect outgroups. Also, people may think that their own group is ignored or harmed in some way, which leads to resentment. Modern racism is associated with feeling uncomfortable, insecure, distrustful, and negative toward outgroup members, and with the avoidance of intergroup contact (Gaertner & Dovidio, 1986), making it crucial to examine strategies to improve attitudes among individuals high on modern racism.

We test whether giving people instructions to imagine intergroup interaction prior to reading a testimonial featuring an immigrant who shares the interests, tastes, and sentiments of the autochthonous audience (high similarity) causes greater identification than reading a testimonial with an otherwise identical immigrant whose interests, tastes, and sentiments are based on his national origin (low similarity), and whether this process is most likely among prejudiced individuals. We therefore consider imagined intergroup contact as a facilitating factor, or exposure condition, that will enhance identification and the subsequent effects when is combined with the effect of similarity.

To shed light on the interaction between these variables, a 2×2 between-subjects experimental factorial design is used, allowing us to test the joint effect of imagined contact and similarity on identification with the protagonist and (indirectly, as a conditional process) on attitudes and behavioral intentions. The role of prejudice as a moderator that conditions that process is also analyzed. Our design thus considers two manipulated independent variables (imagined contact and similarity), a mediator (identification), and an additional moderating variable tapping an individual difference (prejudice levels).

With regard to identification, in line with a *moderated moderation model* (Hayes, 2013), a three-way interaction effect between imagined contact, similarity, and prejudice on identification with an outgroup message

protagonist is expected. That is, identification should be induced if the outgroup protagonist is similar to the recipient in terms of social identity (i.e., could be more easily categorized as an ingroup member) and if the recipient’s imagination is “trained” through imagined contact prior to exposure. Given that identification is an imaginative process (Cohen, 2001), imagining a positive interaction with a stigmatized immigrant should make it easier for people to identify with the protagonist. As argued above, this strategy should work especially well for prejudiced individuals (Hodson, 2011).

Hypothesis 1: Imagined contact prior to reading a testimonial whose immigrant protagonist is presented as similar in terms of social identity will induce greater identification than reading a testimonial featuring a low-similarity immigrant protagonist, but especially strongly among individuals with a high level of prejudice.

With regard to attitudinal and behavioral outcomes, the reviewed work on narrative persuasion finds that narratives are effective tools for weakening strong attitudes, even when controversial issues are addressed (Cohen et al., 2015; Igartua & Barrios, 2012; Wojcieszak et al., 2017), partly because identification reduces counter-argumentation. It is thus expected that people who are attitudinally distant from the message (i.e., highly prejudiced) will identify more with the protagonist when imagined contact has been fostered before reading a testimonial featuring a similar protagonist. In other words, we propose a conditional indirect effect of imagined contact on attitudes and behavioral intentions through identification only when participants show high prejudice and read a narrative with a similar immigrant.

Hypothesis 2: Imagined contact prior to reading a testimonial whose immigrant protagonist is presented as similar in terms of social identity will lead to greater identification with the protagonist than reading a testimonial featuring a low-similarity immigrant protagonist, which in turn will improve

attitudes (*H2a*) and enhance intentions to interact with immigrants (*H2b*), and this process will be especially strong among individuals with high prejudice levels (see Figure 1).

Method

Participants

The experiment was conducted in February 2016. Participants were drawn from a diverse opt-in online panel of *Survey Sampling International* (SSI), and were offered incentives by SSI for their participation. In order for the sample to approximate the general British population, quotas on age, gender, education, and the region of the country were set. The final sample consisted of 417 individuals of British origin whose parents were also British. The sample had a mean age of 41.67 (range: 18–65, *SD* = 13.42), 50.4% men and 49.6% women, and with the modal education category being General Certificate of Education Advanced Level (A Level; 42%; 21%—secondary level studies, 25%—Bachelor’s degree, 11%—some graduate work). On a political ideology scale from 0 (left) to 11 (right), the sample had a mean value of 5.48 (*SD* = 2.21). Roughly 50% worked full time and 16.5% worked part-time.

Design and Procedure

Participants first completed a pretest questionnaire, which assessed the moderator and socio-demographic variables. After the pretest, participants were randomly assigned to one of four experimental conditions: 2 (imagined contact) × 2 (similarity). First, half of the participants received instructions to imagine intergroup contact, and the other half received instructions to imagine an unrelated scene (control group). These instructions remained on the screen for two minutes. Then, participants were randomly assigned to two similarity conditions: Half of the participants read a first-person narrative of a Pakistani immigrant, in which he is presented as similar in terms of social identity, and half read a nearly identical message, in which he is not

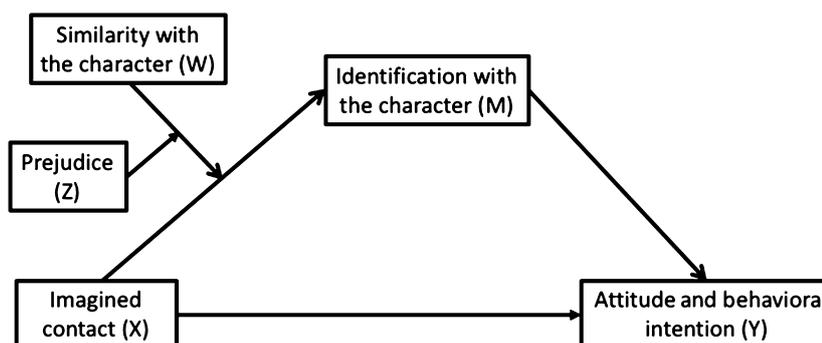


Fig. 1: Hypothesized conditional process model

portrayed as similar (see below). After reading, participants completed a posttest questionnaire that assessed perceived similarity (manipulation check), identification (the mediator), and the core dependent variables (i.e., attitudes and behavioral intentions).

Imagined contact. Standard instructions from prior studies were used to manipulate imagined intergroup contact (see study 1 in Husnu & Crisp, 2010).³ Participants in the imagined contact conditions read the following instructions: “You will read a short story, in which a person shares his experiences related to living in the UK. Before reading the story, we would like you to spend the next 2 minutes imagining yourself meeting a Pakistani immigrant for the first time. Imagine that during the encounter, you find out some interesting and unexpected things about the person.” Participants in the control group were given the following instructions: “You will read a short story, in which a person shares his experiences related to living in the UK. Before reading the story, we would like you to spend the next 2 minutes imagining an outdoor scene. Try to imagine aspects of the scene about you (e.g., Is it a beach, a forest? Are there trees, hills? What’s on the horizon?).”

Experimental stimuli. A first-person testimonial was constructed, in which a Pakistani immigrant shares his experiences since his arrival in the UK (see Appendix S1). A Pakistani immigrant was chosen because Pakistanis are one of the most stigmatized immigrant groups in the UK.⁴ In the story, Ali (a popular first name for Pakistani man) describes various events and feelings related to his arrival in the country, current occupation, his social and family life, his feelings about living in the UK, his fluency in the language, and his sense of belonging. He also mentions rejection of immigrants: the fact that many people think that immigrants take jobs away from native

Britons and that immigrants increase crime. He also defends immigrants and asks for greater tolerance.

When it comes to the similarity manipulation, parts in the testimonial were altered, keeping the rest constant. In the high similarity condition, the protagonist emphasized feeling British (vs. Pakistani in the low similarity condition), that his friends are mainly British (Pakistani), that his favorite food is British (Pakistani), that he usually speaks to his children in English (Urdu), that he reads mainly British (Pakistani) newspapers, that he wishes to remain in the UK (go back to Pakistan), and that he identifies with British (Pakistani) culture and its flag. To reinforce the manipulation, the text was accompanied by a photograph of Ali in his room, with a British (Pakistani) flag on a wall.

Pilot studies were conducted to select the photograph and to test whether the similarity manipulation was effective. A sample of British students ($n = 27$) assessed three photographs of Pakistani men (from un-copyrighted online photo library) in terms of how attractive, pleasant, honest, threatening, and friendly (on scales of 0–10) they considered the men to be. The photograph rated most positively was selected. In addition, the two versions of the testimonial were piloted for clarity and comprehensibility, believability, and interest (from 1 “strongly disagree” to 7 “strongly agree”). There were no statistically significant differences between the high and the low similarity versions on these measures (the means being above 5 in all cases). Finally, the pilot asked: “To what extent do you feel you have things in common with Ali” (from 0 “nothing” to 10 “a lot”). The testimonial with a similar protagonist ($N = 13$) generated significantly higher perceived similarity ($M = 5.53$, $SD = 2.40$) than the low similarity testimonial, $N = 14$, $M = 3.57$, $SD = 2.17$; $t(25) = 2.23$, $p < .017$.

Measures

Prejudice toward immigrants. The moderator, prejudice, was assessed using a measure of modern racism (McConahay *et al.*, 1981). Participants indicated their agreement (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree) with seven items (e.g., “Pakistani immigrants have gotten more economically than what they deserve”, “Pakistani immigrants are getting too demanding in their push for better treatment”; Cronbach $\alpha = .76$; $M = 4.06$, $SD = 0.98$).

Identification with the protagonist. This mediator was assessed using 11 items from a validated scale (see Igartua & Barrios, 2012; e.g., “I felt emotionally involved with Ali’s feelings”, “I felt as if I were Ali”, “I had the impression of living Ali’s story myself” (1 = not at all, 5 = very much; Cronbach $\alpha = .95$; $M = 2.61$, $SD = 0.97$).

Attitudes toward immigration. Attitudes were the first dependent variable, measured with a four-item scale (e.g., “please indicate how strongly you

³Demand characteristics could also explain imagined contact effects. Participants may respond more positively in the imagined contact condition because they guessed the rationale of the experiment and acted in accordance with perceived expectations. Although this is a possibility, prior work finds no evidence to suggest that imagined contact effects are due to demand characteristics (Crisp & Turner, 2009). In fact, imagined contact manipulations successfully influence explicit and also implicit attitudes (Turner & Crisp, 2010). Given that it is difficult to control responses on implicit measures (e.g., the Implicit Association Test, IAT), observing effects on IAT response times minimizes the demand characteristics explanation.

⁴Some studies find that “a majority of Britons tend to think that Pakistani migrants are not integrating well into British society. The trait most commonly associated with people from a Pakistani background is that they keep to their own, and substantially more so than either African or Eastern European communities” (<https://yougov.co.uk/news/2013/06/24/british-attitudes-its-pakistani-diaspora/>), that only 23% of those surveyed thought that immigrants from Pakistan made a positive contribution to the country, and 34% thought that they made a negative contribution (http://cdn.yougov.com/cumulus_uploads/document/f4rr9e024l/YG-Archive-Pol-Times-results-2502015-W.pdf).

favor or oppose immigration,” “please indicate how strongly you favor or oppose that the government finances information campaigns about immigrants” (1 = strongly oppose, 7 = strongly favor; Cronbach $\alpha = .80$; $M = 4.04$, $SD = 1.22$), which was adapted from prior work to the context of the tested messages (e.g., Igartua & Cheng, 2009).

Behavioral intentions. This second dependent variable was assessed using a three-item scale (Crisp & Husnu, 2011): “Thinking about the next time you find yourself in a situation where you could interact with a Pakistani immigrant (e.g., queuing for a bus, with friends in a café, etc.), how interested would you be in striking up a conversation?” (1 = not at all interested, 7 = very interested), “how important do you think it is to learn more about the Pakistani immigrants and the problems they face?” (1 = very unimportant, 7 = very important) and “how willing would you be to participate in a discussion group that includes Pakistani immigrants that will focus on issues of prejudice and discrimination?” (1 = not willing at all, 7 = very willing) (Cronbach $\alpha = .80$; $M = 4.32$, $SD = 1.34$).

Analytical Strategy

To analyze the data, a PROCESS macro was used (Hayes, 2013). PROCESS is a flexible computational tool suitable for estimating various mediation or moderation models. It is based on multiple linear regression and is considered most appropriate for analyzing interactions between one or more experimental independent variables and a continuous independent variable (in this case, modern racism) (Hayes & Matthes, 2009). The first hypothesis proposes a three-way interaction effect between two categorical variables, that is, imagined contact and similarity, and the continuous moderator, modern racism, on identification with the protagonist. To test this hypothesis, PROCESS model 3 was used, with two independent variables: imagined contact (0 “no imagined contact” and 1 “imagined contact”) and similarity with the protagonist (0 “low” and 1 “high”). Modern racism was entered as a continuous moderator, and identification as the dependent variable.

To test the second hypothesis, which proposes a *moderated moderated mediation* (Hayes, 2018), two moderated moderated mediation models were estimated (PROCESS model 11), one for each dependent variable. PROCESS calculates the conditional indirect effects (based on the bootstrapping technique), that is, estimating the effect of an independent variable (imagined contact) on a dependent variable (attitudes, behavioral intentions), through a mediating variable (identification) at different levels of similarity with the protagonist (the second experimental manipulation) and at different values of modern racism. The conditional indirect effects were calculated using 10,000 bootstrapping samples, generating bias-corrected confidence intervals. A conditional indirect effect is

considered significant if the confidence interval (CI at 95%) does not include the value 0. This overarching model allows testing whether the postulated combined effect of the manipulated factors on the dependent variables through identification emerges only among highly prejudiced people.

Results

Preliminary Analyses

Random assignment to the four experimental conditions was successful. There were no statistically significant differences among the conditions in terms of socio-demographics; gender, $\chi^2(3, N = 417) = 5.32$, $p = .149$; age, $F(3, 414) = 2.28$, $p = .078$, political self-positioning, $F(3, 413) = 0.44$, $p = .722$, and modern racism, $F(3, 413) = 0.13$, $p = .940$.

Also, the experimental manipulation of similarity was effective. After exposure, participants responded to the following question “To what extent do you consider you have some things in common with Ali; how much do you think he is like you?” (1 = I have nothing in common with him, he is very different from me, 7 = I have many things in common with him, he seems a lot like me; $M = 3.78$, $SD = 1.68$). An independent sample *t*-test found statistically significant differences, $t(415) = 7.08$, $p < .001$: Those in the high similarity condition reported greater similarity ($M = 4.33$, $SD = 1.59$) than the low similarity condition ($M = 3.23$, $SD = 1.58$). Also, a statistically significant correlation emerged between perceived similarity and identification with Ali, $r(415) = .64$, $p < .001$, a result that is consistent with prior literature (e.g., Tukachinsky, 2014).

H1: Effect of Imagined Contact, Similarity and Modern Racism on Identification

Hypothesis 1 posited a three-way interaction effect between imagined contact, similarity, and modern racism on identification. As expected, PROCESS model 3 found a statistically significant three-way interaction ($B = 0.46$, $p < .014$), such that the effect of imagined contact and high similarity (the conditional effect of the interaction between both independent variables) on identification was only significant among participants with high modern racism ($B = 0.66$, $p < .010$), and that effect was not significant at moderate ($B = 0.21$, $p = .240$) or low ($B = -0.24$, $p = .352$) levels of modern racism.

In addition, the Johnson-Neyman technique was used to calculate the critical value in modern racism after which this interaction effect was statistically significant. That value was 4.42, on a scale with a theoretical range of 1–7, so it is a value statistically above the overall sample mean, $M = 4.06$; $t(416) = -7.40$, $p < .001$, and 33.57% of the participants scored above that value. This means that encouraging people to

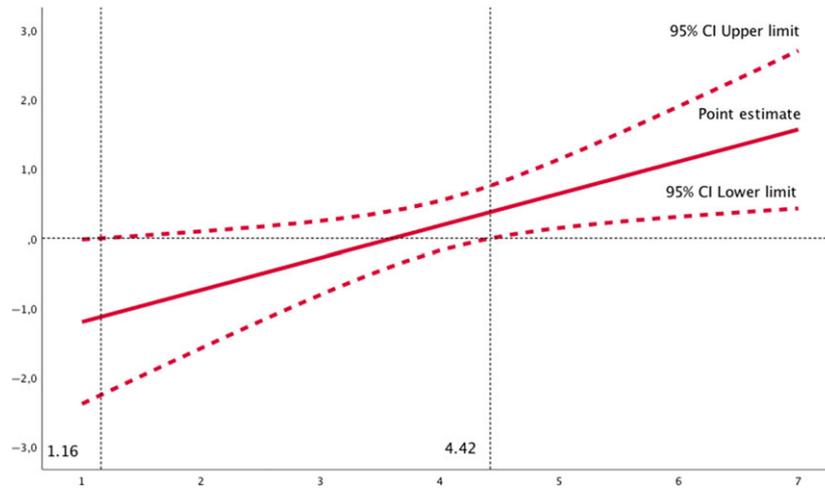


Fig. 2: Johnson-Neyman regions of significance for the conditional effect of the interaction between imagined contact and similarity on identification at levels of prejudice toward immigrants

imagine a brief contact with an immigrant prior to reading a testimonial of a similar immigrant increased identification but only among individuals with high modern racism, consistent with H1 (see Figure 2).⁵

H2: The Conditional Process Model

Hypothesis 2 posited a *moderated mediated mediation model*, that is, a conditional indirect effect of imagined contact on attitude (H2a) and behavioral intentions (H2b) through identification. This indirect effect should be especially pronounced among the participants in high similarity condition who scored high on the modern racism scale.

PROCESS model 11, predicting attitudes toward immigration found the already detected three-way interaction between imagined contact, similarity, and modern racism on identification ($B = 0.46, p < .014$). In turn, identification was associated with a more positive attitude toward immigration ($B = 0.75, p < .001$). Moreover, the only two significant conditional indirect effects (from imagined contact to attitude through identification) emerged when participants had read a narrative with a similar immigrant and when their modern racism was high ($B_{\text{indirect effect}} = 0.57, SE = .15, CI\ 95\% [0.27, 0.88]$) and moderate ($B_{\text{indirect effect}} = 0.27, SE = .10, CI\ 95\% [0.08, 0.47]$); see Table 1). This offers support for H2a, additionally finding significant effects at moderate prejudice levels.

The model testing behavioral intentions as the dependent variable produced similar results. Identification predicted greater intentions to interact with Pakistani immigrants ($B = 0.91, p < .001$). Again, the only two significant conditional indirect effects (from

Table 1. Results of the conditional process model (PROCESS, model 11) with attitudes toward immigration as dependent variable (H2a)

Predictor variables ($R^2 = .12, p < .001$)	Mediator variable model (identification with Ali)			
	B	SE	t	p
Constant	2.91	0.37	7.67	0.000
Imagined contact (X)	0.40	0.56	0.71	0.473
Similarity to protagonist of narrative	1.35	0.56	2.39	0.016
Prejudice toward immigrants	-0.14	0.09	-1.61	0.108
Interaction "imagined contact × similarity"	-1.66	0.78	-2.12	0.034
Interaction "imagined contact × prejudice"	-0.06	0.13	-0.46	0.645
Interaction "similarity × prejudice"	-0.24	0.13	-1.81	0.070
Interaction "imagined contact × similarity × prejudice"	0.46	0.18	2.46	0.014

Predictor variables ($R^2 = .36, p < .001$)	Dependent variable model (Y) (attitude toward immigration)			
	B	SE	t	p
Constant	2.05	0.14	14.54	0.000
Identification with Ali	0.75	0.04	15.27	0.000
Imagined contact (direct effect)	0.01	0.09	0.15	0.879

Similarity to protagonist (W)	Prejudice (Z)	Conditional indirect effects of X on Y		
		B	SE	Boot 95% CI
Low (0)	Low (3.08)	0.16	0.15	[-0.14, 0.47]
Low (0)	Medium (4.06)	0.11	0.09	[-0.07, 0.31]
Low (0)	High (5.04)	0.06	0.20	[-0.34, 0.46]
High (1)	Low (3.08)	-0.02	0.13	[-0.30, 0.23]
High (1)	Medium (4.06)	0.27	0.10	[0.08, 0.47]
High (1)	High (5.04)	0.57	0.15	[0.27, 0.88]

Note: The table includes the B coefficients, which are non-standardized regression coefficients. Significant conditional indirect effects in bold.

imagined contact to behavioral intentions through identification) emerged when participants had read a testimonial with a similar immigrant and when their modern racism was high ($B_{\text{indirect effect}} = 0.68,$

⁵There was another critical value in the moderating variable (modern racism) below which the interaction effect of imagined contact and similarity on identification was statistically significant. That value was 1.16, but only 0.47% of the participants in the study scored below that value on the modern racism index.

Table 2. Results of the conditional process model (PROCESS, model 11) with behavioral intention toward Pakistani immigrants as dependent variable (H2b)

Predictor variables ($R^2 = .12, p < .001$)	Mediator variable model (identification with Ali)			
	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Constant	2.91	0.37	7.67	0.000
Imagined contact (<i>X</i>)	0.40	0.56	0.71	0.473
Similarity to protagonist of narrative	1.35	0.56	2.39	0.016
Prejudice toward immigrants	-0.14	0.09	-1.61	0.108
Interaction "imagined contact × similarity"	-1.66	0.78	-2.12	0.034
Interaction "imagined contact × prejudice"	-0.06	0.13	-0.46	0.645
Interaction "similarity × prejudice"	-0.24	0.13	-1.81	0.070
Interaction "imagined contact × similarity × prejudice"	0.46	0.18	2.46	0.014

Predictor variables ($R^2 = .43, p < .001$)	Dependent variable model (<i>Y</i>) (behavioral intention toward Pakistani immigrants)			
	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Constant	1.92	0.14	13.25	0.000
Identification with Ali	0.91	0.05	17.83	0.000
Imagined contact (direct effect)	0.01	0.10	0.17	0.861

Similarity to protagonist (<i>W</i>)	Conditional indirect effects of <i>X</i> on <i>Y</i>			
	Prejudice (<i>Z</i>)	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	Boot 95% CI
Low (0)	Low (3.08)	0.19	0.18	[-0.17, 0.55]
Low (0)	Medium (4.06)	0.13	0.11	[-0.08, 0.36]
Low (0)	High (5.04)	0.08	0.24	[-0.39, 0.57]
High (1)	Low (3.08)	-0.02	0.16	[-0.34, 0.29]
High (1)	Medium (4.06)	0.33	0.12	[0.10, 0.57]
High (1)	High (5.04)	0.68	0.18	[0.33, 1.06]

Note: The table includes the *B* coefficients, which are non-standardized regression coefficients. Significant conditional indirect effects in bold.

$SE = .18$, CI 95% [0.33, 1.06]) and moderate ($B_{\text{indirect effect}} = 0.33$, $SE = .12$, CI 95% [0.10, 0.57]; see Table 2). These results are consistent with *H2b*, also again detecting effects among those with moderate prejudice. In short, identification did mediate the effects of imagined contact and similarity, and only when individuals had moderate to high levels of modern racism.

Conclusions and Discussion

This research shed light on the processes explaining the impact of testimonials featuring protagonists from stigmatized social groups. It followed the current trend in media psychology, and tested, in the same analysis, mediating variables (identification with the protagonist) and moderating variables related to individual differences (modern racism) (Slater, 2015; Valkenburg, Peter, & Walther, 2016). The theoretical model

proposed that media effects should be analyzed as conditional processes, that the reception processes should be considered as a mediating variable, and that there are dispositional variables that condition the effects of media messages.

Theoretically, this study extended the boundary conditions of research on narrative persuasion not only by analyzing the role of identification with a stigmatized character, but also by merging that research with the scholarship on intergroup contact. This study suggests that imagined contact and similarity in terms of social identity can be combined as effective intervention strategies to improve outgroup attitudes and encourage intergroup behaviors, and especially among prejudiced individuals. More specifically, our study offers several noteworthy findings.

First, encouraging people to imagine interaction with an immigrant prior to reading a testimonial presenting an immigrant similar in terms of social identity enhances identification among highly prejudiced recipients. After a short imagined contact, those individuals can more easily identify with a protagonist, as long as he shares some key aspects of their culture (e.g., enjoys its typical food or supports a national sports team). This result expands previous work by adding similarity in terms of social identity as a factor enhancing identification, a factor that goes beyond what has been studied to date and that is relevant to messages about outgroups. Finding that imagined contact makes it possible to encourage prejudiced individuals to identify with a similar outgroup character is also consistent with social identity and self-categorization theories, according to which people react more favorably to those who are similar on some crucial factors, and with the research on prejudice and integration (e.g., Navas, García, Rojas, Pumares, & Cuadrado, 2006; Rojas et al., 2014).

Second, the data supported the overarching theoretical model proposed: For those prejudiced, a short mental exercise of imagined intergroup interaction prior to reading a testimonial delivered by a similar immigrant can enhance identification, leading to more positive attitudes and greater openness to future contact.

This finding is consistent with the research on exposure conditions, suggesting that the effect of similarity can be intensified by simultaneously altering some elements of the conditions in which exposure takes place (Tukachinsky, 2014). Our study proposed a new theoretical "facilitator" of message effects, namely imagined contact, and showed that this imaginative psychological state can improve the reception of media content in the context of messages about stigmatized outgroups and among those with high and moderate prejudice levels. This finding also adds to the work on narrative persuasion by showing how to enhance identification with stigmatized characters among prejudiced audiences. In short, although prejudice thwarts positive reactions to outgroups, training imagination and portraying an immigrant as similar can generate

beneficial outcomes precisely through identification with the outgroup member, a task difficult to achieve. This effect may be due to the fact that identification is an enjoyable and immersive process (Cohen, 2001; Igartua, 2010), and—as such—it may have made the prejudiced participants less motivated and less able to counter-argue the message, or more likely to elaborate the message cognitively (see Igartua & Vega, 2016). These processes were not tested in the present study, and so future research should investigate whether the observed mediating effect is due to a reduction in counter-argumentation and/or an increase in cognitive elaboration.

These results also advance the research on imagined contact. Showing that its effects are consistently moderated by previous prejudice is important not only because the group contact literature rarely incorporates individual differences in the theorizing despite the argument that they condition the effects, but also because it can help establish whether contact can be an effective intervention strategy for those who are negatively predisposed toward various groups (Hodson, 2011). This study applies this work to an important domain of exposure to stigmatized immigrants in short messages, and to the concept of modern racism (taken as a proxy measure of prejudice toward immigrants). This study is also the first to show that imagined contact can be a facilitator of media effects, leading to improved outgroup attitudes, as noted above.

When interpreting the results, several limitations need to be kept in mind. First, it cannot be determined what exactly generated the effects, whether the message itself, the first-person perspective, the concrete protagonist, his photo, or the image of a flag in the background. This study tested the short testimonial as a package of all these factors. This can be seen as a conflation of factors that should be examined separately. Nevertheless, any similar investigation runs into the problem of potential conflation. After all, testimonial messages necessarily involve a person, an idiosyncratic story, specific information, and other uncontrolled factors. Although decomposing the effects of various components would add to the literature, the effects of the multitude of factors are rarely easy to dissect. In fact, some work on narrative effects examines exposure to a movie or a television show versus no exposure (e.g., Igartua & Barrios, 2012), and so the factors that generate effects are even more difficult to pinpoint. This project systematically isolated similarity in terms of social identity, and future designs should vary other components of narratives more generally and of messages about outgroups more specifically. Because this study relied on stimuli that were equal in length and in the number of facts provided, it can at least be concluded that the results are not due to the nature of the arguments conveyed in the story.

Also, it is possible that the item asking about perceived similarity could have served as a manipulation rather than (or in addition to) a manipulation check.

Asking a question about similarity may have led people to think about this concept, and it is this activated thought, not the text-based similarity manipulation *per se*, that could have generated the effects. This is a possibility in any designs that include manipulation checks before the assessment of the core dependent variables, as was the case in this study (Kühnen, 2010), and so future work may consider revising the order or omitting manipulation checks altogether, relying only on pilot test data.

Moreover, this study is limited to a comparison of two messages, those featuring a similar versus dissimilar immigrant. As a result, it is not clear whether parallel effects would emerge for other stigmatized groups (e.g., the homeless, the HIV positive) and for other, less stigmatized, immigrant groups (e.g., Spaniards in the UK). In addition to testing more messages, it would be beneficial to include a control group (i.e., no narrative) to assess whether effects differ in the experimental conditions from a baseline.

Further, as with most experiments, it cannot be determined whether the effects were durable and impactful, or rather short-lived and inconsequential. Participants may have forgotten the information, and so their attitudes may have returned to the previous levels shortly after exposure. This is especially because media coverage of stigmatized immigrants rarely focuses on shared commonalities, but rather emphasizes difference and stereotypes (e.g., Beyer & Matthes, 2015; Cheng, Igartua, Palacios, Acosta, & Palito, 2014). As such, the impact of high similarity messages may not only be short-lived, but also quickly counteracted with negative messages. Nevertheless, finding that short-term exposure did enhance identification, thus improving attitudes and encouraging intergroup contact among prejudiced people, is important in and of itself. Future designs should incorporate delayed posttests to identify the longevity of these effects and also present participants with competing messages to assess the relative “staying power” of messages favorable toward outgroups.

Last but not least, these effects are detected in a situation that may not often transpire in non-experimental settings. Certainly, the prejudiced citizens could benefit most from imagined intergroup contact before exposure to messages about outgroups. Yet a prejudiced person is not likely to voluntarily imagine a positive interaction with a member of a disliked group. In addition, the effects emerge when messages about outgroups show those outgroups as similar to the majority group, a condition rarely met in naturalistic settings. Nevertheless, practitioners could apply our findings when designing integration-related campaigns. For instance, public service announcements or campaign appeals against racism or xenophobia should attempt to simultaneously encourage recipients to generate certain mental states prior to message exposure (e.g., by including a simple statement such as “imagine we are having a good time together”) and to present outgroups as sharing some similarities with the audiences

(e.g., emphasizing that everyone has a family). Other real-world strategies for applying our findings need to be detected and tested.

Although not free from limitations, this project extends the theories on imagined contact and narrative persuasion and applies them to the consequential domain of immigration. Given the centrality of mediated communication to how citizens respond to out-groups, research that extends the current findings is both timely and relevant.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors confirm they have no conflict of interest to declare. Authors also confirm that this article adheres to ethical guidelines specified in the APA Code of Conduct as well as the authors’ national ethics guidelines.

Supporting Information

Additional supporting information may be found in the online version of this article at the publisher’s web-site.

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