The Joint Effects of Imagined Contact and Similarity with the Protagonist of First-Person Narratives Through Identification and Transportation

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Abstract

This paper presents the findings of two experiments carried out in Spain ($N = 400$) and the Netherlands ($N = 392$) testing the effects of imagined contact and similarity with a narrative protagonist on attitudes and behavioral intentions related to stigmatized immigrants. We advance a concept of an *optimal reception condition*: imagining a positive interaction with an immigrant before reading a personal testimonial written by an immigrant who is similar to the native audience. In both studies, participants received instructions of imagined inter-group contact (versus control instructions) before reading a first-person testimonial presenting an immigrant as similar or dissimilar. The optimal reception condition induced greater identification and narrative transportation than the reference condition, in turn leading to more positive attitudes, a higher intention of inter-group contact, and a greater desire to share the message. The findings are discussed in the context of research on narrative persuasion and prejudice reduction.

Keywords: Narrative persuasion, identification with characters, narrative transportation, character similarity, imagined inter-group contact.

"I was born in Guadalajara Mexico. My parents came to the USA when I was 8 years old. I'm now 36 years old and unemployed. Being undocumented has made life so difficult. I became pregnant with twins at age 16 my kids are now 19 and my youngest 13. I have been living in constant fear of deportation and not been able to obtain stability and provide for my younger daughter. I feel like everyone around me is moving up in life and I'm stuck. I literally cry every day because of my immigration status, all my family is here legally except me. I want to do so much with my life but it seems impossible. I stay optimistic but it doesn't change the fact that I'm undocumented. Life is just so unfair." (https://myimmigrationstory.com)

People often encounter personal narratives, whether in newspaper articles, in magazine testimonial ads, in online blogs, or through social media. Research shows that these narratives have effects on people's attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors (Braddock & Dillard, 2016. When it comes explaining *how* personal narratives

influence individuals, models of narrative persuasion focus on identification with characters and narrative transportation as the two principal mechanisms (Tal-Or & Cohen, 2015; Tukachinsky & Tokunaga, 2013), and recent research examines how to *intensify* these processes (de Graaf, Sanders, & Hoeken, 2016; Tukachinsky, 2014).

Our work builds on that research, focusing on the factors that increase identification and narrative transportation and that indirectly influence attitudes and behavioral intentions. We analyze similarity and imagined intergroup contact as factors relevant to outgroup attitudes, the studied context, and propose that integrating these two variables should be most effective. We introduce the concept of *optimal reception condition,* one in which the imagination of a message recipient is *trained* through imagined intergroup contact before reading a personal narrative written by a protagonist presented as highly similar to the recipient.

We apply this focus to improving attitudes toward stigmatized immigrants in the European Union, where countering growing prejudice toward various immigrant groups is an important practical challenge (Wojcieszak et al., 2017). We also focus on a specific category of narrative messages, namely short testimonials delivered first-hand by an affected individual (see e.g., Braverman, 2008; de Wit, Das, & Vet, 2008). Such messages are not only used in public communication campaigns, in the form of testimonial ads, those that aim to improve people's health, for instance (Boeijinga, Hoeken & Sanders, 2017; Kim & Lee, 2017; Kim & Shapiro, 2016; Nan, Futerfas & Ma, 2017), but also are prevalent in the online environment (e.g., users sharing personal stories on Facebook or revealing their experiences in news comments sections, see Kim & Wojcieszak, 2018; Lee & Jang, 2010; Wojcieszak, Azrout, Boomgaarden, Alencar, & Sheets, 2017; Wojcieszak & Kim, 2016).

Using two original experiments conducted in Spain and the Netherlands, in which we used first-person written testimonials about the life of an immigrant, we show that the optimal reception condition induces greater identification and narrative transportation than the reference condition, thereby influencing outgroup attitudes and behavioral intentions.

Narrative Persuasion: Identification and Transportation Processes

A message can be considered a narrative if it tells a story about one or more events, has a clearly identifiable structure, and relays the ups and downs of one or more characters (Kreuter et al., 2007). Narrative messages can range from simple forms such as testimonials or slices of life in advertisements or health communication campaigns, personal first-person stories shared on social media, to audio-visual narratives in the form of television series or feature length films.

Research on the effects of narratives in general and of testimonial messages in particular pinpoints two important mechanisms through which persuasion emerges: identification with characters and narrative transportation (Green & Brock, 2000; Moyer-Gusé, 2008; Slater & Rouner, 2002). Identification with characters is a cognitive-affective process that takes place during reception (reading, viewing) of the narrative message and that is linked to perspective-taking or cognitive empathy (putting oneself in the shoes of the character), emotional empathy (feeling the same emotions as the character) and the temporary loss of self-awareness (merging with the character) (Cohen, 2001; Igartua & Barrios, 2012; Moyer-Gusé, 2008). Identification is "an *imaginative experience* in which a person surrenders consciousness of his or her own identity and experiences the world through someone else's point of view" (Cohen, 2001, p. 248). In this context, research finds that when a person identifies with a narrative character, he or

she takes on that character's perspective from a cognitive point of view, which leads to changes in beliefs or opinions (de Graaf, Hoeken, Sanders, & Beentjes, 2012; Hoeken, Kolthoff, & Sanders, 2016; Igartua & Barrios, 2012; Moyer-Gusé, Chung, & Jain, 2011).

In turn, narrative transportation is a psychological process through which the audience focuses attention on the story, becomes emotionally involved in it, and forms clear and vivid mental images about the different elements of the story (characters, scenarios, etc.) (Green & Brock, 2000). According to the Transportation-Imagery Model, these three processes comprise transportation, and - in turn - lead to changes in beliefs about the social milieu represented in the narrative, and there is consistent evidence that transportation explains the impact of narrative messages (e.g., Cohen et al., 2015; Kim & Shapiro, 2016).

Because transportation and identification facilitate narrative persuasion, it is important to know how to increase both mechanisms. The research in this field focuses on two aspects: manipulating exposure conditions (e.g., the effect of distraction during message reception on narrative transportation) and altering narrative messages themselves (e.g., similarity between the audience and the message protagonist, or the perspective from which the story is told) (see Tukachinsky, 2014).

Similarity in Terms of Social Identity

This project focuses on two factors that can enhance both transportation and identification, and – crucially - we manipulate both factors in our experimental design. First, we test similarity between the protagonist of the message and the recipient. Similarity describes a process through which a message receiver shares certain traits with the protagonist. Similarity can be based on objective traits (such as demographics or nationality) but also on psychological or subjective characteristics (such as personality, opinions, values or experiences), both of which have been proposed to increase identification and, indirectly, affect attitudes.

Although similarity is often studied, empirical evidence regarding its effect on transportation and identification is inconclusive (Chen, Bell, & Taylor, 2016; Cohen, Weimann-Saks, & Mazor-Tregerman, 2017; de Graaf, 2014; de Graaf et al., 2016; Hoeken et al., 2016; Kim, Shi, & Cappella, 2016; Tukachinsky, 2014). In one review, Tukachinsky (2014) showed that similarity (based on objective traits) increases narrative transportation and perceived similarity, but not identification. That review, however, only considers the effects of demographic similarity (manipulating gender, age or ethnic group of a message protagonist). Also, some recent studies clearly demonstrate that similarity has significant effects on identification and attitudes (Chen et al., 2016; Hoeken et al., 2016; Kim et al., 2016; but see Cohen et al., 2017 who found that demographic similarity did not have a significant effect on identification and attitudes).

These inconsistent results may be due to the fact that similarity is a complex, multi-dimensional construct and that different experiments differently manipulate similarity. Also, and most germane here, the effect of similarity can be intensified by simultaneously altering other elements of the message (Kaufman & Libby, 2012). This implies that it is possible that similarity enhances identification only under certain reception conditions. It is also possible that certain types of similarity are more effective than others in provoking identification and narrative transportation.

In this project, we introduce a new type of similarity: *similarity in terms of social identity*, namely emphasizing that a protagonist of a testimonial message shares some attitudinal, psychological, and behavioral characteristics that are uniquely

relevant to the specific social identity that forms the basis for the in- and outgroup distinction. For instance, a message could present a protagonist similar not on demographic traits (*where you are from*) but in subjective aspects such as national feelings (*what group you identify with*) and attachment to cultural elements (such as a language or culinary preferences). In the context of prejudice reduction, it is a complex task to foster identification and transportation when messages feature stigmatized immigrants and the audience does not obtain any benefit for changing their attitudes, unlike in health campaigns (Walter, Murphy, & Gillig, 2017). For this reason, we consider that manipulating similarity in terms of social identity can have more significant effects than demographic similarity, as it brings to the forefront what people have culturally in common and the feeling of social identity ("we're all part of the same group").

In addition, stigmatized characters induce less identification by default (Chung & Slater, 2013), and people with negative outgroup attitudes find it more difficult to identify with an outgroup character (i.e. *imagining* that they are the character and taking their point of view) (Igartua & Frutos, 2017). Thus, we propose that similarity will be particularly effective for stimulating identification and transportation if it is combined with an additional strategy: *training* the imagination through instructions of imagined intergroup contact before exposure to a personal testimonial.

Imagined Intergroup Contact and Prejudice Reduction

Social psychology consistently shows that one of the most effective strategies for reducing prejudice is to facilitate direct contact with outgroup members (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). The positive effects of contact can take place even if it occurs indirectly (Harwood, 2010), such as through ingroup friends (Wright, Aron, McLaughlin, & Ropp, 1997)

or through mass media (Park, 2012; Wojcieszak & Azrout, 2016). This project focuses on imagined intergroup contact (Crisp & Turner, 2009), which is not often studied in message effects research but the relevance of which to communication and media psychology is being increasingly recognized (Harwood et al., 2017).

The hypothesis of *imagined intergroup contact* (Crisp & Turner, 2009) proposes that the mere imagining of a positive encounter with an outgroup member (e.g., an immigrant) can reduce prejudice. Imagined contact is defined as "the mental simulation of a social interaction with a member or members of an outgroup category" (Miles & Crisp, 2013, p. 4). Experiments manipulate imagined contact through instructions that induce participants to think about a positive encounter with an outgroup member (versus imagining an experience unrelated to an interaction) and then observe the effect of this instruction on attitudes, emotions, and behavioral intentions towards the outgroup (Husnu & Crisp, 2015; Turner, Crisp, & Lambert, 2007).

Research suggests that imagined contact not only influences people's outgroup attitudes, but also "may be valuable as a means of *preparing* people for future contact" (Miles & Crisp, 2013, p. 4). Imagined contact can make people more receptive to seeking future contact opportunities, or prepare them for engaging in such contact with an open mind, lower anxiety, and positive attitude. Furthermore, studies show that using imagined contact as a *warm-up* strategy, preparatory stage, or first step for future contact is especially beneficial with respect to stigmatized outgroups (Crisp & Husnu, 2011).

We propose to go beyond testing the *direct* effect of imagined contact, because – in our view – imagined contact can be an *exposure condition* (that is, a particular psychological state in which people receive the message; see Tukachinsky, 2014), facilitating transportation and identification in the context of reading a short testimonial

message. We posit that the combination of imagined intergroup contact *and* inducing similarity in terms of social identity could be an *optimal reception condition* for short testimonials (e.g., an ad sponsored by a non-governmental organization) to effectively counter prejudice. Given that the ability to imagine being the character (identification) and the ability to form mental images of the story and the events narrated (narrative transportation) are two catalysts thorough which exposure to narrative messages influences attitudes, *training* the imagination before a person reads a narrative should increase the effect of the similarity on identification and transportation and, indirectly, on intergroup attitudes and a behavioral intention of contact.

Sharing Narrative Messages: Amplifying Their Attitudinal Impact

Most work on narrative persuasion focuses on attitude change as the central outcome of interest. In some ways, "the object of narrative persuasion is to change attitudes" (Cohen et al., 2017, p. 19). This project considers an additional measure that goes beyond the more classic attitudinal measures: the intention to share the message through social media (*message-sharing intention*). Certain interventions, such as public service announcements or a personal story touching on socially consequential issues such as health or discrimination, can be considered successful if individuals exposed to the messages decide to share it on social media (Facebook, Twitter). In fact, messages in narrative form (as compared to non-narrative messages) generate a higher intention to share, with narrative transportation acting as the mediating variable of this effect (Barbour, Doshi & Hernández, 2016). This project examines whether the optimal reception condition increases transportation and identification, and whether these in turn have an impact on the message-sharing intention.

Research on the dissemination of online contents through social media shows that the messages most shared (news, health information) are the ones that cause high emotional activation, greater entertainment, and more favorable attitudes towards the content of the message (Berger & Milkman, 2012; Crook, Stephens, Pastorek, Mackert, & Donovan, 2016). Given that identification and narrative transportation are factors that predict enjoyment and emotional involvement (Cohen, 2001; Green, Brock, & Kaufman, 2004), one would expect both variables to predict the intention to share a message on social media.

Overview, Objectives and Hypotheses

To test our theoretical model, according to which the optimal reception condition (high similarity and imagined contact) enhances both narrative transportation and identification with the protagonist, thereby influencing outgroup attitudes and behavioral intentions (see Figure 1), two experiments were carried out in two different contexts (Spain and the Netherlands) using short testimonial messages delivered by a stigmatized immigrant of different origins (Moroccan in Spain and a Polish immigrant in the Netherlands) which aimed to improve outgroup attitudes.

The stimuli messages were first-person testimonials similar to those used in previous studies on narrative health communication (Boeijinga, Hoeken & Sanders, 2017; Braverman, 2008; Kim & Lee, 2017; Kim & Shapiro, 2016; Nan, Futerfas & Ma, 2017), narrative news (Kim, Bigman, Leader, Lerman & Cappella, 2012; Oliver, Dillard, Bae & Tamul, 2012) or on stories published on websites, blogs or online forums (Kim & Wojcieszak, 2018; Wojcieszak, et al., 2017; Wojcieszak & Kim, 2016).

A similar experimental design was used in both studies and consisted of manipulating imagined intergroup contact

before the participants read a first-person testimonial written by an immigrant. We define the *optimal reception condition* as that which *trains* the imagination of a recipient before she reads a testimonial whose immigrant protagonist is portrayed as highly similar in terms of social identity. Within this context, we advance the following theoretical expectations:

Hypothesis 1. The optimal reception condition, as opposed to the control condition, will induce greater identification with the protagonist (H1a) and greater narrative transportation (H1b).

Hypothesis 2. The optimal reception condition will induce greater identification and narrative transportation, which in turn will be associated with a more positive attitude towards immigration (H2a), a higher intention of intergroup contact (H2b) and a higher intention of sharing the message (H2c).
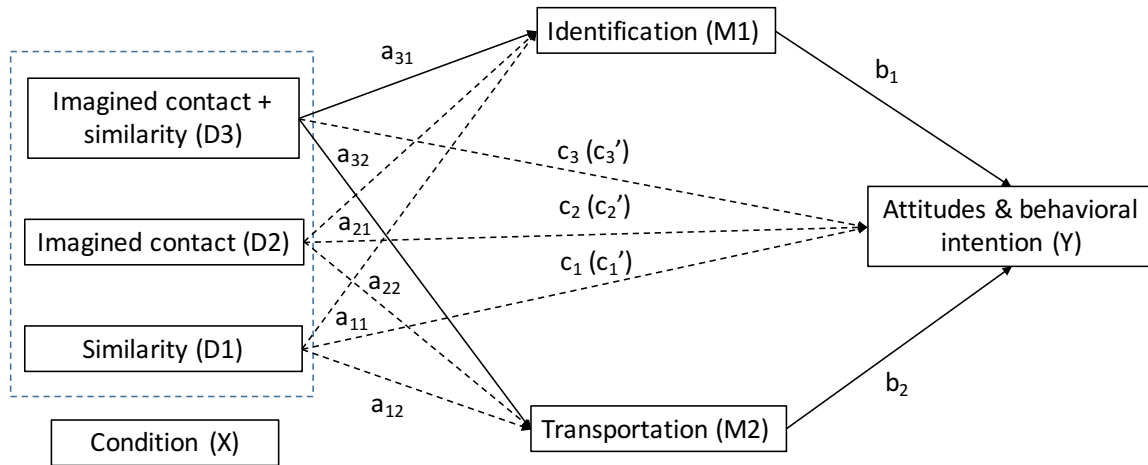

Figure 1.- *Hypothesized mediation model (H2)*

Note.- Continuous lines show the hypothesized effect of the optimal reception condition (D3) on reception processes (H1) and the indirect effect on attitudes and intention of behavior (H2).

Experiment 1

Method

Participants and Design

The first experiment relied on the Qualtrics panel to recruit a sample of 400 individuals of Spanish origin, whose parents were also Spanish. Sex and age quotas were established in order for the sample to represent the Spanish population on these characteristics. Fifty percent of the participants were women, and the mean age was 40.41 ($SD = 12.16$, range: 18-65).

The design consisted of a pre-test questionnaire, experimental manipulation, and post-test questionnaire. The pre-test measured the sociodemographic variables and political self-positioning (from 0 = left to 10 = right, $M = 4.35$, $SD = 2.53$). The participants were then randomly divided into four experimental treatments using a 2 x 2 factorial design. First, the participants were randomly assigned to one of two imagined contact conditions: half received instructions of imagined intergroup contact and the other half received instructions to imagine a scene or a landscape (control group). These instructions appeared on a screen for two minutes. After that the participants were randomly assigned to two similarity conditions: half read a first-person testimonial written by a Moroccan immigrant who is similar to them in terms of social identity, and half read a nearly identical testimonial whose protagonist was not similar (see below). Later, the post-test measured manipulation checks and the dependent variables.

Stimulus Materials (Independent Variable Manipulations)

Imagined intergroup contact was manipulated using the standard instructions used in prior work (see e.g., experiment 2; Husnu & Crisp, 2010). Participants received the following instructions: "You will read a short story, in which a person shares his experiences related to living in Spain. Before reading the story, we would like you to spend the next 2 min imagining yourself meeting a Moroccan immigrant for the first time. While imagining this think specifically of *when* (e.g. next Thursday) and *where* (e.g. the bus stop) this conversation might occur. Imagine that the interaction is positive, relaxed, and comfortable. It may help to close your eyes while imagining the conversation". The control group received the following instructions: "You will read a short story, in which a person shares his experiences related to living in Spain. Before reading the story, we would like you to spend the next 2 min 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). It may help to close your eyes while imagining the outdoor scene".

The first-person testimonials featuring a Moroccan immigrant sharing his experiences since his arrival in Spain were constructed taking as reference examples published on websites of immigrant support organizations and online articles about the experiences of immigrants.[1] The message was created to resemble an advertisement that might be featured as part of a public communication campaign or as a story one may share on social media. The testimonial appeared as unformatted extracted text, without additional features that could introduce uncontrolled variance. A Moroccan immigrant was chosen as the protagonist because Moroccans are one of the most stigmatized immigrant groups in Spain (Cea D'Ancona & Valles, 2014). In the story, Saîd (a popular name in Morocco) refers to different events, circumstances, and feelings related with his arrival in the country, first jobs, current employment, family situation, social and family life, handling the language, and feelings of belonging. He also mentions that many people think that Moroccans are taking jobs away from the Spanish and that there is a link between immigration and criminality. Saîd asks for greater tolerance, suggesting prosecuting labor exploitation and carrying out campaigns against racism and xenophobia.

To experimentally manipulate high (506 words) or low (523 words) similarity in terms of social identity, several parts of the message were systematically altered. In the high (low) similarity condition the protagonist felt Spanish (versus Moroccan), had mostly Spanish (Moroccan) friends, mentioned that his favorite food is Spanish (Moroccan), commented that his children usually speak Spanish (Arabic), that he reads mainly Spanish (Moroccan) newspapers, wishes to continue to live in Spain (return to Morocco), and identifies with Spanish (Moroccan) culture. To reinforce the text-based manipulation, the testimonial was accompanied by a photograph of Saîd in his room with a Spanish (Moroccan) flag on one of the walls.

Two pilot studies were carried out. The first was conducted to select the photograph of the protagonist ($N = 21$). We chose the photograph that received the highest score on three positive traits (attractive, agreeable, honest) and a low score on "threatening". The second pilot study was done to test whether the manipulation of similarity was effective ($N = 54$). As intended, the participants who read the high similarity testimonial reported significantly higher perceived similarity with the immigrant than those who read the low similarity testimonial. Both versions of the story were rated as equally understandable, believable, and interesting.

Measures

Perceived similarity. To assure that the manipulation was effective, immediately after reading the narrative participants answered the following questions: "To what extent do you consider you have some things in common with Saîd?" and "How much do you think he is like you?" (1 = not at all, 7 = very much). The two items were combined to make a valid index ($r = .76$, $p < .001$; $M = 3.96$, $SD = 1.69$).

Identification with the protagonist. Identification was assessed using an 11-item scale whose reliability and validity were confirmed in a previous study (Igartua & Barrios, 2012). The instrument is designed to measure retrospectively an individual's degree of identification with a specific character (e.g., "I felt as if I were Saîd", "I had the impression of living Saîd's story myself"; 1 = not at all, 5 = very much). These items were averaged into a reliable scale ($\alpha = .95$, $M = 2.97$, $SD = 1.22$).

Transportation. Transportation was measured using five items from previous studies (Green & Brock, 2000; Wojcieszak & Kim, 2016), which tapped the degree to which the participants were absorbed or immersed in the story (e.g., "I was mentally involved in the text while reading it", "The text affected me emotionally", from 1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree). These items were averaged ($\alpha = .89$, $M = 4.58$, $SD = 0.95$).

Attitudes towards immigration. Attitudes were evaluated with four items (e. g., "how strongly do you favor or oppose that the government finances information campaigns about immigrants" (1 = strongly oppose, 7 = strongly favor). These four were averaged into a reliable scale ($\alpha = .83$, $M = 4.64$, $SD = 1.09$).

Behavioral intentions. Participants' desire to engage in future contact with Moroccan immigrants was assessed using three items (e.g., "Thinking about the next time you find yourself in a situation where you could interact with a Moroccan immigrant -waiting 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). These items were averaged ($\alpha = .87$; $M = 4.45$, $SD = 1.51$; Crisp & Husnu, 2011).

Message-sharing intentions. Six items measured the intention to share the story with other people on social media (e.g., "I would be willing to post a link to this information on Facebook", "I would re-tweet a link to this information",1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree). We averaged these items ($\alpha = .94$, $M = 4.26$, $SD = 1.18$; Barbour et al., 2016).

Results

Preliminary Analysis

Random assignment to the four conditions was successful. There were no statistically significant differences among the conditions in terms of socio-demographics (gender ($\chi^2(3, N = 400) = 1.55$, $p = .669$; age ($F(3, 396) = 0.36$, $p = .780$) and political self-positioning ($F(3, 386) = 0.61$, $p = .607$).

The manipulation of similarity also worked as intended. Independent sample t-test found that participants who read the testimonial in which the protagonist was similar in terms of social identity considered that Saîd was similar to them ($M = 4.47$, $SD = 1.64$) to a significantly greater extent than participants who read the low similarity testimonial ($M = 3.35$, $SD = 1.56$; $t(398) = -6.98$, $p < .001$).

Joint Effect of Imagined Contact and Similarity on Identification and Transportation (H1)

We expected that participants would experience greater identification with the protagonist (H1a) and greater narrative transportation (H1b) in the optimal reception condition as compared to the reference condition. To test this hypothesis, two analyses of variance (ANOVA) were

run with the experimental condition as the independent variable and identification and transportation as the dependent variables. A planned contrast analysis (-1, 0, 0, 1) was also carried out which compared condition 4 or the optimal reception condition (i.e., imagined contact and high similarity, coefficient 1) to the reference condition 1 (i.e., no imagined contact and low similarity, coefficient -1).

There were statistically significant differences in identification ($F(3, 396) = 12.19, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = 0.085$) and narrative transportation ($F(3, 396) = 9.34, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = 0.066$) as a function of experimental condition. Moreover, both planned contrasts were statistically significant (identification: $t(396) = 4.68, p < .001, r = .22$; transportation: $t(396) = 3.55, p < .001, r = .17$). The participants in the optimal reception condition showed higher identification ($Mdif = 0.59, SE = 0.12$) and narrative transportation ($Mdif = 0.66, SE = 0.18$) than the participants in the reference condition.[2] H1 is therefore supported.

Mediation Models (H2)

The second hypothesis posited that the effect of the optimal reception condition on attitude towards immigration (H2a), intended intergroup contact (H2b) and the intention to share the message (H2c) would be mediated by identification and transportation. In order to examine whether the joint effect of imagined contact and similarity with the protagonist had a significant indirect effect on the dependent variables, we used the PROCESS macro for SPSS (Model 4; 10,000 bootstrapped samples with 95% bias-corrected confidence intervals; Hayes, 2013) set to a multicategorical model, treating the control condition (no imagined contact and low similarity protagonist), as a reference category.

To perform the data analysis with PROCESS, the multicategorical independent variable was entered into a mediation model to quantify the relative indirect effects of being in one experimental group (condition 2, D1: no imagined contact and high similarity; condition 3, D2: imagined contact and low similarity; condition 4, D3: imagined contact and high similarity) compared with the reference group (condition 1: no imagined contact and low similarity). This procedure required the estimation of three dummy codes (D1, D2, D3) acting separately as the independent variable and allowing the remaining two dummy codes to serve as covariates (Hayes & Preacher, 2014). This model estimated the indirect effect of the optimal reception condition (D3) on attitudes, intended intergroup contact, and message-sharing intention, as mediated by identification and transportation.

Regarding attitudes toward immigration, the optimal reception condition (D3), relative to the reference condition, significantly increased identification ($a_{31} = .59, SE = .12, p < .001$) and narrative transportation ($a_{32} = .66, SE = .18, p < .001$). In addition, identification ($b_1 = .61, SE = .10, p < .001$) and narrative transportation ($b_2 = .23, SE = .07, p < .001$) were significant predictors of attitudes toward immigration (see Figure 2a). The relative indirect effects of the optimal reception condition through identification ($a_{31}b_1 = .36, SE = .10, 95\% \ CI \ [.18, .61]$) and transportation ($a_{32}b_2 = .15, SE = .07, 95\% \ CI \ [.05, .33]$) were therefore significant. Although not hypothesized, compared with the reference condition, the similarity condition (D1) produced a significant relative indirect effect on attitudes toward immigration through identification ($a_{11}b_1 = .38, SE = .10, 95\% \ CI \ [.20, .63]$) and transportation ($a_{12}b_2 = .16, SE = .07, 95\% \ CI \ [.05, .35]$). Imagined contact (D2) did not produce any significant relative indirect effect on attitudes, neither through identification ($a_{21}b_1 = .08, SE = .08, 95\% \ CI \ [-.06, .25]$) nor transportation ($a_{22}b_2 = -.01, SE = .05, 95\% \ CI \ [-.12, .08]$).
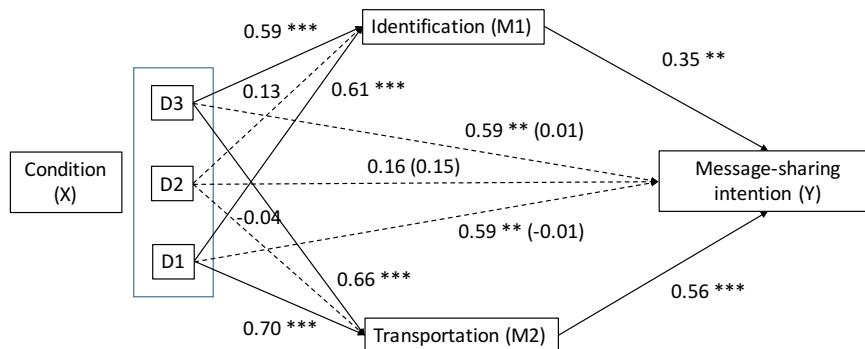
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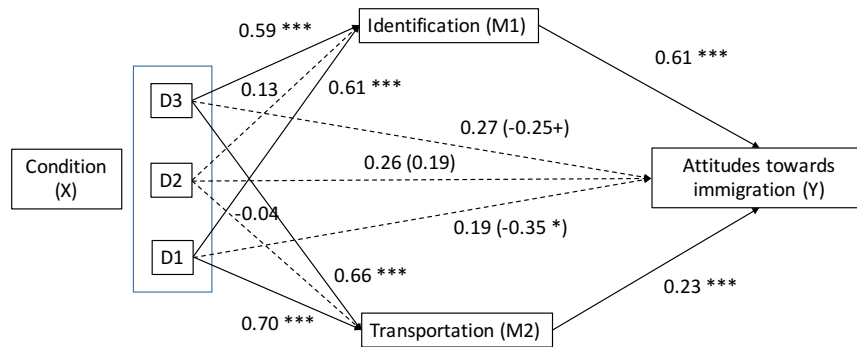
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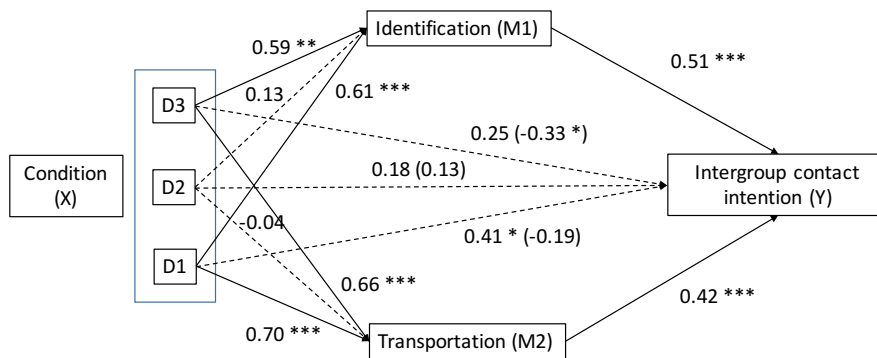
(c)

Figure 2.- *Results of the mediation analysis (Study 1, Spain, N = 400): relative indirect effect of the optimal reception condition (imagined contact and high similarity narrative, D3) on attitudes towards immigration (a), behavioral intentions (b) and message-sharing intention (c) through identification and narrative transportation*

Note.- The Figure shows the non-standardized regression coefficients, B. The coefficients of the relative direct effects appear in parentheses. The dashed line represents nonsignificant coefficients. + $p < .10$, * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

Similar results emerged for intended intergroup contact with Moroccan immigrants (see Figure 2b). The relative indirect effects of the optimal reception condition (D3) through identification ($a_{31}b_1$ = .30, *SE* = .09, 95% *CI* [.14, .52]) and

transportation ($a_{32}b_2 = .27$, $SE = .09$, 95% CI [.11, .51]) were statistically significant. Again, compared with the reference condition, similarity (D1) produced a significant relative indirect effect on intended intergroup contact (identification: $a_{11}b_1 = .31$, $SE = .09$, 95% CI [.15, .54]; transportation: $a_{12}b_2 = .29$, $SE = .09$, 95% CI [.12, .51]). Imagined contact (D2) did not produce any significant relative indirect effect on behavioral intentions (identification: $a_{21}b_1 = .06$, $SE = .05$, 95% CI [-.05, .21]; transportation: $a_{22}b_2 = -.02$, $SE = .08$, 95% CI [-.18, .14]).

Parallel effects emerged for message-sharing intentions: significant relative indirect effects of the optimal reception condition (D3) through identification ($a_{31}b_1 = .21$, $SE = .09$, 95% CI [.06, .44]) and transportation ($a_{32}b_2 = .37$, $SE = .12$, 95% CI [.16, .65]) (see Figure 2c). Similarity (D1) had a significant relative indirect effect through identification ($a_{11}b_1 = .21$, $SE = .09$, 95% CI [.06, .44]) and transportation ($a_{12}b_2 = .39$, $SE = .11$, 95% CI [.19, .66]). Finally, imagined contact (D2) did not produce any significant relative indirect effects on message-sharing intention (identification: $a_{21}b_1 = .04$, $SE = .04$, 95% CI [-.03, .17]: transportation: $a_{22}b_2 = -.02$, $SE = .11$, 95% CI [-.26, .18]). This consistent pattern supports H2.

Discussion

Study 1 confirms our theoretical model. The optimal reception condition induced greater identification and transportation (compared to the reference condition). Both mechanisms explained the effect of the optimal reception condition on the three dependent variables. However, these results must be interpreted with caution as they are based on a study using only one testimonial message. Also, the testimonial featured a Moroccan immigrant, and so the effects may be contaminated by a relation of Moroccan immigrants with Islam (the dominant religion in Morocco at 98%) and therefore with Islamophobia

(Saleem, Yang, & Ramasubramanian, 2016).

Experiment 2: A Replication

To address these issues, replicate the results, and validate the proposed model we used a similar design in the Netherlands, a distinct sociopolitical context, and using a narrative featuring an immigrant from Poland. Polish are a large and typically disliked immigrant group in the Netherlands, and Poland is a country with profound Catholic tradition and only a minor Muslim presence at less than 1%.

Method

Participants and Design

A sample of 392 people of Dutch origin whose parents were also Dutch were recruited from a Qualtrics panel. Quotas were set for gender and age in order for the sample to reflect the Dutch population. Thus, 50.3% of the participants were women and the mean age was 40.96 ($SD = 11.11$, range: 18-65).

A 2 x 2 factor design was used and imagined contact and similarity were manipulated in the same way as in Study 1. We again took into account different aspects of social identity relevant to immigrant groups (e.g., feeling more Dutch than Polish), and – to reinforce the similarity manipulation – accompanied the narrative by a photograph of the protagonist (Leszek) near a Dutch (versus Polish) flag.

Measures

The measures from Study 1 were adapted to Polish immigration. The pre-test measured the sociodemographic variables and political self-positioning (from 0 = left to 10 = right; $M = 5.47$, $SD = 2.20$). Immediately after exposure to the testimonial, the post-test measured perceived similarity ($M = 3.51$, $SD = 1.61$), identification with the protagonist ($\alpha = .94$,

$M = 2.64$, $SD = 0.93$), transportation ($\alpha = .88$, $M = 4.19$, $SD = 1.33$), attitudes toward immigration ($\alpha = .85$, $M = 4.12$, $SD = 1.33$), intention to engage in contact with Polish immigrants ($\alpha = .85$; $M = 4.04$, $SD = 1.37$), and message-sharing intentions ($\alpha = .92$, $M = 3.52$, $SD = 1.46$).

Results

Random assignment to the four experimental conditions was successful: no differences were observed in terms of socio-demographics or political self-positioning. Also, the manipulation of similarity with the protagonist was effective ($t(390) = -3.40$, $p < .001$).

Hypothesis 1 posited that participants would feel greater identification with the protagonist (H1a) and narrative transportation (H1b) in the optimal message reception condition, as compared to the reference condition. Analysis of variance (ANOVA) found statistically significant differences in identification ($F(3, 388) = 3.31$, $p < .05$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.025$), and the planned contrast also were statistically significant ($t(388) = 2.60$, $p < .01$, $r = .13$). The participants in the optimal reception condition showed greater identification ($Mdif = 0.34$, $SE = 0.13$) than the reference condition. The effect of that condition on narrative transportation was marginally significant ($F(3, 388) = 2.37$, $p = .070$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.018$) and the planned contrast also yielded marginally significant results ($t(388) = 1.88$, $p = .060$, $r = .09$).[3] Hence, H1a is supported, and H1b partially supported.

H2 posited that the effects of the optimal reception condition on attitudes towards immigration (H2a), intended intergroup contact (H2b) and message-sharing intentions (H2c) would be mediated by identification and transportation. The PROCESS macro was again used to test this hypothesis. Regarding attitudes towards immigration (se Figure 3a), the optimal reception condition (D3), relative to the reference condition, significantly increased identification ($a_{31} = .34$, $SE = .13$, $p < .01$). However, identification did not have a significant effect on attitudes toward immigration ($b_1 = -.02$, $SE = .10$, $p = .801$), yielding an insignificant indirect effect ($a_{31}b_1 = -.009$, $SE = .04$, 95% CI [-.10, .06]). The optimal reception condition, relative to the reference condition, increased transportation only marginally ($a_{32} = .35$, $SE = .18$, $p = .060$). Because narrative transportation was a significant predictor of attitude toward immigration ($b_2 = .60$, $SE = .07$, $p < .001$), the relative indirect effect of the optimal reception condition through transportation was marginally significant ($a_{32}b_2 = .21$, $SE = .12$, 90% CI [.03, .43]).

With respect to intended contact with Polish immigrants (see Figure 3b), the relative indirect effect of the optimal reception condition through identification was statistically significant ($a_{31}b_1 = .11$, $SE = .06$, 95% CI [.02, .27]). Similarly, the relative indirect effects of the optimal reception condition through narrative transportation was marginally significant ($a_{32}b_2 = .16$, $SE = .09$, 90% CI [.02, .33]). Finally, the relative indirect effect of the optimal reception condition through identification on message-sharing intention was also significant ($a_{31}b_1 = .14$, $SE = .07$, 95% CI [.03, .31]), and - again - the mediating effect from the optimal reception condition on message-sharing intention through transportation was marginally significant ($a_{32}b_2 = .16$, $SE = .09$, 90% CI [.02, .33]). These results partially confirm H2b and H2c (see Figure 3c).

Unlike in Study 1, D1 (similarity) did not have a significant relative indirect effect through identification or transportation on attitudes toward immigration, intended intergroup contact, and message-sharing intention. Similarly to Study 1, D2 (imagined contact) did not produce any significant relative indirect effects through identification or transportation on the three tested outcomes.
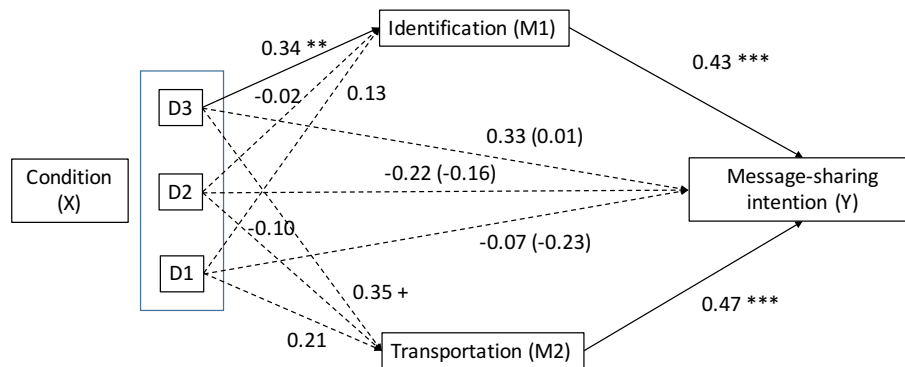
(a)
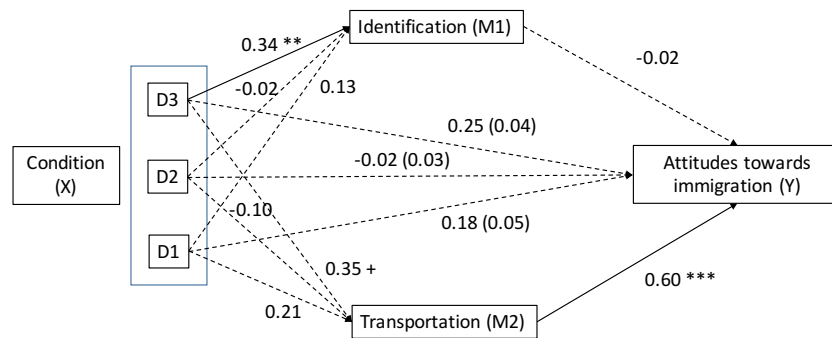
(b)
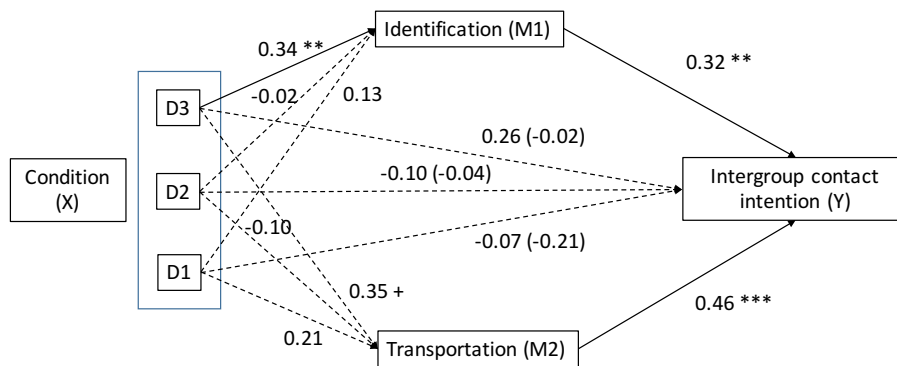
(c)

Figure 3.- *Results of the mediation analysis (Study 2, Netherlands, N = 392): relative indirect effect of the optimal reception condition (imagined contact and high similarity narrative, D3) on attitudes towards immigration (a), behavioral intentions (b) and message-sharing intention (c) through identification and narrative transportation*

Note.- The Figure shows the non-standardized regression coefficients, B. The coefficients of the relative direct effects appear in parentheses. The dashed line represents nonsignificant coefficients. $+ p < .10$, $** p < .01$, $*** p < .001$.

Discussion

The results of Study 2 are generally consistent with those obtained in Study 1. Working with a different immigrant group in a different European context, we again found that the optimal reception condition stimulates identification with the protagonist of the story and – to some extent– transportation into the message, which in turn induces intention to engage in intergroup contact and a desire to share the message with other people.

General Discussion

An important question in much research on narrative persuasion is how to enhance identification of the audiences with message protagonists, and also how to increase transportation – or immersion – of the audience into the message itself. This question also presents a practical challenge for those interested in applying narratives in general and short testimonials in particular to pressing social problems, ranging from health to intergroup hostilities. Inasmuch as identification and transportation facilitate it for the effects to emerge (Tal-Or & Cohen, 2015; Tukachinsky & Tokunaga, 2013), addressing this question and challenge is of theoretical and social importance.

This project aimed to extend prior work on the factors increasing identification and transportation. Our theoretical model addressed both imagined intergroup contact – manipulated prior to reading a testimonial– as well as featuring a protagonist who is similar to the audience in terms of social identity. We proposed a theoretical notion of the optimal reception condition, according to which imagining a positive interaction with an outgroup protagonist before reading a testimonial written by an outgroup member similar to the audience should be especially effective in enhancing identification and transportation, thereby generating more favorable outgroup attitudes, intentions to

engage in intergroup contact, and intentions to further disseminate the message on social networks.

The results from two original experiments provide substantial support for the theoretical model posited. Both the study carried out in Spain (with a Moroccan immigrant as protagonist) and in the Netherlands (with a Polish immigrant) yielded similar results, thus validating the proposed theoretical model.

In line with the first hypothesis, combining instructions of imagined contact with manipulation of similarity made it possible to increase identification as well as transportation. Hence we show that varying the conditions of exposure can facilitate the effect of similarity in the reception processes considered. In both studies, instructions of imagined intergroup contact were given to the participants immediately before they read a narrative with a favorable message towards immigration. In addition, previous research has documented that imagined intergroup contact involves the activation of the imagination and a kind *cognitive training* for a future encounter with a person from a stigmatized group (Crisp & Husnu, 2011). Since both identification and transportation are processes linked to imagination (imagining being the character or the details of the story), it is logical to think that this stage of *mental training* will have repercussions on both processes when the participants read a testimonial with a protagonist similar to themselves.

Although previous evidence on the effect of similarity on identification and transportation has yielded mixed results, Study 1 found that similarity in terms of social identity exerted a significant (non-hypothesized) effect on both mediators. This is consistent with the latest studies (Chen et al., 2016; Hoeken et al., 2016; Kaufman & Libby, 2012; but see Cohen et al., 2017). This finding underscores the importance and effectiveness of similarity in terms of social identity, a concept

proposed here. To manipulate demographic similarity it is sufficient to give information on gender or nationality of the protagonist just once in the narrative (repeating such information at different times throughout a written narrative would seem artificial). These attributes may be overlooked by the participants (Igartua & Fiuza, 2018). In contrast, when similarity is manipulated in terms of social identity it refers to several different aspects (feelings of belonging, language, favorite food, etc.) throughout the whole text, and therefore the character's *social identity* is more difficult to overlook. As such, similarity in terms of social identity is more effective than demographic similarity. In line with this approach, Kim et al. (2016) observed that the intensity of the similarity between the protagonist of the message and the audience (sharing three or more demographic traits) was the condition needed to increase narrative engagement.

The crucial and novel addition to our study regards the proposition that the optimal reception condition increase identification and transportation and this in turn generates more positive attitudes and behavioral intentions. Across both studies, we show that both identification and transportation acted as mediating mechanisms between the optimal reception condition and all the outcome variables tested (although in Study 2 the effect on transportation was only marginally significant). Transportation may have played a weaker role in Study 2 perhaps because, over all, the Dutch participants experienced less narrative transportation than the Spaniards. In any case, our results show that identification and transportation underlie and explain narrative persuasion processes, thus converging with previous research in this field (Cohen et al., 2015; de Graaf et al., 2012; Green & Brock, 2000; Igartua & Barrios, 2012; Walter, Murphy, & Gillig, 2017).

Another innovative aspect of this study is having considered as dependent variable the intention to share the message on social media. Taking into account that

"(…) people may avoid stories about marginalized groups" (Walter, Murphy, & Gillig, 2017, p. 21), managing to get a message featuring an outgroup member and favorable to the stigmatized outgroup shared on social media may be an indicator of communicative effectiveness. If such messages come from personal contacts, they can attain greater persuasive impact, given that confidence in those messages will increase or they will be perceived as less threatening (see Anspach, 2017 for evidence that stories shared on social media by friends and family are often read). Finding that the optimal reception condition encouraged our participants, across two different contexts, to share the testimonial message about two distinct immigrant groups, offers an important addition to the literature.

Despite these findings, some limitations need to be kept in mind when interpreting the results. We cannot be confident that the participants followed our instructions and used the allotted time to imagine a positive interaction with an immigrant. Similar to most work in the area, we did not include manipulation checks of imagined contact, and so the limited effects from imagined contact may be due to the lack of compliance on the part of our subjects.

Also, we only considered the effects of written messages. Such are quite frequent in health communication campaigns, online newspapers, websites of social organizations, and in social media, and their consumption is made easier by the use of mobile devices (smartphones, iPads). Furthermore, relative to longer video narratives, such as movies, entertainment shows, or televised news, it is also more feasible to systematically manipulate such messages for the purposes of experimental investigation. Nevertheless, visual or audio narratives may have distinct effects on the tested processes. We suspect that these effects would be yet stronger – inasmuch as audiovisual narratives may generate greater identification and transportation (Walter,

Murphy, & Baezconde-Garbanati, 2017). If so, the consistent results presented can offer a conservative estimate of the effects of personal testimonials (and of the optimal reception condition especially).

In a similar vein, our research focused on only one type of stigmatized group: immigrants in two European countries. This focus was guided by the fact that immigration has become a central item on the political agendas of the EU (Meleady, Seger, & Vermue, 2017) and public attitudes toward immigrants in Europe are rather negative (e.g., Pew Research Center, 2015, 2016). We encourage future research to systematically examine whether the tested effects differ for other stigmatized groups (e.g., the homeless, the HIV positive) and for less disliked immigrants (e.g., Germans in Spain). Future research should test these potentially differential effects, helping to establish the boundary conditions in which similarity and imagined contact work in the context of messages about or delivered by various outgroups.

Another limitation of our research is that only one message was used in each experimental condition (see, for a review, Slater, Peter & Valkenburg, 2015). Using single examples of media messages per condition is a general problem in experimental work in communication and media psychology. In fact, a review of 306 experiments published between 2004 and 2013, observed that a majority (65%) used only one message per condition (Reeves, Yeykelis, & Cummings, 2016). This is also a common practice in narrative persuasion research more specifically (e.g., Christy, 2017; Kim & Lee, 2017; Kim & Shapiro, 2017) where some publications include a replication study with other messages (e.g., Cohen et al., 2017; Walter, Murphy, & Gillig, 2017).

Lastly, as with most experimental studies, it is unclear whether the effects were durable and impactful, or rather short-lived and inconsequential. Participants may have forgotten the information read, and so

their attitudes may have returned to the previous levels shortly after exposure. This is especially because media coverage of immigrants rarely focuses on shared commonalities (e.g., Cheng, Igartua, Palacios, Acosta, & Palito, 2014). As such, the effects from high similarity messages may not only be short-lived, but also quickly counteracted by negative messages. Nevertheless, finding that short-term exposure to a stigmatized immigrant similar on some dimensions to our participants and followed the imagined intergroup contact did enhance identification and transportation, thus generating various positive outcomes, 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.

In conclusion, our work improves our understanding of the mechanisms that explain the impact of stories on individuals. The proposed concept of optimal reception condition, an *exposure state* (Potter, 2009), clearly and consistently facilitates identification and transportation and, in turn, improves outgroup attitudes and stimulates intended intergroup contact, and the desire to share the message on social media. Theoretically, these results not only advance a new concept to narrative persuasion literature, but also help to clarify the relatively inconclusive evidence regarding the effects of similarity. These results also have concrete practical implications, suggesting that campaign appeals or public service announcements should attempt to simultaneously encourage recipients to generate certain mental states prior to exposure to messages featuring outgroup members (e.g., by including a simple statement such as "imagine we are having a good time together") and to present the outgroups as sharing some similarities with the audience members (e.g., emphasizing that everyone has a family). How to do this in practice will be

an important challenge for practitioners and scholars interested in minimizing intergroup hostilities. Offering some tools (as we did in our project) and showing that they are effective offers a first step to address this challenge.

Footnotes

[1] Websites consulted to elaborate the narratives in both experiments: "Immigrants in their own words 100 stories" (*The Guardian*), https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/ng-interactive/2015/mar/24/immigrants-in-their-own-words-100-stories; "Six real life stories of migration" (*The Guardian*), https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2014/jul/09/six-real-life-stories-of-migration; "Inmigrantes para salvar la España que se muere" (*El País*), https://elpais.com/internacional/2017/03/16/actualidad/1489657190_531393.html; "Llegué a España en cayuco con 12 años y me acabo de graduar en Magisterio" (*El País*), https://verne.elpais.com/verne/2016/06/03/articulo/1464946855_124670.html; "My immigration story: the story of U.S. immigrants in their own words" https://myimmigrationstory.com; "I am an immigrant", https://www.iamanimmigrant.com; "Immigration place, Australia", https://immigrationplace.com.au; "historias de migrantes: relatos no conocidos ni reconocidos por los estados", http://www.orlandocarcamo.com/foro_historias_de_migrantes.html#comment-4600).

[2] A second planned contrast analysis was also carried out which compared the average of all three conditions to the optimal condition (contrast codes: -1 = control, -1 = similarity only, -1 = imagined contact only, 3 = optimal condition) and similar results were found for identification ($t(396) = 3.31$, $p < .001$, $r = .16$) and transportation ($t(396) = 2.89$, $p < .01$, $r = 14$).

[3] Like in Study 1, we carried out a second planned contrast analysis which compared the average of all three conditions to the optimal condition, obtaining similar results for identification ($t(388) = 2.85$, $p < .01$, $r = .14$) and a statistically significant effect on transportation ($t(388) = 2.06$, $p < .05$, $r = .10$).

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