Improving Attitudes Toward Stigmatized Immigrants with First-Person Narratives. Moderating and Mediating Variables

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Abstract

We assess 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) x 2 (similarity) experiment on a systematic sample of native British adults. We find that encouraging imagined contact prior to reading a narrative message that presents an immigrant protagonist who is similar to the recipients enhances identification with the protagonist, thereby improving outgroup attitudes and encouraging intergroup contact, and only among those who are strongly negative toward immigrants (i.e., high on modern racism). We discuss theoretical and practical implications of the findings for the work on imagined contact, narrative persuasion, and identification, as well as for public communication campaigns.

Keywords: Narrative persuasion, identification with the character, imagined contact, immigration, prejudice reduction, modern racism.

In recent years, research on narrative persuasion has made important contributions both in identifying the mechanisms underlying the effects of narratives and investigating the aspects of narrative messages that increase their persuasiveness. This knowledge is now being used to develop communication 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; Murphy, Frank, Chatterjee, & Baezconde-Garbanati, 2013; Tal-Or & Tsfati, 2016; Wojcieszak, Azrout, Boomgaarden, Alencar, & Sheets, 2015; Wojcieszak & Kim, 2016).

This study contributes to this field by examining whether and how narrative messages can be used as tools for improving people's attitudes towards stigmatized groups such as immigrants in the context of the European Union. Theoretically, we combine the work on the processes underlying narrative persuasion with the research on reducing prejudice, and – more specifically – with the work on imagined intergroup contact, modern racism, and acculturation strategies on the part of the immigrant populations. We incorporate these concepts toward addressing a practical question guiding our study, namely can first person narratives with stigmatized immigrants as protagonists improve outgroup attitudes

and encourage outgroup-related behaviors among individuals who are strongly negative toward the immigrant population?

Methodologically, we rely on an experimental design on a systematic sample of native British adults (N = 417) assigned to (1) imagine either a positive interaction with an immigrant or an unrelated outdoor scene, before reading a first-person narrative in which a stigmatized immigrant was portrayed as (2) either similar or dissimilar in terms of social identity to our British message recipients. Before presenting the data and the results, we first outline the work on imagined intergroup contact and on narrative persuasion, and we combine this work with research on prejudice.

Intergroup Contact and Prejudice Reduction

Interpersonal contact between individuals from different social groups is effective in improving attitudes towards stigmatized groups (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 these positive effects emerge even if intergroup contact is indirect, vicarious, or merely symbolic (Harwood, 2010; Park, 2012).

The first form of indirect contact relevant for our study is the *imagined intergroup contact* (Crisp & Turner, 2009). Here, imagining a positive encounter with an outgroup member, i.e., "the mental simulation of a social interaction with a member or members of an outgroup category" (Miles & Crisp, 2013, p. 4), reduces prejudice. Experimental studies typically instruct participants to think about a positive encounter with an outgroup member (versus imagining another experience not related to an outgroup in the control condition), and

later observe the effect of these instructions on attitudes, emotions, or behavioral intentions towards the outgroup (Crisp, Husnu, Meleady, Stathi, & Turner, 2010; Turner, Crisp, & Lambert, 2007; Turner & Crisp, 2010). A recent meta-analysis indeed shows that such instructions have significant positive effects (Miles & Crisp, 2013).

These effects are stronger for behavioral intentions than for outgroup attitudes likely because "imagined contact may be valuable as a means of *preparing* people for future contact" (Miles & Crisp, 2013, p. 4). That is, imagined contact can make people more receptive to seeking future opportunities for intergroup contact, or can also prepare them for approaching intergroup interactions with an open mind, positive outlook, and reduced anxiety. Using imagined contact as a "warm-up" stage for future contact could be particularly beneficial in the case of stigmatized outgroups, and also when individuals in the ingroup show a high degree of prejudice (Crisp & Turner, 2012).

The second form of indirect contact crucial for our purposes is *mediated intergroup contact* (Park, 2012). Mass communication messages can create the illusion of a face-to-face interaction with the characters featured in these messages (Hartmann & Goldhoorn, 2011), and so ingroup spectators can develop parasocial relationships with outgroup members in the media, and these relationships function similarly to real relationships (Park, 2012; Schiappa, Gregg, & Hewes, 2005). Through this process, viewing fictional dramas that feature various minority groups in a positive light is associated with more positive attitudes towards these minorities, especially when people identify with the minority characters in the media (Ortiz & Harwood, 2007). Also, television series with a message favorable to multicultural contact can reduce perceived intercultural threat and stimulate identification with outgroup characters to

far greater extent than viewing a series unrelated to multicultural contact (Müller, 2009).

Narrative Persuasion and Identification with Characters

Rather than relying on television dramas or fictional series, we focus on messages that can feasibly be encountered in the online environment, newspapers or magazines, or public communication campaigns. Our specific focus is on short, first-person, written narratives addressing the experiences of a stigmatized immigrant in his or her new country. Given this focus, the research on narrative persuasion is also relevant to our study. This research studies the mechanisms that explain how narratives can change attitudes, beliefs, or behaviors in contexts as diverse as health communication, uncontentious political issues, or personally disliked minority groups (de Graaf, Hoeken, Sanders, & Beentjes, 2012; Green & Brock, 2000; Moyer-Gusé, 2008; Slater & Rouner, 2002; Wojcieszak & Kim, 2015). As a recent meta-analysis establishes, narratives have significant effects on attitudes, beliefs, behavioral intentions, and actual behaviors (Braddock & Dillard, 2016).

Identification with characters in a narrative is a crucial explanatory mechanism underlying these effects (Cohen et al., 2015; de Graaf et al., 2012; Hoeken & Fikkers, 2014; Igartua, 2010; Igartua & Barrios, 2012; Igartua & Vega, 2016; Tal-Or & Tsfati, 2016). Identification is defined as a cognitive-affective process that takes place during reception (reading, viewing) of a 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 (imagining being the character, taking on his or her identity, and becoming merged with the character) (Cohen, 2001; Igartua

& Barrios, 2012; Moyer-Gusé, 2008). In brief, identification is "an imaginative experience in which a person surrenders consciousness of his or her own identity and experiences of the world through someone else's point of view" (Cohen, 2001, p. 248).

As such, identification allows people to overcome the natural tendency to limit one's view of things to a single perspective by taking on the character's point of view. For these reasons, identification can increase the likelihood that an individual will accept the beliefs and attitudes espoused by the character and implicit in the narrative. In fact, research shows that identification with characters fosters a change in attitudes, beliefs, or opinions (de Graaf et al., 2012; Moyer-Gusé, Chung, & Jain, 2011). There is less work, however, on why people identify with one character and not another, or why they identify more or less intensely.

Some work suggests that telling a story from the first-person perspective (de Graaf et al., 2012) or providing positive information about a character before people read a narrative (Tal-Or & Cohen, 2010) increase identification. Other studies, in turn, point to the crucial importance of the *similarity* between the protagonist and the audience (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 message protagonist. Similarity can be based on objective traits (such as gender or nationality) but also on psychological or subjective characteristics (such as personality, beliefs, or values). Both objective and perceived similarity increase identification and, indirectly, affect attitudes. In fact, it is sometimes noted that similarity is a prerequisite for identification with a character (Cohen, 2001).

Applying these findings to messages about members from stigmatized

outgroups poses two challenges. For one, stigmatized characters provoke less identification, and less perspective-taking in particular (Chung & Slater, 2013). Second, attitudes toward stigmatized outgroups are often negative, and so highly prejudiced individuals, namely those who may especially benefit from exposure to messages positive toward the outgroups, are yet less likely to identify with members of stigmatized outgroups. For instance, those high on modern racism toward immigrants identified the least with immigrant characters in a fictional feature film despite the fact that these characters were portrayed favorably in the film (Igartua & Frutos, 2017).

Prejudice (Modern Racism) and Acculturation

The crucial question, therefore, is how to foster similarity and identification with a stigmatized immigrant protagonist in a narrative intended to improve outgroup attitudes, and how to do so among people who are highly prejudiced towards immigrants. Such prejudice can be conceptualized from several different theoretical perspectives. In this study we draw on the concept of modern racism (McConahay, Hardee, & Batts, 1981).

Modern racism is a subtle form of prejudice that is linked to ambivalent reactions towards persons from specific outgroups (in our case, stigmatized immigrants). An individual who shows a high level of modern racism thinks that immigrants, or other ethnic minorities, break the rules and values of the host society; in addition, they believe that they "ask for too much;" they think that the government or institutions devote excessive social or economic resources to protect immigrants or other minorities, that their own group is being ignored or harmed in some way, and therefore they feel a certain resentment towards these outgroups. For these reasons, modern racism is associated with mistrust, feeling uncomfortable, insecure, distrustful and negative toward outgroup members, and also with the avoidance of contact with outgroups (Gaertner & Dovidio, 1986).

What often relates to modern racism in general and to the majority group's prejudice towards immigrants or other ethnic minorities in particular is the attitudes majority group's members hold toward acculturation. The acculturation process refers to how minority members change and adapt when they come into continuous contact with people of another culture (Rojas, Navas, Sayans-Jimémez, & Cuadrado, 2014). Immigrants can consider their cultural identity and customs to be sufficiently valuable to uphold in the host society or, alternatively, they can consider that their relations with the host society are valuable enough to be sought out and adopted. The combination of these two dimensions leads to four possible acculturation strategies on the part of immigrants: *integration* (maintain elements of home culture and adopt elements from the host society), *assimilation* (adopt elements from the host society without maintaining elements of the home culture), *separation/segregation* (maintain elements of the home culture without adopting elements from the host society) or *marginalization/exclusion* (preference for not maintaining or adopting cultural elements) (Berry, 1997, 1999; Rojas et al., 2014). Research suggests that prejudice is positively related to immigrants either segregating or assimilating and negatively to the immigrants integrating into the host society (Navas, García, Rojas, Pumares, & Cuadrado, 2006; Rojas et al., 2014), and that minority groups perceived as less different are seen as less threatening and more competent (van Osch & Breugelmans, 2012).

Building on this work, we posit that fostering *similarity in terms of social identity* is a suitable way to promote identification with a stigmatized immigrant protagonist of a narrative that

seeks to improve attitudes towards immigrants among highly prejudiced individuals. In other words, if the immigrant protagonist shows that he or she shares interests, pastimes, and national sentiments with the autochthonous audience, that is, if the immigrant is presented as with an acculturation profile of assimilation, the prejudiced individuals will be more likely to identify with the protagonist.

Overview, Objectives and Hypotheses

The main objective 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, we examine how to enhance identification with a highly stigmatized immigrant toward improving attitudes towards immigrants and encouraging future intergroup interactions.

First, we test whether giving people instructions prior to reading a narrative in order to enhance imagined contact increases their identification with the immigrant protagonist, and, indirectly (i.e. through identification) improves their attitudes and generates behavioral intentions. We therefore consider imagined intergroup contact as a facilitating factor for identification and for the change in attitudes and behavioral intentions.

Second, we test whether a narrative that features an immigrant who shares the interests, tastes, and sentiments of the autochthonous audience (high similarity) causes greater identification than a narrative with an otherwise identical immigrant whose interests, tastes, and sentiments are based exclusively on his or her national origin (low similarity).

To shed additional light on the interaction between these variables, evidence that is currently missing in the literature, we rely on a 2 x 2 between-subjects experimental factorial design that allows us to test whether fostering imagined contact induces greater identification with the protagonist and whether this effect is moderated by similarity in terms of social identity. We also analyze the role of modern racism as a moderating variable that conditions that process. Our design thus considers two manipulated independent variables (imagined contact and similarity) and an additional moderating variable tapping an individual difference, modern racism.

We expect a series of three-way interaction effects between imagined contact, similarity, and modern racism. Specifically:

Hypothesis 1: Imagined intergroup contact prior to reading a narrative whose protagonist is a highly stigmatized but assimilated immigrant will induce greater identification, but only among individuals with a high level of modern racism.

Hypothesis 2: Imagined intergroup contact prior to reading a narrative whose protagonist is a highly stigmatized but assimilated immigrant will induce a favorable attitude toward immigrants (*Hypothesis 2a*) and greater behavioral intentions (*Hypothesis 2b*) but only among individuals scoring high in modern racism.

Finally, we expect a conditional indirect effect of imagined contact on attitudes and behavioral intentions through identification only when participants show high modern racism and read a narrative with a stigmatized but assimilated immigrant.

Hypothesis 3: Imagined intergroup contact prior to reading a first-person narrative whose protagonist is a stigmatized but assimilated immigrant will lead to greater identification, which in turn will lead to a more favorable attitude towards immigrants (*Hypothesis 3a*) and a

higher intention to interact with immigrants (*Hypothesis 3b*), but this process will only emerge among individuals with high modern racism (see Figure 1).
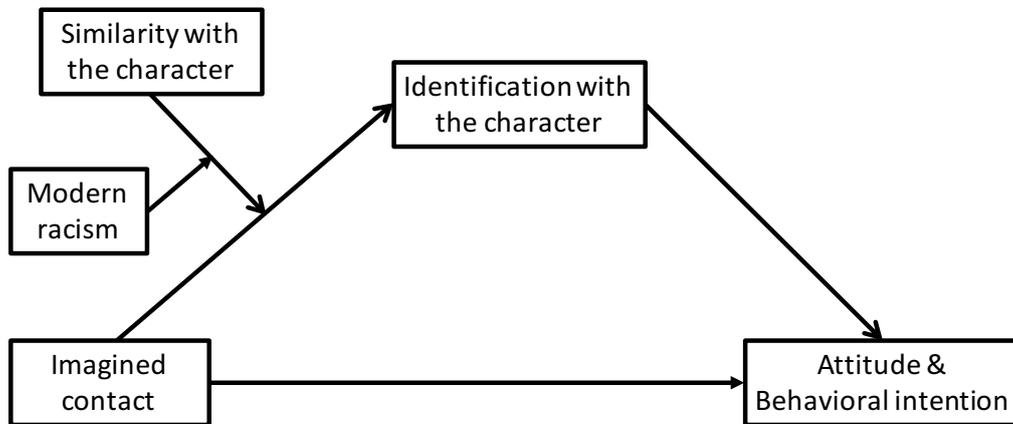

Figure 1. *Hypothesized conditional process model.*

Method

Participants

The sample consisted of 417 individuals of British origin whose parents were also British. Participants were drawn from a diverse opt-in online panel of SSI, *Survey Sampling International*. In order for our sample to approximate the general British population, we set quotas on age, gender, education, and the region of the country. Our final sample had a mean age of 41.67 (range: 18 to 65), 50.4% men and 49.6% women, and with the modal education category being General Certificate of Education Advanced Level (A Level; 42%; another 21.1% had secondary level studies, 25.4% had a Bachelor's degree, and 11.3% had done some graduate work). Forty-nine point nine percent of the participants worked full time and 16.5% worked part-time.

Design and Procedure

Participants first completed a pretest questionnaire, which assessed modern racism, direct contact with Pakistani immigrants, and the socio-demographic variables (sex, age, political self-positioning, education, and occupation). After the pretest, participants were randomly assigned to one of four experimental conditions: 2 (imagined contact) x 2 (similarity). First, half of the participants received instructions to imagine intergroup contact, and the other half received instructions to imagine a scene or a landscape (control group). These instructions appeared on the screen and remained for two minutes. After these two minutes, participants were randomly assigned to two similarity conditions: half of the participants read a first-person narrative of a Pakistani immigrant, in which the immigrant is presented as similar in terms of social identity, and half of the participants read a nearly identical message, in which the protagonist is not portrayed as similar to our experimental participants (see details below). After reading, participants completed the posttest questionnaire that assessed perceived similarity with the protagonist (manipulation check), attention paid to the narrative, perceived realism of the narrative, attitudes towards immigrants, and behavioral intentions.

Imagined contact. To manipulate imagined intergroup contact we relied on instructions from prior studies[1] (Crisp & Husnu, 2011; Crisp & Turner, 2009; Miles & Crisp, 2013; Turner & Crisp, 2010; in particular study 1 in Husnu & Crisp, 2010). 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. We constructed a first-person narrative, in which a Pakistani immigrant shares his experiences since his arrival in the United Kingdom (see appendix). A Pakistani immigrant was chosen for the experiment because Pakistanis are one of the most stigmatized immigrant groups in the UK.[2] In the story, Ali (a popular first name for Pakistani man) describes various events and feelings related to his arrival in the country, first jobs, current occupation, his family situation, his feelings about living in the UK, his social life, raising children, 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. The protagonist presents counter-arguments to defend immigrants and asks for greater tolerance towards immigrants, positing measures such as prosecuting worker exploitation and developing educational campaigns and actions against racism and xenophobia.

When it comes to the similarity manipulation, we altered parts in our narrative keeping the rest constant. In the high similarity condition, the narrative protagonist emphasized feeling British (versus Pakistani in the low similarity condition), mentioned that his business employs British (Pakistani) workers, 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 experimental manipulation, the narrative was accompanied by a photograph of Ali in his room, with a British (Pakistani) flag on a wall.

We conducted a pilot study both to select the photograph and to test whether the manipulation of similarity was effective. A sample of British students ($n = 27$) was asked to assess three photographs of Pakistani men (taken from un-copyrighted online photo library) in terms of how attractive, pleasant, honest, threatening, and friendly (on scales of 0 to 10) they considered the men to be. We selected the photograph rated most positively on these traits. In addition, we also evaluated whether the two versions of the narrative were comparable in terms of clarity and comprehensibility, believability, and interest (from 1 "strongly disagree" to 7 "strongly agree"). No statistically significant differences emerged between the high and the low similarity narrative on these measures (the means being above 5 in all cases). Finally, the participants in the pilot assessed: "To what extent do you feel you have things in common with Ali" (from 0 "nothing" to 10 "a lot"). The narrative with a similar protagonist ($N = 13$) generated significantly higher perceived similarity

(M = 5.53, SD = 2.40) than the low similarity narrative (N = 14, M = 3.57, SD = 2.17; $t(25)$ = 2.23, p < .017).

Measures

Modern racism. Modern racism was measured with 7 items (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree), which were adapted to Pakistani immigrants (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 α = .76; M = 4.06, SD = 0.98; see McConahay, Hardee, & Batts, 1981 for the original scale).

Direct contact with Pakistani immigrants. Participants were asked "how much contact do you have overall with immigrants from Pakistan in your everyday life" (from 1 = not at all, to 5 = a great deal; M = 2.35, SD = 1.15).

Political self-positioning. Participants also reported their political ideology on a standard scale from 0 (left) to 10 (right) (M = 5.48, SD = 2.21).

Perceived similarity. To check the experimental manipulation, we asked the participants the following questions (but as one only item) immediately after they read the narrative: "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).

Attention paid to the narrative. Participants were asked to assess how strongly they disagreed or agreed, from 1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree, with two statements: "I paid attention to this message," and "I read this message closely" (r = .76, p < .001; Cronbach α = .86; M = 5.53, SD = 1.08).

Identification with the protagonist. Identification was assessed using 11 items (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 α = .95; M = 2.61, SD = 0.97; Igartua & Barrios, 2012).

Perceived realism of the narrative. We asked participants to rate how much they agreed or disagreed with the following four statements: "the events in the text portrayed possible real-life situations," "Ali's story could actually happen in real life; it shows what usually happens to immigrants in the UK," "Ali's story was realistic," and "The story told by Ali made sense" (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree; Cronbach α = .93; M = 5.19, SD = 1.13; Cho, Shen, & Wilson, 2012).

Attitudes towards immigration. Attitudes were evaluated with a four-item scale (e. g., "please indicate how strongly you 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 α = .80; M = 4.04, SD = 1.22).

Behavioral intentions. We assessed participants' desire to establish future contact with Pakistani immigrants using a three-item scale (Crisp & Husnu, 2010, 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 α = .80; M = 4.32, SD = 1.34).

Results

Preliminary Analyses

We first verified that random assignment to the four experimental conditions was successful. There were no statistically significant differences among the conditions in terms of socio-demographics (gender (χ^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), modern racism (F(3, 413) = 0.13, p = .940) and direct contact with Pakistani immigrants (F(3, 413) = 1.59, p = .189).

We also tested whether the experimental manipulation of similarity was effective. An independent sample t-test found that there were indeed statistically significant differences (t(415) = 7.08, p < .001). Participants who had read the narrative with a protagonist similar in terms of social identity considered that Ali was similar to them and that they had things in common with Ali (M = 4.33, SD = 1.59) to a greater extent than participants who read the narrative in which the protagonist was portrayed with low similarity (M = 3.23, SD = 1.58). The similarity manipulation did not influence perceived realism of and the attention paid to the narrative (t(415) = 1.15, p = .247 and t(401.42) = 0.79, p = .428 respectively).

Hypothesis 1: Effect of Imagined Contact, Similarity and Modern Racism on Identification

Hypothesis 1 posited a three-way interaction effect of imagined contact, similarity, and modern racism on identification with the protagonist.[3] We predicted that imagined contact prior to reading the story of a highly stigmatized yet assimilated immigrant (high similarity) would increase identification but only among individuals with high modern racism. To test this hypothesis, we used the PROCESS macro (model 3) which is based on multiple linear regression (Hayes, 2013) and is considered the most suitable for analyzing the interaction between one or more experimental independent variables and a continuous independent variable (in this case, modern racism) (Hayes & Matthes, 2009). We recoded imagined contact (-0.5 "no imagined contact" and 0.5 "imagined contact") and similarity to the protagonist (-0.5 "low similarity" and 0.5 "high similarity") prior to running the model (this system of coding permits a *main effects parameterization* and has been recommended by Hayes, 2013, pp. 271-279). Identification with the protagonist was entered into the analysis as the dependent variable and direct contact with Pakistani immigrants was included as a control variable (to increase the power of the analysis).

The analyses showed that there was a negative relationship between modern racism and identification with Ali (B = -.25, p < .046). In addition, the three-way interaction between imagined contact, similarity, and modern racism on identification was positive and significant (B = .47, p < .009). Thus, 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 = .63, p < .011), and that effect was not significant at moderate (B = .16, p = .340) or low (B = -.29, p = .231) levels of modern racism.

In addition, using the Johnson-Neyman technique, we calculated the critical value in the moderating variable (modern racism) after which the interaction effect of imagined contact and similarity on identification was statistically significant. That value was 4.51, on a scale with a theoretical range of 1 to 7, so it is a value statistically above the overall mean of the participants (M = 4.06; t(416) = -9.27, p < .001). Twenty-eight point

twenty-nine percent (28.29%) of the participants in the study scored above that value on the modern racism index. This means that encouraging people to imagine a brief contact with an immigrant prior to reading a narrative with an immigrant

similar to the audience in terms of social identity enhances identification with the protagonist, but only in people with high modern racism. [4] This is consistent with *Hypothesis 1* (see Figure 2).
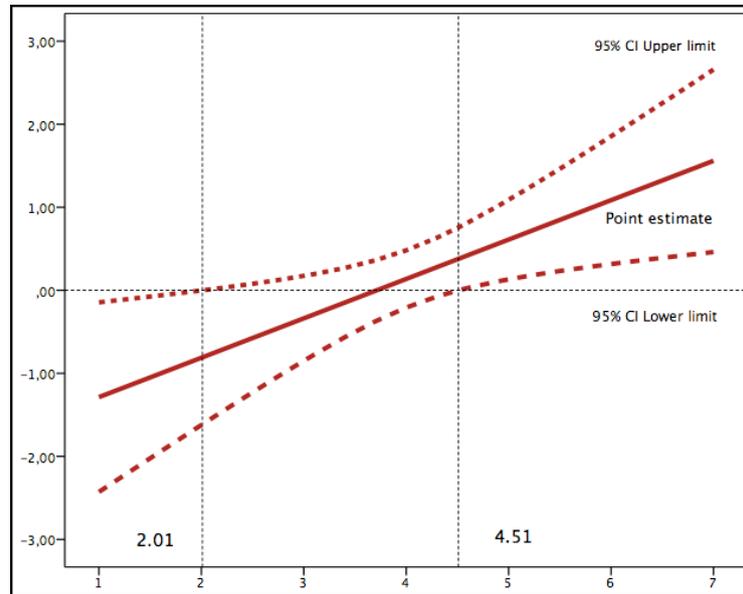

Figure 2. *Johnson-Neyman regions of significance for the conditional effect of the interaction between imagined contact and similarity on identification at levels of modern racism index.*

Hypothesis 2: Effect of Imagined Contact, Similarity and Modern Racism on Attitude Towards Immigration and on Behavioral Intention

Hypothesis 2 predicted a three-way interaction effect between imagined contact, similarity, and modern racism on attitudes towards immigration (H2a) and on behavioral intentions (H2b).[5] That is, we predicted that imagined contact prior to reading the narrative with a similar protagonist would induce a favorable attitude towards immigration and greater behavioral intentions but only among those who scored high on modern racism. We again used the PROCESS macro (model 3) to test two moderated moderation models, one for each dependent variable (attitudes and behavioral intentions).

When it comes to attitudes toward immigration, we found a negative relationship between modern racism and attitudes ($B = -.51$, $p < .001$), with participants scoring high on modern racism being – unsurprisingly – more negative toward immigration. In addition, we found a three-way interaction effect between imagined contact, similarity, and modern racism on attitudes ($B = .75$, $p < .001$). Consistent with *Hypothesis 2a*, this interaction indicates that the effect of imagined contact and high similarity on a positive attitude towards immigration emerged only among participants with high modern racism ($B = 1.05$, $p < .001$), but not among those whose modern racism was moderate ($B = .31$, $p = .159$) or low ($B = -.42$, $p = .176$).

When it comes to behavioral intentions, we find a negative relationship

between modern racism and individual intentions to interact with Pakistani immigrants ($B = -.40$, $p < .001$). The three-way interaction effect was again significant ($B = .66$, $p < .009$), indicating that the effect of imagined contact and high similarity on behavioral intentions emerged only among participants with high modern racism ($B = .88$, $p < .012$), but not among those with moderate ($B = .23$, $p = .351$) or low ($B = -.41$, $p = .233$) modern racism. This pattern supports *Hypothesis 2b*.

Hypothesis 3: Testing of the Conditional Process Model

Hypothesis 3 posited a *moderated moderated mediation model*, that is, a conditional indirect effect of imagined contact on attitude (H3a) and behavioral intention (H3b) through identification with the protagonist. This indirect effect would take place only among the participants who read a narrative with a similar protagonist and who scored high on the modern racism scale.

Table 1
Results of the conditional process model (PROCESS, model 11) with attitudes towards immigration as dependent variable (H3a)

	Mediator variable model (Identification with Ali)			
Predictor variables ($R^2 = .18$, $p < .001$)	B	SE	t	p
Constant	3.11	.19	16.03	.000
Imagined contact	-.47	.37	-1.24	.212
Similarity to protagonist of narrative	.50	.37	1.33	.183
Modern racism (MR)	-.25	.04	-5.36	.000
Direct contact with Pakistani immigrants	.22	.03	5.65	.000
Interaction "imagined contact x similarity"	-1.76	.75	-2.33	.020
Interaction "imagined contact x MR"	.18	.09	2.08	.037
Interaction "similarity x MR"	-.01	.09	-0.18	.855
Interaction "imagined contact x similarity x MR"	.47	.18	2.62	.009
	Dependent variable model (Attitude towards immigration)			
Predictor variables ($R^2 = .37$, $p < .001$)	B	SE	t	p
Constant	2.21	.15	14.25	.000
Identification with Ali	.78	.05	15.44	.000
Imagined contact (direct effect)	-.00	.09	-0.08	.935
Direct contact with Pakistani immigrants	-.09	.04	-2.16	.030
	Conditional indirect effects			
Similarity to protagonist of narrative	Moderator variable	B	SE	Boot 95% CI
Low (-0.5)	Low MR (3.08)	.20	.14	[-.08, .49]
Low (-0.5)	Medium MR (4.06)	.16	.09	[-.01, .36]
Low (-0.5)	High MR (5.05)	.12	.18	[-.22, .50]
High (0.5)	Low MR (3.08)	-.03	.14	[-.32, .24]
High (0.5)	Medium RM (4.06)	.29	.10	[.10, .49]
High (0.5)	High MR (5.05)	.62	.15	[.33, .92]

Note. - The predictor variable "imagined contact" was coded as -0.5 "no imagined contact" and 0.5 "imagined intergroup contact" following the recommendations of Hayes (2013). The table includes the *B* coefficients, which are non-standardized regression coefficients.

We used the PROCESS macro model 11 to test two moderated moderated mediation models, 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 (attitude, behavioral intention), through a mediating variable (identification) at different values of two moderator variables (similarity and modern racism) and controlling for direct contact with Pakistani immigrants. We calculated the conditional indirect effects using 10,000 bootstrapping samples, generating confidence intervals of the bias-corrected bootstrap type. A conditional indirect effect is considered significant if the confidence interval (CI at 95%) does not include the value 0.

The model testing attitudes towards immigration found the already detected (see results from *Hypothesis 1*) three-way interaction between imagined contact, similarity, and modern racism on identification with Ali ($B = .47$, $p < .009$). In turn, identification with Ali was associated with a more positive attitude towards immigration ($B = .78$, $p < .001$). 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 moderate ($B_{\text{indirect effect}} = .29$, $SE = .10$, CI 95% [.10, .49]) or high ($B_{\text{indirect effect}} = .62$, $SE = .15$, CI 95% [.33, .92]; see Table 1). This offers support for our *Hypothesis 3*.

Table 2
Results of the conditional process model (PROCESS, model 11) with behavioral intention toward Pakistani immigrants (H3b)

	Mediator variable model (Identification with Ali)			
Predictor variables ($R^2 = .18$, $p < .001$)	B	SE	t	p
Constant	3.11	.19	16.03	.000
Imagined contact	-.47	.37	-1.24	.212
Similarity to protagonist of narrative	.50	.37	1.33	.183
Modern racism (MR)	-.25	.04	-5.36	.000
Direct contact with Pakistani immigrants	.22	.03	5.65	.000
Interaction "imagined contact x similarity"	-1.76	.75	-2.33	.020
Interaction "imagined contact x MR"	.18	.09	2.08	.037
Interaction "similarity x MR"	-.01	.09	-0.18	.855
Interaction "imagined contact x similarity x MR"	.47	.18	2.62	.009

	Dependent variable model (Behavioral intention toward Pakistani immigrants)			
Predictor variables ($R^2 = .44$, $p < .001$)	B	SE	t	p
Constant	1.78	.16	11.16	.000
Identification with Ali	.88	.05	17.03	.000
Imagined contact (direct effect)	.03	.10	0.38	.697
Direct contact with Pakistani immigrants	.08	.04	1.99	.046

	Conditional indirect effects			
Similarity with protagonist of narrative	Moderator variable	B	SE	Boot 95% CI
Low (-0.5)	Low MR (3.08)	.23	.16	[-.10, .56]
Low (-0.5)	Medium MR (4.06)	.18	.10	[-.02, .39]
Low (-0.5)	High MR (5.05)	.14	.20	[-.27, .54]
High (0.5)	Low MR (3.08)	-.03	.16	[-.36, .28]
High (0.5)	Medium RM (4.06)	.33	.11	[.11, .56]
High (0.5)	High MR (5.05)	.70	.16	[.36, 1.03]

Note. - The predictor variable "imagined contact" was coded as -0.5 "no imagined contact" and 0.5 "imagined intergroup contact" following the recommendations of Hayes (2013). The table includes the B coefficients, which are non-standardized regression coefficients.

The model testing behavioral intentions as the dependent variable produced similar results. Identification with Ali was associated with greater intentions to interact with Pakistani immigrants ($B = .88$, $p < .001$). Again, the only two significant conditional indirect effects (from imagined contact to behavioral intention through identification) emerged when participants had read a narrative with a similar immigrant and when their modern racism was moderate ($B_{\text{indirect effect}} = .33$, $SE = .11$, CI 95% [.11, .56]) or high ($B_{\text{indirect effect}} = .70$, $SE = .16$, CI 95% [.36, 1.03]; see Table 2). In short, identification with Ali did indeed play a crucial mediating role for the impact of imagined contact and similarity on attitudes towards immigration and on intentions to interact with Pakistani immigrants, but only when individuals had moderate to high levels of modern racism towards immigrants.

Conclusions and Discussion

In this study, we shed light on the processes explaining the impact of narratives whose protagonists come from stigmatized social groups on attitudes and behavioral intentions. We followed the current trend in media psychology, and tested, in the same analysis, mediating variables (here, identification with the protagonist) and moderating variables related to individual differences (here, modern racism) (Knobloch-Westerwick, 2015; Slater, 2007, 2015; Valkenburg & Peter, 2013; Valkenburg, Peter, & Walther, 2016). From this perspective, we argued that the mediating 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 on various outcomes (Valkenburg & Peter, 2013).

Theoretically, we 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 and that on the relationship between modern racism and immigrant acculturation.

In general, we find that imagined contact and similarity in terms of social identity can be combined as effective intervention strategies to foster positive outgroup attitudes and encourage positive behaviors directed at stigmatized social groups. More specifically, our study offers several noteworthy findings.

First, we show that encouraging people to imagine a brief contact with an immigrant prior to reading a narrative as well as presenting an immigrant similar to the audience in terms of social identity enhances identification with the protagonist, and especially among people with high modern racism levels. Moreover, *main effects* (from imagined contact and similarity on identification) were found even when controlling for modern racism and direct contact with immigrants (see footnote 3), a finding that underscores the power of mediated messages aimed at affecting immigration-relevant outcomes. These results add novel insight to studies on the effect of similarity on identification with characters (de Graaf, 2014; Hoeken et al., 2016), in that we show that imagined contact enhances such identification. That is, a highly prejudiced person, after a short imagined intergroup contact "mental exercise," can more easily take the perspective of the protagonist in the narrative, as long as that protagonist is portrayed as assimilated (Miles & Crisp, 2013).

Our second notable finding regards the effects of imagined contact and similarity of the narrative protagonist to message receivers. We find a consistent pattern that both imagined contact and similarity lead to more favorable attitudes towards immigration and greater intentions to engage in various interactions with immigrants. Again, this effect only

emerged among those high on modern racism. Furthermore, the significant interactions indicate that imagined contact facilitates similarity effects among the most prejudiced persons. It is telling that we find these positive effects among the most prejudiced individuals, a target group for whom such effects are especially socially consequential (given that those most prejudiced drive and foment intergroup conflicts).

These results advance the research on imagined contact and its relation to individual characteristics or predispositions that moderate imagined contact effects on various outcomes. Showing that imagined contact effects are in fact consistently moderated by modern racism 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 most negatively predisposed toward various social groups. In fact, a recent review of intergroup contact studies shows that contact is *most* effective for individuals who are high on prejudice-related traits such as authoritarianism, desire for order, social-dominance orientation, or need-for-closure (Hodson, 2011). We extend this work to an important domain of exposure to stigmatized outgroups in short media messages, and among those high on modern racism.

Third, our data supported our theoretical model, in which imagined intergroup contact improves attitudes and encourages future interactions with immigrants through identification among those whose modern racism is high and who read a narrative message with a stigmatized yet assimilated immigrant protagonist. In other words, for those most prejudiced, a *short mental exercise*, i.e., imagining a pleasant intergroup interaction, can enhance identification with

an outgroup member featured in a media message, ultimately leading to more positive attitudes and greater openness to potential future interactions with personally disliked outgroups.

This finding is consistent with the research on prejudice and preferred acculturation strategies: the most prejudiced individuals prefer stigmatized immigrants to assimilate (Navas et al., 2006; Rojas et al., 2014), and so an assimilated immigrant shown in a message may be seen as a "success story" and as less threatening than an identical immigrant who prefers the language, cuisine, or customs of his home country. This finding is also in line with, and substantially extends, the aforementioned evidence from the work on narrative persuasion, that sees identification with characters as a decisive factor in explaining narrative effects (e.g., Cohen et al., 2015; Hoeken & Fikkers, 2014; Igartua & Vega, 2016; Tal-Or & Tsfati, 2016) and that shows that identification decreases when a message features stigmatized characters (Chung & Slater, 2013; Igartua & Frutos, 2017). We take this work one step further, showing that similarity in terms of social identity can successfully enhance identification with stigmatized characters and also among those who are highly prejudiced. In short, although modern racism naturally thwarts positive reactions to outgroups, portraying an outgroup member, an immigrant, as assimilated can improve attitudes and promote openness to getting to know the personally disliked group in the future precisely through enhanced identification with the outgroup member, a task difficult to achieve.

When interpreting our results, some limitations need to be kept in mind. First, our study is limited to a comparison of two messages, those presenting similar versus dissimilar immigrant. This presents two problems. First, we confidently conclude that the similarity manipulation generated the effects on identification,

attitudes, and behavioral intentions, yet we do not know whether similar effects would also emerge for other stigmatized groups in general (e.g., the homeless, the HIV positive) and whether similarity in terms of social identity would matter for other, less stigmatized, immigrant groups (e.g., the Polish or Spaniards in the UK). Also, we cannot determine which factor in our narrative exerted effects, whether the first-person account, the concrete protagonist, the photograph, among other factors.

Also, 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 most media messages featuring stigmatized immigrants do not focus on shared commonalities, but rather emphasize difference and stereotypes. As such, the impact of high similarity messages such as ours may not only be short-lived, but also quickly counteracted with other, more negative, messages. Nevertheless, finding that short-term exposure to a stigmatized immigrant, similar on some dimensions to our participants, did enhance identification, thus improving attitudes and encouraging intergroup contact among people who were most prejudicial 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, we find these consequential effects among individuals with a high degree of prejudice against immigrants in some circumstances. The circumstances studied, however, may not often transpire in realistic, non-experimental situations. Certainly, the most prejudiced could benefit most from a warm-up stage (imagined intergroup contact) before encountering media messages. Yet how likely is it that a prejudiced person will voluntarily imagine a positive interaction with a member of a disliked social group? Also, the media messages encountered should not only be positive toward outgroups but also show those outgroups as similar to the majority group. Again, these conditions are rarely met in naturalistic settings, where people selectively expose themselves to media messages that are consistent with their attitudes (e.g., Stroud, 2011) and where most messages are not favorable toward various stigmatized outgroups. Thus, despite our desire to offer practically applicable findings, work is needed on how these findings can actually be applied, against all odds.

Although not free from limitations, we offer important findings on the role of imagined contact and narrative messages in affecting attitudes and behavioral intention as related to a stigmatized outgroup, non-Western immigrants in Western Europe. We also propose a strategy to affect these outcomes among people with high modern racism, the ones most in need of change, using narratives with an assimilated immigrant and stimulating imagined contact before reading the narrative. Given the massive influx of immigrants to Europe, practitioners should take these findings into account when designing integration-related campaigns. Also, journalists should be acutely aware that various writing strategies alter the context – and the effects - of media messages. Given the centrality of the mediated communication to how citizens respond to outgroups, research that extends our findings is both timely and relevant.

Footnotes

[1] Demand characteristics could be considered an alternative explanation to imagined contact effect on attitudes. It could be possible that participants in

previous imagined contact studies had respond more positively in the imagined contact condition because they guessed the rationale of the experiment and acted in accordance with the perceived expectations of the researcher. However, Crisp & Turner (2009) have found no evidence to suggest that imagined contact effects could be explained by demand characteristics. In fact, imagined contact manipulation have been succeeded to influence explicit and also implicit attitudes (Turner & Crisp, 2010). Given that it is more difficult to control responses on implicit measures (e.g., the Implicit Association Test, IAT) than on explicit measures, observing an impact of imagined contact on IAT response times rule out the demand characteristics explanation.

[2] Specifically, some 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, at least according to respondents in this study" (see 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 (see http://cdn.yougov.com/cumulus_uploads/document/f4rr9eo24l/YG-Archive-Pol-Times-results-2502015-W.pdf).

[3] Multiple linear regression analysis was performed including as independent variables imagined contact (coded: 0 "no imagined contact," 1 "imagines intergroup contact"), similarity to the character (coded: 0 "low similarity," 1 "high similarity"), modern racism and direct contact with Pakistani immigrants, identification with Ali being the dependent variable. The model was statistically significant ($_{adjusted}$ $R^2 = .15$, $p < .001$). Imagined contact ($\beta = .15$, $p < .001$), similarity ($\beta = .22$, $p < .001$) and direct contact with Pakistani immigrants ($\beta = .25$, $p < .001$) were positively associated with identification, whereas modern racism exerted a negative effect ($\beta = -.22$, $p < .001$).

[4] There 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 2.01, but only 2.63% of the participants in the study scored below that value on the modern racism index. Because in this case the conditional effect is negative, that means that encouraging people with very low modern racism to imagine a brief contact with an immigrant prior to reading a narrative with an immigrant similar to the audience in terms of social identity decrease identification.

[5] Two multiple linear regression analyses were run including as independent variables: imagined contact, similarity to the character, modern racism, and direct contact with Pakistani immigrants, whereas attitude towards immigration and behavioral intention were entered as dependent variables. In the first model ($_{adjusted}$ $R^2 = .13$, $p < .001$), imagined contact ($\beta = .09$, $p < .035$) and direct contact with Pakistani immigrants ($\beta = .14$, $p < .003$) were positively associated with attitude towards immigration, whereas modern racism had a negative effect ($\beta = -.38$, $p < .001$). In contrast, similarity did affect the attitude ($\beta = -.002$, $p = .965$). In the second model, ($_{adjusted}$ $R^2 = .11$, $p < .001$) imagined contact ($\beta = .11$, $p < .013$) and direct contact with Pakistani immigrants ($\beta = .27$, $p < .001$) were again positively associated with behavioral intentions, whereas modern racism exerted a negative effect ($\beta = -.27$, $p < .001$). Similarity again did not have a significant effect on behavioral intention ($\beta = .03$, $p = .444$).

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Appendix
Narratives used in the experimental study

Low similarity in terms of social identity	High similarity in terms of social identity
My name is Ali, I am from Pakistan, I have been living in the UK for 10 years and I feel Pakistani. I'll tell you my story.	My name is Ali, I am from Pakistan, I have been living in the UK for 10 years and I feel British. I'll tell you my story.
Because working conditions in my country were not very good, I came to the UK to obtain a better future for my family. I worked many years in construction as a labourer, then as a waiter in a restaurant and, right now, I have a small business in which I have three employees. All are Pakistani, by the way. The Pakistani are very hardworking, more than the Brits.	Because working conditions in my country were not very good, I came to the UK to obtain a better future for my family. I worked many years in construction as a labourer, then as a waiter in a restaurant and, right now, I have a small business in which I have three employees. All are British, by the way. The Brits are very hardworking, more than the Pakistani.
In these ten years I have managed to bring my family, my wife and two children. I feel good living in the UK although my friends are mostly Pakistani. We meet over the weekends and always eat biryani, typical Pakistani dish and my favourite food. With my children I almost always speak Urdu and they also have more Pakistani than British friends. Also, I speak English quite badly and I almost always read Pakistani newspapers. In short, I feel Pakistani.	In these ten years I have managed to bring my family, my wife and two children. I feel good living in the UK and my friends are mostly British. We meet over the weekends and always eat fish and chips, my favourite food. With my children I almost always speak English and they also have more British than Pakistani friends. Also, I speak English quite well and almost always read British newspapers. In short, I feel British.
Despite living in the UK for so long, sometimes I feel rejected. I remember several occasions, but two things in particular have caused me pain. First, I have heard, over and over again, that "immigrants take jobs away from the Brits." And it's not true, because when I arrived, the Brits did not want to work in construction. Furthermore, while working as a labourer I was always exploited by my bosses. And if I protested, they answered that those were the conditions (working for up to 12 hours a day, for example), and if I did not like it, I knew where	Despite living in the UK for so long, sometimes I feel rejected. I remember several occasions, but two things in particular have caused me pain. First, I have heard, over and over again, that "immigrants take jobs away from the Brits." And it's not true, because when I arrived, the Brits did not want to work in construction. Furthermore, while working as a labourer I was always exploited by my bosses. And if I protested, they answered that those were the conditions (working for up to 12 hours a day, for example), and if I did not like it, I knew where

the door was ... I think that the Brits should know that many immigrants are exploited. British Government should monitor and prosecute this type of exploitation.

Also, many Brits say that immigrants are criminals. I've noticed that, in the subway, people get away from me when they hear my accent, as if they thought I will rob them. I do not understand why this rejection toward immigrants is so strong. In my opinion, the public should be reminded through information campaigns that immigrants are the same as the Brits in many ways. Also, in schools children should be taught to be more tolerant of immigrants.

Yes, I was born in another country. But here I pay my taxes and work hard to support my family and give them the best, like any Pakistani parent wants for their children. My decision to come to the UK was positive for me, my family and I also think I'm contributing something positive to the UK. Even though I live in the UK, I want to return to Pakistan one day, I identify with the Pakistani culture, its food, and the colours of its flag. That's why I would like my children to grow up in Pakistan.

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