

# Improving Attitudes towards Immigration through Fictional Feature Films. A Moderated Mediation Model of Narrative Persuasion

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*Abstract.* This study is linked to research into narrative persuasion and the techniques used to reduce rejection towards stigmatized groups based on affective processes. A quasi-experimental study was carried out with 142 upper-secondary school students who were assigned randomly to one of two conditions: viewing a film that emphasizes discrimination towards immigrants and arouses reactions of empathy (Poniente) or seeing a film that underscores positive intergroup contact (El Próximo Oriente). One month before viewing the films the participants completed the Modern Racism Scale, and after the films were viewed, we measured their identification with in-group and out-group characters and attitudes towards immigration. It was observed that viewing the film designed to stimulate empathy towards immigrants caused greater identification with the out-group characters, which in turn induced more positive attitudes towards immigration, but only when previous prejudice was low or moderate. The implications of these findings are discussed in the context of research into narrative persuasion.

*Keywords:* Narrative persuasion, identification with characters, feature films, immigration, modern racism.

Narrative formats (such as movies or television series) offer a non-threatening context in which individuals can experience vicarious parasocial contact with characters belonging to discriminated out-groups, and which in situations of direct or interpersonal social contact could cause discomfort or unease (Chung & Slater, 2013). Thus, exposure to such narrative formats can reduce attitudes of rejection towards minorities or stigmatized groups, such as immigrants (Park, 2012). Previous research in this context has shown that vicarious or parasocial contact between individuals of the in-group and individuals of the out-group through feature films or television narratives can reduce negative attitudes towards immigration. In addition, it has been shown that identification with characters in the out-group plays an important mediating role (Müller, 2009). However, to date there has been no confirmation of the extent to which previously held prejudice towards

the out-group may moderate that process. The aim of this study was thus to analyze the mediating and moderating processes linked to the impact of films about immigration on attitudes towards that population, all as a basis for advancing our knowledge of the processes or mechanisms involved in narrative persuasion.

## *Reduction of prejudice and mediated intergroup contact*

Prejudice is a negative attitude or feeling of rejection towards an individual because they belong to a certain group (Dovidio, Kawakami, Smoak & Gaertner, 2009). Since prejudice is a phenomenon that can be analyzed at different levels, different approaches have been established in an attempt to reduce it (Harwood, 2010; Park, 2012). In the context of social psychology, one of the strategies shown to be most effective in reducing prejudice is facilitating interaction or direct contact

between individuals in the in-group and those in the out-group (see the meta-analysis by Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). But it has also been found that the positive effects of contact can be achieved even when the contact is indirect, vicarious or merely symbolic. According to the theory of extended contact (Wright, Aron, McLaughlin-Volpe & Ropp, 1997), knowing or observing that a member of the in-group maintains a close relationship with a member of the out-group can contribute to improving inter-group attitudes. Furthermore, the theory of imagined contact (Crisp & Turner, 2009) proposes that the mere fact of imagining a positive encounter with a person pertaining to an out-group leads to a reduction in prejudice.

The theory of parasocial contact (Schiappa, Gregg & Hewes, 2005) maintains that exposure through the media to examples of positive intercultural relations between individuals in the in-group and individuals in the out-group provides an opportunity for parasocial contact that reinforces attitudes of acceptance towards members of the out-group and molds behaviors of intergroup contact. In this context, Park (2012) defines mediated inter-group contact as the parasocial interaction that takes place: 1) between a spectator who belongs to the in-group and a fictional character who forms part of an out-group, 2) when that spectator observes how a character from the in-group interacts with a character from the out-group, and 3) when an individual from the in-group identifies with a fictional character from his or her own group who becomes involved in friendly or favorable interactions with a character from the out-group.

Previous empirical evidence shows the importance of parasocial interaction and identification with characters. Thus, Ortiz and Harwood (2007) found that viewing series that provide a positive image of minorities and identification with minority characters was associated with

positive attitudes towards these minorities. Secondly, it has been observed that exposure to a multicultural drama series with a favorable message about inter-group contact (compared to viewing a series used as a control variable) reduced the perception of intercultural threat and identification with characters of the out-group explained this effect (Müller, 2009). Finally, in an experimental study it was found that exposure to the feature film *A Day without a Mexican* (with a positive message about immigration) reinforced a favorable attitude towards immigration, and identification with characters played a mediating role (Igartua, 2010, study 3). These last two findings are in agreement with those of research into strategies to reduce prejudice based on affective processes (Batson, Polycarpou, Harmon-Jones et al., 1997; Finlay & Stephan, 2000). From this perspective it has been found that an effective way to improve attitudes towards the stigmatized group (cultural or ethnic minorities, immigrants, persons with a disability, etc.) is to foster empathy and perspective-taking with respect to a member of the stigmatized out-group. Thus, it can be posited that certain audio-visual productions (such as *The Color Purple* or *Rain Man*) that present the particular cases of persons forming part of the stigmatized groups could be used to improve the image of such groups by allowing audiences to feel empathy towards or to identify with the characters in them, and this would lead to attitudinal changes.

#### *Narrative persuasion and identification with characters*

Narrative persuasion research (Dal Cin, Zanna & Fong, 2004; de Graaf, Hoeken, Sanders & Beentjes, 2012; Green & Brock, 2000; Moyer-Gusé, 2008; Slater & Rouner, 2002) is a field that investigates how the information located within narratives can alter people's perceptions of reality. There are empirical studies that

have confirmed the power of cinematographic fiction specifically for changes of attitudes and beliefs (e.g., Baumert, Hofmann & Blum, 2008; Caputo & Rouner, 2011; Chen & Lin, 2014; Igartua & Barrios, 2012). Furthermore, there is a variety of models about the mechanisms of narrative persuasion, the most representative being: narrative transportation (Green & Brock, 2000), the Extended-Elaboration Likelihood Model (E-ELM; Slater & Rouner, 2002) and the entertainment overcoming resistance model (Moyer-Gusé, 2008). In these models, identification with character is considered to play a relevant role in the narrative persuasion processes (Dal Cin et al., 2004).

Identification with characters is a mechanism through which people experience and interpret a narrative from the inside, as if the events being narrated were actually happening to them. This process is linked to different aspects such as cognitive empathy (taking the perspective of the character), emotional empathy (sharing in the emotional experience of the characters) and the sensation of becoming the character or of temporarily assuming their identity, goals and motivations (*merging*) (Cohen, 2001; Igartua & Barrios, 2012; Moyer-Gusé, 2008). Cohen (2006) posits that identification provides an opportunity to try on other identities and adopt the feelings and thoughts of another. Considered in this way, identification allows the individual 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, Moyer-Gusé (2008) points out that identification with characters can increase the likelihood that individuals will accept the beliefs and attitudes implicit in fictional narratives. In this context, empirical research has found that identification with characters fosters a change in attitude; that is, when a person identifies with a fictional character, he or

she takes on that character's perspective from a cognitive point of view, which leads to changes in beliefs or opinions (e.g., de Graaf et al., 2012; Moyer-Gusé, Chung & Jain, 2011).

Cohen (2001) points out that the main factors leading to identification with characters are related to audience characteristics and the characters' attributes. Thus, a positive relation has been observed between a person's perceived similarity with the character and identification (Chory-Assad & Cicchirillo, 2005). Moreover, it has empirically been found that the perception of positive personality traits in the character is positively associated with identification (Tal-Or & Cohen, 2010). It has also been shown that empathy (as a personality trait) predicts greater identification with fictional characters (Calvert, Strouse & Murray, 2006).

In the context of inter-group relations and contact with immigrants, modern racism (as a measure of prejudice towards immigrants) could be a relevant variable that influences the degree of identification with main characters who are immigrants in fictional feature films. Modern racism constitutes a more subtle, indirect, rationalized and cold form of prejudice than the older forms (McConahay, Hardee & Batts, 1981). It is also linked to reactions of distrust and avoiding contact with persons in the out-group, and also with feelings of discomfort, insecurity, mistrust and a lower manifestation of positive feelings (Gaertner & Dovidio, 1986; Navas, 1998). In an experimental study on the impact of a film with a message against racism (involving African Americans in the United States), it was found that people's previous level of prejudice (as measured using the Modern Racism Scale by McConahay et al., 1981) influenced their interpretation of the film and their reactions to it (Eno & Ewoldsen, 2010). That study shows the importance of considering the role of individual

differences (such as the previous level of prejudice towards immigrants) in attempting to understand the impact of fictional feature films with immigrants as the main characters.

But considering the role of individual differences (in the present study, modern racism) also allows us to test whether identification with characters behaves as a mediating variable at all levels of the moderating variable. Identification with characters involves feeling empathy for their situation, taking on their point of view (seeing the world from their perspective), having the feeling of taking on their actual identity, constituting a kind of *fusion* of identities that does not always take place. For example, it has been observed that there was less identification (understood as taking that perspective) when the characters were presented as stigmatized in a fictional feature film (Chung & Slater, 2013). One would expect that a person with a high degree of prejudice against immigration, exposed to a film whose lead characters are immigrants, will experience difficulties to identify with immigrant characters.

The above explanation is consistent with the social judgment theory (Dal Cin et al., 2004; Sherif & Hovland, 1961), which posits that any attempt to explain persuasive effects has to start by considering the previous position or attitude of the individual and its degree of consolidation. From this perspective it is posited that the distance perceived (or degree of discrepancy) between an individual's previous attitude and the attitude in the message determines attitudinal impact (Perloff, 2010). For these reasons it could be posited that people with a high degree of modern racism, that is, those who show more extreme previous attitudes in regard to immigration, will experience a low degree of identification with immigrant characters and therefore the message will have a low attitudinal impact. Thus, individuals with a low or moderate level of

previous prejudice will be the ones that identify to a greater degree with the immigrant character and this will lead to an attitudinal impact in consonance with the message of the film.

#### *Research context and hypotheses*

The present study, of a quasi-experimental nature, is an attempt to contribute to clarifying the moderating role of previous attitudes (in this case, prejudice evaluated as modern racism) in the reception processes of feature films about immigration. In addition, we also sought to obtain evidence as to the processes responsible for persuasive impact, specifically identification with out-group characters. Thus, with this study not only do we analyze the possible attitudinal effects of exposure to films about immigration that provide a different image of the phenomenon, but we also delve deeper into the analysis of the mediating mechanisms or processes of narrative persuasion.

The study participants were upper-secondary school students distributed into two different experimental conditions: a first group viewed a film that reinforces a message denouncing racism and stimulates empathy towards immigrants (*Poniente*) whereas a second group watched a film showing positive and non-conflictive examples of close relations between natives and immigrants (*El Próximo Oriente*). One month prior to being shown the film, the participants were asked to complete a first questionnaire (presented to them as part of a different study) which included a measure of their prejudice towards immigrants (using the Modern Racism Scale by McConahay et al., 1981) and other control variables (their perception of the problems facing the country, political self-positioning and level of contact with immigrants). They were asked to complete a second questionnaire immediately after viewing the film. This second questionnaire assessed different

criteria related to reception processes (identification with in-group and out-group characters) and the dependent variable in the study: attitude towards immigration.

Our first hypothesis has to do with the impact that viewing the films had on attitudes towards immigration. It was posited that the film *Poniente*, by showing situations involving discrimination of immigrants and situations of suffering that can induce empathy in the average spectator, and with a message denouncing racism, would induce a positive attitude towards immigration in the viewers.

H1. Viewing the film *Poniente* (as compared to viewing the film *El Próximo Oriente*) will induce a positive attitude towards immigration.

One of the fundamental dimensions of identification with characters is empathy. And empathy is considered one of the main techniques in reducing prejudice (Batson et al., 1997; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2008). Thus, one would expect that a film that shows conflictive situations between in-group and out-group characters and discrimination of immigrants, at the same time denouncing xenophobia and racism, will cause a greater empathic reaction towards immigrants that will manifest in a high identification with the immigrant characters in the film as compared with a film lacking these elements.

H2. The feature film *Poniente* will induce greater identification with immigrant characters than the film *El próximo Oriente*.

Previous research studies have demonstrated that prejudice is associated with more negative attitudes and emotions towards immigrants in everyday contexts and with avoidance behaviors. It is logical to think that this effect can also manifest in a situation of mediated or parasocial inter-

group contact, such as when watching a film in which immigrants are the main characters. Furthermore, given that an individual's similarity to characters is positively associated with identification (Chory-Assad & Cicchirillo, 2005), it is highly likely that persons with a high level of previous prejudice will experience lower empathic identification with immigrant characters. Likewise, it is expected that the film with the message denouncing racism will induce greater identification with immigrant characters than the film that does not address this topic, but this effect should be more pronounced among individuals with a low or moderate prejudice in regard to immigrants.

H3a. A negative relation will be observed between the level of previous prejudice towards immigrants and the level of identification with immigrant characters in the films viewed.

H3b. The effect that viewing the film *Poniente* has on identification with its immigrant characters will be moderated by the participants' degree of modern racism. Thus, among the participants experimentally exposed to this film, the level of identification with the immigrant characters will be greater when their level of previous prejudice is low or moderate.

Narrative persuasion models consider identification with characters to be an important mediating process in the impact of fictional narratives on attitudes and beliefs. In the context of research on reducing prejudice through mediated contents, Park (2012), starting from the hypothesis of parasocial contact (Ortiz & Harwood, 2007; Schiappa et al., 2005), posits three relevant processes in mediated inter-group contact: parasocial interaction with out-group characters, parasocial interaction with an in-group character who

in the story interacts with an out-group character, and identification with in-group characters who interact with out-group characters in the story. However, Müller (2009) has observed that identification with out-group characters (and not identification with in-group characters) is associated with less inter-group anxiety and a more positive attitude towards immigrants. Thus, it could be posited that identification with immigrant characters acts as a possible mediator, since it has been considered that empathy (a central component in identification with characters) constitutes a relevant variable in reducing prejudice (Batson et al., 1997). Thus, taking social judgment theory (Dal Cine et al., 2004; Perloff, 2010) as a reference, one would expect the hypothesized mediating process only to

manifest when the previous level of prejudice towards immigrants is low to moderate.

H4. Viewing the film *Poniente* (as compared to viewing the film *El Próximo Oriente*) will induce a high identification with the immigrant main characters of the film, which in turn will be associated with a more positive attitude towards immigration. However, and in accordance with a *moderated mediation model* (Hayes, 2013), this mediating process will only take place among individuals with low or moderate prejudice towards immigrants (Figure 1).

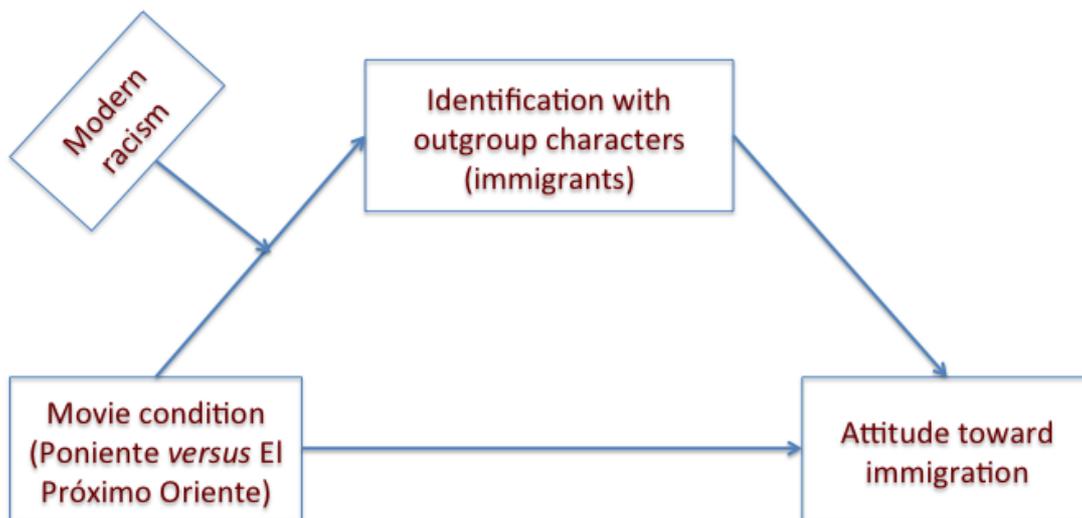


Figure 1. Moderated mediation model

Method

Participants

Participating in the research were 142 students with Spanish nationality in their first year of upper-secondary education at four public secondary schools located in a provincial capital of Spain. A collaboration agreement with the school was entered into prior to the study. Fifty

percent of the participants were men and 50% were women, with a mean age of 16.86 (*SD* = 1.02, range: 16 to 20 years of age, 92.3% between 16 and 18 years of age).

Design and procedure

A posttest-only two groups design was used, the independent variable being the film viewed (*Poniente* or *El Próximo*

*Oriente*). Given the nature of the participants (upper-secondary school students at four different schools) it was not possible to distribute the students randomly to the two experimental treatments (the film viewed), and therefore two schools were randomly distributed to each condition, which is why the research is considered quasi-experimental. The absence of a random process in assigning individual participants to the experimental conditions means that the quasi-experiment is subject to more concerns regarding internal validity than experimental research *per se*. To tackle these concerns, and in particular the possibility of there being significant differences among the participants assigned to the different treatments prior to the experiment, a pre-test questionnaire was administered to measure relevant variables such as political self-positioning, level of previous prejudice towards immigrants, level of contact with immigrants in interpersonal contexts and the perception of immigration as a problem for the country. Previous research has found that these variables are linked to attitudes towards immigration (e.g., Cea D'Ancona, 2004). Thus, in a first stage of analyzing the results we checked whether there were any differences regarding these variables among the participants assigned to the two experimental groups<sup>1</sup>.

The research was carried out in two stages. In the first, a pre-test questionnaire was administered in which the following were evaluated: the perception of social problems, modern racism towards immigrants, level of contact with immigrants, political self-positioning, and socio-demographic data. In addition, in order to camouflage the real objectives of the study, questions about the social network Facebook were included. This questionnaire was administered in the four schools during the same week in February 2014. Four weeks after the pre-test questionnaire was administered (March 2014), we again went to the schools and

showed the films in question. In their classrooms the students viewed an edited version of one of the selected films (67 for *El Próximo Oriente* and 75 for *Poniente*). Immediately after viewing, the participants completed the post-test questionnaire designed to assess their reception processes (identification with the main characters), the dependent variable (attitude towards immigration) and socio-demographic data such as country of birth (in order to exclude the questionnaires of any foreign-born participants).

#### *Description of the films and pilot study*

Two feature films produced in Spain were used: *Poniente* (Gutiérrez, 2002) and *El Próximo Oriente* (Colomo, 2006). They were selected because they present two different views of the immigration phenomenon. Taking as a reference studies about the role of empathy and identification in the reduction of prejudice (Batson et al., 1997; Müller, 2009), we considered that a film with the potential to reduce prejudice towards immigrants should cause empathy-identification with the members of the out-group (immigrants). *Poniente* was considered the most appropriate film for fulfilling this requirement. It posits intercultural conflict as a basic ingredient by showing examples of violence and racism in the working world, and by observing how immigrants are exploited, deprived of their rights and discriminated against by people in the place they live. The film ends precisely with the demands for better working and living conditions that the immigrants express peacefully. As a counterpoint we used the film *El Próximo Oriente*, which shows several positive examples of intimate relations between Spanish citizens and Asian immigrants with Muslim beliefs. It tells the love story between a Spanish man and a Muslim woman and is a kind of celebration of multiculturalism and the mixing of races.

In order to underscore the message of each film most efficiently, the films were edited (initially both were approximately 90 minutes long) to create versions approximately 45 minutes long, respecting the plot lines of the script and without depleting the story in any of its aspects. In the case of *Poniente*, a 47 minute version was created that emphasized the conflictive situations between the native characters (in-group) and the immigrant characters (out-group), the racism of the natives, and the discrimination the immigrants were subject to at work, making very clear how much the immigrants suffered owing to their situation as such. In contrast, the 46 minute edited version of *El Próximo Oriente* underscored the intimate and positive contact between characters of the in-group and out-group.

A pilot study was carried out with the participation of 45 students of audio-visual communication (68.9% women and a mean age of 20.51 years). The participants in the pilot study were distributed into two groups and each group was shown a different film. After viewing, they completed a short questionnaire which asked (on a 7 point Likert-type scale from 1 “not at all” to 7 “very much”) to what extent they considered that the following affirmations could be applied to the film they had viewed: 1) “It can be seen that peaceful and harmonious co-existence between immigrants and Spaniards is possible,” 2) “Although it shows some conflictive situations between immigrants and Spaniards, the average viewer would feel empathy for the immigrants,” 3) “It offers a positive view of immigrants and Spaniards getting along,” 4) “The film contains a message denouncing racism and xenophobia,” 5) “Conflictive situations between immigrants and natives are shown,” 6) “The average viewer would feel uneasy or sad seeing the situation in which the immigrants in the film have to live,” 7) “The idea the film reinforces is that it is

possible for immigrants and Spaniards to have close relations (as couples or friends),” 8) “It shows a positive image of immigrants,” y 9) “It shows a positive view of intercultural contact, that is, contact between persons from different cultures.” Two indices were then created based on these items: “positive intercultural contact present in the film” (items 1, 3, 7, 8 and 9;  $\alpha = .87$ ) and “empathy and a condemnation of racism present in the film” (items 2, 4, 5 and 6;  $\alpha = .76$ ).

The results of the pilot study showed that each film emphasized a different view of immigration. The idea of positive intercultural contact was more present in the film *El Próximo Oriente* ( $M = 5.31$ ;  $SD = 0.67$ ) than in *Poniente* ( $M = 3.08$ ;  $SD = 1.07$ ;  $t(41.70) = 8.46$ ,  $p < .001$ ). In contrast, *Poniente* ( $M = 5.93$ ;  $SD = 1.14$ ) presented a message that reinforced empathy towards immigrants and condemned racism to a greater extent than *El Próximo Oriente* ( $M = 4.63$ ;  $SD = 0.60$ ;  $t(41.21) = -4.95$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

#### *Instruments and variables*

*Perception of the importance of several issues as problems for the country.* This was really used to measure the “perception of immigration as a problem for the country.” The question was phrased as follows (my translation): “please indicate to what extent you believe the following matters are important problems for the country,” followed by a list of 11 issues (among them, immigration) and an 11-point scale for responding ranging from 0 “not important at all” to 10 “extremely important.”

*Prejudice towards immigrants.* Prejudice was assessed using the Modern Racism Scale by McConahay et al. (1981), translated and adapted to the Spanish context by Navas (1998). This scale was included to assess the participants’ level of prejudice towards immigrants before being exposed to the film. It comprises 10 items

(examples: “In recent years, immigrants have gotten more economically than they deserve,” “Immigrants should not push themselves where they are not wanted”) with responses to be chosen from a 7-point Likert scale (ranging from 1 “strongly disagree” to 7 “strongly agree”). Principal component factor analysis (Varimax rotation) was run and extracted two factors that explained 59.96% of the variance. All the items except number 3 (“It is understandable that the immigrants who live here are unhappy”) were grouped in the first factor (which explained 48.87% of the variance) with positive signs (except for item 9, “All Spaniards should support immigrants in their struggle against discrimination,” which had a negative sign). Taking into account these results, we created a modern racism index ( $\alpha = .89$ ) by adding up all the items (except item 3, and with prior recoding of item 9). Thus, the higher the score the higher the negative prejudice towards immigrants.

*Level of contact with immigrants.* Each participant was asked if he or she had, or had had in the past (1 = yes, 0 = no), some type of relation with immigrants (as family, friends, boy or girlfriend, coworkers, classmates or neighbors). We then created an index of personal contact with immigrants based on the simple sum of the six dichotomous variables considered (theoretical range of points from 0 to 6).

*Political self-positioning.* The question was based on sociological surveys carried out in Spain (Cea D’Ancona, 2004): “When we talk about politics we generally use the expressions “left” and “right.” Taking into account the following scale, which number best represents your political position?” (where 1 = left, 10 = right).

*Identification with the main characters.* This was assessed with an 11-item scale whose reliability and validity were confirmed in a previous study (Igartua & Barrios, 2012). The instrument has 11 items designed to measure in

retrospect the respondents’ degree of identification with a specific character (examples: “I tried to see things from X’s point of view,” “I felt emotionally involved with X’s feelings,” “I had the impression of living X’s story myself,” with possible responses ranging from 1 = not at all, to 5 = very much). For each film we analyzed the identification with two out-group characters (immigrants) and two in-group characters (natives). To facilitate the task we used two versions of the post-test questionnaire, one that asked about the characters in *Poniente* and the other about the characters in *El Próximo Oriente*. A photograph of the characters was included in each case. Based on the application of the identification scale for two main characters of the in-group and two main characters of the out-group, and following the procedure used by Müller (2009) and Moyer-Gusé and Nabi (2010), we created two identification indices: identification with in-group characters ( $\alpha = .92$  for the film *El Próximo Oriente* and  $\alpha = .94$  for *Poniente*) and identification with out-group characters ( $\alpha = .92$  for *El Próximo Oriente* and  $\alpha = .96$  for *Poniente*).

*Attitude towards immigration.* The dependent variable in the study was evaluated by means of a one-item scale (Igartua, 2010, study 3). Participants were asked: “As you know, all developed countries receive immigrants. Do you think, generally, that immigration is a more positive or a more negative thing for Spain?” (0 = very negative to 10 = very positive).

## Results

### *Equivalence of the experimental groups*

Given the quasi-experimental nature of the study, we tested whether the two groups of participants differed in relation to the following variables: political self-positioning, level of previous prejudice as assessed by the Modern Racism Scale, the perception of

immigration as a problem for the country and personal level of contact with immigrants. The results showed that there were no significant differences between

the groups in any of the four variables considered (see Table 1), which means that the groups were equivalent.

Table 1. *Equivalence of the experimental groups in regard to relevant variables (Student's t-test).*

Control Variables	Condition (movie)		<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>
	El Próximo Oriente	Poniente			
• Political self-positioning	4.41 (1.77)	4.60 (1.85)	-0.62	137	.532
• Perception of immigration as a problem for the country	6.29 (2.39)	5.73 (2.27)	1.39	135	.166
• Modern Racism	3.24 (1.39)	2.96 (1.18)	1.27	137	.206
• Relation with immigrants index	3.03 (1.22)	2.74 (1.18)	1.40	137	.162
<i>N</i>	67	75			

*Note.* Range of scores: self-positioning (1 = left, 10 = right); immigration as a problem (0 = not important at all, 10 = very important); modern racism (1 = low, 7 = high); relation with immigrants index (0 = low, 6 = high).

*Impact of viewing the films on attitude towards immigration*

Hypothesis 1 posited that viewing the film *Poniente* would induce a more positive attitude towards immigration than viewing the film *El Próximo Oriente*. Using Student's *t* test we found that the participants who watched the film *Poniente* showed a more positive attitude towards immigration ( $M = 5.60$ ,  $SD = 2.08$ ) than the participants who viewed *El Próximo Oriente* ( $M = 4.82$ ,  $SD = 2.34$ ;  $t(140) = -2.10$ ,  $p < .038$ ,  $r = .17$ ). Moreover, this effect continued to be statistically significant ( $F_{condition} (1, 132) = 4.06$ ,  $p < .046$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .03$ ) even when including in the covariance analysis (ANCOVA) the covariables of the modern racism index ( $F_{modern\ racism} (1, 132) = 25.92$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .16$ ), and the level of personal contact with immigrants ( $F_{contact\ with\ immigrants} (1, 132) = 8.26$ ,  $p < .005$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .05$ ).

The above result was endorsed when analysis of variance and comparison of means tests were run between the two treatment groups and the mean obtained in

that variable in the control group ( $N = 88$ ). Statistically significant differences were observed ( $F_{condition} (2, 226) = 5.75$ ,  $p < .004$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .048$ ), but especially when comparing (using the post hoc Scheffe test) the mean of the group exposed to *Poniente* to the mean of the control group ( $M = 4.46$ ,  $SD = 2.07$ ;  $p < .004$ ). No statistically significant differences were observed between the control group and the group experimentally exposed to the film *El Próximo Oriente* ( $p = .590$ ).

*The moderating role of modern racism in identification with out-group characters*

Hypothesis 2 posited that the film *Poniente* would induce greater identification with immigrant characters than the film *El Próximo Oriente*. The results confirm this hypothesis since greater identification with the out-group characters was observed among the participants who had viewed the film *Poniente* ( $M = 2.79$ ,  $SD = 0.91$ ) than among those who had seen *El Próximo Oriente* ( $M = 2.24$ ,  $SD = 0.68$ ;  $t(125.33) = -3.87$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

Hypothesis 3a posited that there would be a negative relation between participants' previous level of prejudice towards immigrants and their level of identification with the immigrant characters in the films viewed, whereas Hypothesis 3b predicted that the effect of viewing the film *Poniente* on identification with its immigrant main characters would be moderated by the participants' degree of modern racism. To test these two hypotheses, and in particular to find out whether previous prejudice towards immigrants (modern racism) played a moderating role, we used the PROCESS macro (model 1) developed by Hayes (2013), which is based on multiple linear regression (moderated multiple

regression). This technique has been considered the most suitable choice for analyzing the interaction between an experimental independent variable (a dichotomous one in this case) coded as a dummy variable,  $0.5 = Poniente$  and  $-0.5 = El Pr\u00f3ximo Oriente$ ) and a continuous independent variable (in this case, the score obtained on the Modern Racism Scale), since it permits delimitation of the regions of statistical significance (by means of the Johnson-Neyman technique) in which the effect of the dichotomous independent variable on the different values of the moderating variable is observed specifically (Hayes & Matthes, 2009).

Table 2. Analysis of the moderating effect of modern racism on the relation between viewing of the films and identification with out-group characters (Multiple regression model with PROCESS, model 1)

Predictor variables ( $R^2 = .21, p < .001$ )	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
• Constant	3.12	.18	16.53	.000
• Modern Racism (MR)	-.20	.05	-3.58	.000
• Film	1.16	.35	3.09	.002
• Interaction "film x MR"	-.22	.11	-1.96	.052
Conditional effect of viewing the film on the dependent variable (identification with out-group characters) at different values of MR.				
• Low MR (-1 SD from the mean: 1.81)	.76	.20	3.78	.000
• Medium MR (3.05)	.48	.14	3.44	.000
• High MR (+ 1 SD from the mean: 4.29)	.21	.19	1.06	.286

Note: The variable "film" (viewed) was recoded as a dummy variable and the value 0.5 was assigned to having seen *Poniente* and -0.5 to having seen *El Pr\u00f3ximo Oriente*, following the recommendations of Hayes (2013). The modern racism variable shows a range of scores from 1 "low" to 7 "high." The table includes the *B* coefficients, which are non-standardized regression coefficients.

The results of the analyses showed that, in agreement with Hypothesis 3a, there is indeed a negative relation between the modern racism of the participants and their degree of identification with the characters of the out-group ( $B = -.20, p < .001$ ). In addition, and in confirmation of Hypothesis 3b, a significant interaction effect was observed between the experimental condition (viewing *Poniente* versus *El Pr\u00f3ximo Oriente*) and the level of modern racism in the identification with

out-group characters ( $B = -.22, p < .052$ ). Thus, it was confirmed that the participants exposed to the film *Poniente* (as compared to those who viewed *El Pr\u00f3ximo Oriente*) experienced a high degree of identification with the immigrant characters when the level of previous prejudice was low ( $B = .76, p < .001$ ) or moderate ( $B = .48, p < .001$ ), but that association was no longer statistically significant when the level of prejudice was high ( $B = .21, p = .286$ ).

In addition, using the Johnson-Neyman technique, we calculated the critical value in the moderating variable (modern racism index) after which the effect of viewing *Poniente* on identification with out-group characters was no longer statistically significant. That value was 3.79, on a scale with a theoretical range of 1 to 7, so it is a value slightly below the theoretical mid-point of the scale (4), but slightly above the overall mean of the participants ( $M = 3.09$ ,  $DT = 1.28$ ). Twenty-six point four percent (26.4%) of the participants in the study scored above that value on the modern

racism index. This means that for those individuals, viewing the film *Poniente* did not induce greater identification with the out-group characters in comparison to those who viewed *El Próximo Oriente*. In contrast, for a large majority of the participants (73.6%), those who scored low or moderately on the modern racism index, *Poniente* did indeed induce greater identification with the out-group characters than *El Próximo Oriente* (see Figure 2).

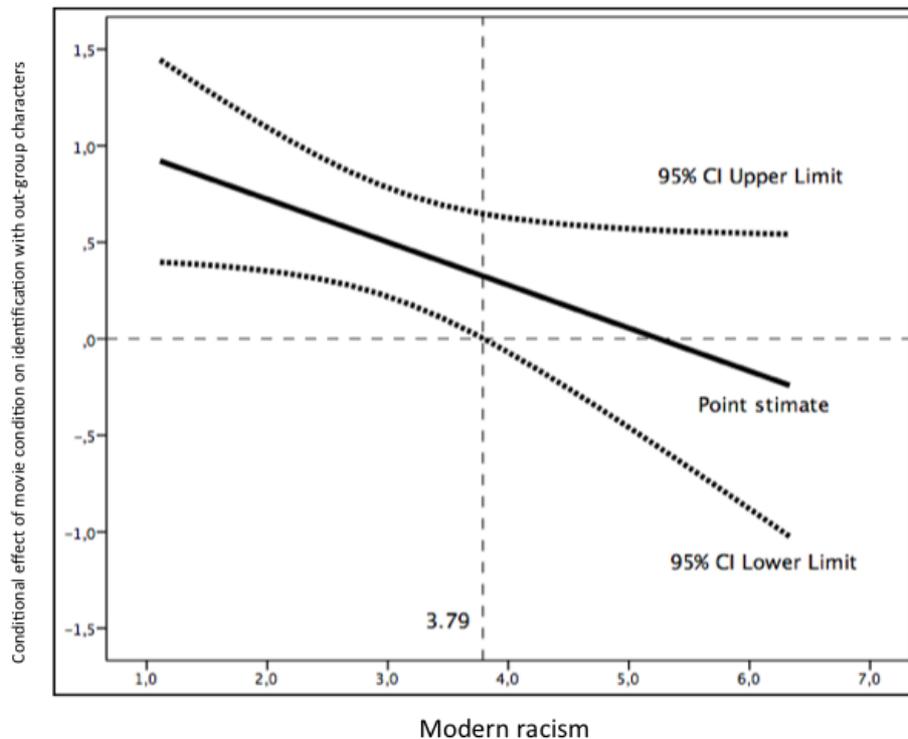


Figure 2. Johnson-Neyman regions of significance for the conditional effect of movie viewing condition on identification with out-group characters at levels of modern racism index.

*Mediation analysis. Testing of the moderated mediation model*

Hypothesis 4 postulated a moderated mediation model in an attempt to understand the role played by identification with out-group characters as a mediating variable of the impact of viewing the films on attitudes towards

immigration, also taking into account the role of modern racism as moderating variable. To test this hypothesis we used the PROCESS macro (model 7) developed by Hayes (2013). This macro allows us to test different mediational models based on the bootstrapping technique. When this procedure is applied (using model 7, in particular), it permits calculation of the

conditional indirect effects, that is, the effect of an independent variable (film viewed) on a dependent variable (attitude towards immigration), through a mediating variable (identification with the out-group characters) and for different levels of a moderating variable (modern racism). In this study, the conditional indirect effects were calculated using 10,000 bootstrapping samples, generating confidence intervals of the bias-corrected

bootstrap type. In this context, an indirect effect is considered statistically significant if the confidence interval established (CI at 95%) does not include the value 0. If the value 0 is included in the confidence interval we cannot reject the null hypothesis that posits that the indirect effect is equal to 0, that is, that there is no association between the variables involved.

Table 3. Results of the moderated mediation analysis (PROCESS, model 7)

Mediating variable model (Identification with out-group characters)				
Predictor variables ( $R^2 = .21, p < .001$ )	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Constant	3.12	.18	16.53	.000
Modern Racism (MR)	-.20	.05	-3.58	.000
Film	1.16	.37	3.09	.002
Interaction “film x MR”	-.22	.11	-1.96	.052
Dependent variable model (Attitude towards immigration)				
Predictor variables ( $R^2 = .12, p < .001$ )	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Constant	3.31	.59	5.58	.000
Identification with out-group characters	.77	.22	3.44	.000
Film (direct effect)	.39	.38	1.01	.313
Conditional indirect effects				
Mediator	Moderating variable	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>Boot 95% CI</i>
Identification with out-group characters	MR low (1.81)	.59	.24	[.20, 1.16]
Identification with out-group characters	MR medium (3.05)	.37	.16	[.12, .78]
Identification with out-group characters	MR high (4.29)	.16	.17	[-.12, .60]

*Note:* The variable “film” (viewed) was recoded as a dummy variable and the value 0.5 was assigned to having seen *Poniente* and -0.5 to having seen *El Próximo Oriente*, following the recommendations of Hayes (2013). The modern racism variable shows a range of scores from 1 “minimum value” to 7 “maximum value.” The table includes the *B* coefficients, which are non-standardized regression coefficients.

The results of the analysis allow us to conclude that exposure to the film *Poniente* induced greater identification with the out-group than exposure to *El Próximo Oriente* ( $B = 1.16, p < .002$ ) and that, in turn, the identification was associated with a more positive attitude towards immigration ( $B = .77, p < .001$ ). However, the existence of a statistically significant interaction effect between the film viewed and the participants’ level of modern racism ( $B = -.22, p < .052$ ) meant

that the conditional indirect effects were only statistically significant when the previous level of prejudice was low ( $B_{\text{indirect effect}} = .59, SE = .24, CI\ 95\% [ .20, 1.16]$ ) or moderate ( $B_{\text{indirect effect}} = .37, SE = .16, CI\ 95\% [ .12, .78]$ ). In short, identification with out-group characters did indeed play a relevant mediating role for understanding the impact of exposure to the film *Poniente* on attitudes towards immigration, but only when the level of

previous prejudice towards immigrants was low to moderate.

### Conclusions and discussion

The findings of this study allow us to conclude that the strategy based on fostering empathy is more efficient as an intervention tool to improve attitudes towards immigration than an audiovisual strategy that shows positive and intimate situations of inter-group contact. This is consistent with the research done by Batson et al. (1997). We observed that the film with a message that reinforced empathy towards immigrants by showing situations of conflict, discrimination, and by denouncing racism and xenophobia (*Poniente*), as compared to a film that reinforced the positive message of intimate intercultural contact with immigrants (*El Próximo Oriente*), provoked a more positive attitude towards immigration in the participants, even when controlling for the effect of relevant variables such as the modern racism index or previous interpersonal contact with immigrants, and also in comparison with a control group that was not exposed to either film.

In regard to identification with characters, a central process in the reception of fictional audiovisual contexts and in processes of narrative persuasion (Cohen, 2001; de Graaf et al., 2012; Moyer-Gusé, 2008), significant differences were also observed between the two films. Identification is linked to the experience of empathy, perspective-taking, and the sensation of becoming the character, taking on his or her goals, motivations and identity. It is logical to assume that a film that does not bring about identification with the main characters will generate less involvement and have less impact (Cohen, 2001; Igartua, 2010). Thus, in this study it was observed that the individuals who saw the film that reinforced a message of condemnation of racism and of empathy towards immigrants (*Poniente*) experienced greater identification with the

out-group characters than the participants who viewed the film that only showed situations of positive inter-group contact (*El Próximo Oriente*). In addition, we had hypothesized that participants' previous level of prejudice towards immigrants (evaluated with the Modern Racism Scale one month before participants viewed the films) *would moderate* this result. First of all, it was observed that modern racism influenced identification with characters in the out-group: the higher the level of modern racism, the lower the identification with immigrant characters, a result consistent with the hypothesis of mediated inter-group contact (Park, 2012) and with previous studies about stigma and narrative impact (Chung & Slater, 2013). Nonetheless, our most important finding was to observe that the film with a message against racism and which contained images to promote empathy towards immigrants (*Poniente*) induced greater identification with the out-group characters (than *El Próximo Oriente*), but only when the level of modern racism was low to moderate. This means that despite the dramatic situations shown in *Poniente*, with clear scenes of discrimination and xenophobia, reactions of empathic identification with characters only took place in the participants with low to moderate levels of prejudice towards that group. This finding is new and brings to light the relevant role of individual differences as moderating variables in order to understand the impact of entertainment contents on reception processes, and in particular, on identification with characters. The inclusion of moderating variables related to individual differences helps to increase the explained variance of the effects of entertainment and provides a better explanation of the effects of those mediated contents<sup>2</sup>. As Oliver and Krakowiak (2009) have pointed out, "... if individual differences are not acknowledged, some programs of research run the risk of incorrectly concluding that

media have no effects or inconsequentially small effects on viewers” (p. 527).

The literature on narrative persuasion and research into mediated inter-group contact consider that parasocial contact with fictional characters, and, in particular, identification with characters, is a mediating process or mechanism that explains attitudinal impact (Chung & Slater, 2013; Igartua, 2010; Müller, 2009; Schiappa et al., 2005; Park, 2012; Ortiz & Harwood, 2007). The findings of our study converge with this theoretical postulate. Nevertheless, the mediating role of identification with characters from the out-group only took place when the participants’ previous level of prejudice was low to moderate, such that the hypothesized moderated mediation model (Hayes, 2013), which was an innovation with respect to previous research (Eno & Ewoldsen, 2010; Müller, 2009), was endorsed by the study data. Thus, it was observed that viewing the film reinforcing a message against racism and empathy towards immigrants (*Poniente*) induced greater identification with out-group characters than viewing the film with a positive message about intimate inter-group contact (*El Próximo Oriente*), and that process was in turn associated with a more favorable attitude towards immigration. However, this causal sequence or mediating process only occurred among the participants who showed (before viewing) a low or moderate level of prejudice or modern racism towards immigrants.

These findings are consistent with those obtained by Müller (2009) in a study carried out in the Netherlands which involved a television series promoting intercultural contact. In that study, however, the role of participants’ previous prejudice in reception processes was not analyzed; in our study it was included as a methodological innovation. The results obtained also converge with those found by Chung and Slater (2013), in which the social acceptance of a stigmatized person

(in this case, a mother represented as a drug addict) was observed to be lower than when negative information about the main character was left out (her history with drugs was avoided and her desire to be a successful mother was emphasized), and that effect was explained by identification with the main character of the film. In that study, the stigmatized person provoked less identification (perspective-taking), which in turn was associated with less social acceptance of the character. However, it was also observed that the narrative with a stigmatized person did not produce a lesser degree of narrative transportation nor did it reduce the enjoyment of viewing the film.

From a theoretical point of view, and in regard to the mechanisms of narrative persuasion, these findings are consistent with social judgment theory (Dal Cin et al., 2004; Perloff, 2010; Sherif & Hovland, 1961). It was observed that the individuals most susceptible to having their attitudes influenced by a fictional film with a message reinforcing empathy towards immigrants (*Poniente*) were those who had already manifested a position more favorable to immigrants, with a low to moderate level of prejudice. This finding, furthermore, has clear practical implications: it means that the intervention strategy based on empathy would have its limitations when applied to individuals with a high level of previous prejudice. Therefore, the challenge for future research is to make a prosocial persuasive impact (for improving inter-group attitudes) on people with a high previous level of prejudice, given that they are the ones most in need of undergoing a change in attitude. It is clear that provoking identification with stigmatized characters (such as the immigrants in the present context) and thus indirectly favoring positive attitudes to inter-group contact is becoming a challenge for creators of fictional contents (Müller, 2009; Park, 2012).

Here we have seen how a strategy based on promoting empathy towards

immigrants is more effective than showing situations of intimate inter-group contact using a free and easy or comic tone. It should be kept in mind that dramatic films foster more eudaimonic type responses (such as reflection, or the sensation that the film is making a lasting impression) than less dramatic films, such as comedies, which stimulate reactions of hedonic enjoyment, positive emotions and less reflection (Oliver & Bartsch, 2010).

Finally, the findings of this study allow us to progress in our knowledge of the processes or mechanisms that govern narrative persuasion when designing entertainment-education interventions aimed at achieving prosocial effects (Moyer-Gusé, 2008). This field could prove to be more effective than the classic publicity campaigns used to reduce inter-group anxiety and improve attitudes towards immigrants.

#### Footnotes

<sup>1</sup> In order to have a measure of comparison in the main dependent variable of the study (attitude towards immigration), and given that a two-group design using only a post-test measure was being used, data was obtained from two more secondary schools (in the same city where the study was carried out) that participated as a *control group*. These participants ( $N = 88$ ) were limited to completing a questionnaire with the dependent and control variables and were not exposed to any film.

<sup>2</sup> A mediational analysis was carried out excluding the moderating effect of modern racism from the analysis (PROCESS model 4). In that analysis a statistically significant indirect effect was observed ( $B = .40$ ,  $SE = .17$ ,  $95\% CI [.13, .83]$ ). However, the percentage of explained variance of the model that predicted the impact of viewing the films on identification with out-group characters was much lower ( $R^2 = .10$ ,  $p < .001$ ) than the one obtained when the modern racism index was included in the analysis as

moderator ( $R^2 = .21$ ,  $p < .001$ ). This result reinforces the importance of the moderator included in the model, and furthermore clearly shows that processes of identification with characters in fictional narratives are not uniform.

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