

Personal narratives to improve attitudes towards stigmatized immigrants: A parallel-serial mediation model

Group Processes & Intergroup Relations

2023, Vol. 26(1) 96–119

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DOI: 10.1177/13684302211052511

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Abstract

This work addresses the study of factors that increase the persuasive efficacy of testimonial messages aimed at improving intergroup attitudes. The results of two online experiments ($N = 840$) on the effect of empathy with, and similarity to, the protagonist in personal stories designed to improve attitudes towards immigrants are presented. In both studies, participants were given instructions to induce a certain exposure condition (empathy vs. an objective or distanced perspective) immediately before reading a narrative whose protagonist was an immigrant with high or low similarity to the audience. The results of mediation analysis show that both empathy and similarity increased identification and narrative transportation, which in turn reduced counterarguing, thus resulting in a more positive attitude towards the outgroup and lower threat perception. The results are discussed in the context of research on narrative persuasion and the design of campaigns to reduce racism and xenophobia.

Keywords

attitudes towards immigrants, mediated intergroup contact, narrative persuasion, prejudice reduction, testimonial messages

Paper received 22 June 2020; revised version accepted 24 September 2021.

Currently, many intergroup encounters take place through the media. This type of communicational exchange often has negative consequences that affect everyday social relationships (Beyer & Matthes, 2015; Saleem et al., 2019). For example, immigration news coverage is often negative and conflict-centered—immigrants are generally depicted as delinquents or criminals, as “masses” or “hordes,” or they are often dehumanized by the use of terms referencing natural disasters (Eberl et al., 2018). However, it is also true that mediated intergroup contact (which

means contact with an outgroup through various media forms; Banas et al., 2020; Harwood, 2010; Park, 2012) can be an effective tool to reduce prejudice and improve attitudes towards stigmatized groups such as immigrants, especially when

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narrative messages are used (Igartua et al., 2019; N. Kim et al., 2020; Moyer-Gusé et al., 2019; Murrar & Brauer, 2018, 2019; Wojcieszak & Kim, 2016).

Instead of relying on vicarious intergroup contact (Dale & Moyer-Gusé, 2020; Mazziotta et al., 2011) or on the entertainment-education approach (Murrar & Brauer, 2018), this work focuses on the impact of personal narrative or testimonial messages in which an immigrant belonging to a stigmatized group relates their life experience. Such testimonial messages or personal narratives are common on social media, blogs, and websites of immigrant support institutions to make the population aware of the reality in which these population groups live (e.g., International Organization for Migration: <https://greece.iom.int/en/migrants-stories>). Although this type of messages may be considered unsophisticated narrative forms, they are easier to understand than didactic or statistically based messages (i.e., those that use factual assertions and abstract data), and are especially effective when personal involvement is low, such as when addressing a topic of little interest to the audience (Braverman, 2008). This type of messages could therefore have direct application to the reduction of racism and xenophobia.

Taking research on narrative persuasion as a reference, two experiments were carried out in Spain and the Netherlands. In both experiments, short testimonial messages delivered by stigmatized immigrants of different origins were used as stimuli. In this context, the present work provides two innovations. First, the joint effect of empathy (understood as an exposure condition) and similarity between the protagonist of the message and the audience on identification and narrative transportation is analyzed. In addition, the indirect effects on attitudes towards the outgroup and threat perception are analyzed through identification with the protagonist and narrative transportation (as primary mediators) and counterarguing (as a secondary mediator).

Personal Narratives to Improve Outgroup Attitudes

There are many definitions of what constitutes a narrative message, but all of them emphasize the

involvement of at least one character who experiences or faces (at least) a certain event in a specific space–time framework; in addition, the narrative must communicate something relevant to the audience from which they can learn (Braddock & Dillard, 2016; Hoeken et al., 2016; Toolan, 2001).

This work focuses on personal stories (testimonials) in which the protagonist is an immigrant who describes their life project. A testimonial message of this type alludes to two different states: their life before emigrating and their life after becoming an immigrant, which are connected through a causal and temporal sequence. Moreover, in the narrative, the immigrant expresses their emotions, mentions the reasons that led them to leave their country, relates their personal history in the host country, alludes to their feelings of belonging, and communicates their expectations for the future (the intentions and goals of the character). The objective of a narrative with such characteristics is to raise awareness among the host population regarding the situation of immigrants in general, thus making it an effective tool to reduce racism and xenophobia. We consider that testimonial messages for prejudice reduction offer several advantages over other, more elaborate, narrative formats. First, by focusing attention on a single character, the underlying persuasive message can be communicated more effectively.¹ Second, as they are short messages, they can be conceived of as “narrative pills” and be more easily disseminated through social media, while also having lower production costs compared with audiovisual entertainment-education messages (Murrar & Brauer, 2018).

Although narrative messages are an effective persuasive tool, not all narratives are equally effective, since significant variation in their effects has been found (Braddock & Dillard, 2016). It is therefore important to determine the factors that can increase their persuasive efficacy (e.g., Cohen & Tal-Or, 2017; de Graaf et al., 2016; Tal-Or & Cohen, 2015; Tukachinsky, 2014). In this context, the current work focuses on analyzing the joint effect of an attribute of the protagonist of the narrative (their similarity to the audience) and an

exposure condition (instructions given to participants to increase empathy immediately before reading the narrative). We proceeded in this way for two reasons: firstly, because there is an open debate regarding which dimensions of similarity are relevant to enhance narrative impact (Cohen et al., 2018), and secondly, because it has been indicated that studies analyzing the effect of similarity in combination with other antecedent variables are necessary (Cohen & Tal-Or, 2017). We hypothesize that the effect of similarity can be increased under certain exposure conditions.

Similarity to the Protagonist

Similarity occurs when the person exposed to a narrative message shares certain traits with its protagonist. According to the similarity–identification hypothesis (Cohen et al., 2018), sharing some characteristics with the protagonist facilitates the formation of affective and cognitive ties. Similarity creates some resemblance between the audience and the narrative protagonist and makes the narrative more personally relevant. However, studies carried out to date have yielded inconclusive results. In the systematic review on this subject conducted by Tukachinsky (2014), it was observed that similarity has a positive effect on perceived similarity (a subjective notion of similarity in a particular domain; $d = 0.85, p < .001$) and narrative transportation (a process that describes the feeling of being immersed in the story; $d = 0.24, p < .01$), but not on identification with the protagonist of the message (a process of merging with the character; $d = 0.10, p > .10$). Given this scenario, the author concludes that a theoretical adjustment should be made regarding the concept of similarity and its dimensions, and that it is necessary to analyze the conditions under which similarity is associated with identification and narrative transportation.

Most works in which similarity to the character is manipulated have concentrated on objective demographic attributes such as gender or age (e.g., Cohen et al., 2018; de Graaf, 2014; Hoeken et al., 2016; van den Hende et al., 2012). However, similarity can also be based on psychological or

subjective characteristics (such as personality, attitudes, values, or biographical experiences). In this context, we consider that when such messages focus on stigmatized characters, more powerful narrative resources will be needed to create affective and cognitive ties, given that this type of characters elicits, by default, greater rejection (Chung & Slater, 2013; Igartua & Frutos, 2017). For this reason, we propose that other dimensions of similarity that are more directly linked to social identity, and more certain to stimulate processes such as identification or narrative transportation, should be activated.

Social identity theory (SIT; Tajfel, 1982) and self-categorization theory (SCT; Turner, 1985) suggest that people tend to categorize those they perceive to be similar to themselves as members of their group, whereas those they perceive as different are considered to be members of an outgroup. SIT suggests that people tend to favor their ingroup relative to outgroups because they strive to maintain a positive self-construct and self-esteem, which extends to the groups they are a part of. This can, but does not always lead (see Brewer, 1999) to outgroup derogation. SCT posits that self-categorization becomes more likely as perceived intergroup differences become more salient. It is this tendency to categorize and the desire to perceive the self and the ingroup more positively that can lead to differential treatment of outgroups (Gaertner et al., 1993). However, a key fact is that this ingroup–outgroup categorization is context-dependent, suggesting that, if certain cues are activated, a person belonging to an outgroup may be seen as a member of the ingroup instead (Turner et al., 1987). Furthermore, according to the common ingroup identity model (Gaertner et al., 1993), a person belonging to an outgroup is classified as such because they differ on certain characteristics that define social identity, such as ethnic origin, home country, gender, or any other group characteristic. However, if a shared sense of identity is activated, creating a supraordinal category (“we”), the ingroup–outgroup separation is more likely to disappear (Dale & Moyer-Gusé, 2020).

In this context, the current research focuses on the effect of similarity in terms of social identity, which implies emphasizing what people have in common by referring to subjective aspects such as national feelings (the group with which a person identifies) and attachment to cultural elements (such as the typical food of a country; Igartua et al., 2019). For example, an immigrant who appears similar to the audience of the message may mention that their favorite food is a typical dish from the host country. We consider that this subjective dimension of similarity is especially relevant in the context of reducing racism and xenophobia, since it would make the process of ingroup–outgroup categorization inactive (i.e., the target would be seen as an ingroup rather than an outgroup member) and, consequently, facilitate engagement with narratives concerning members of stigmatized groups. However, this work goes beyond contrasting the main effects of similarity, to explore the role of exposure to specific narrative message conditions in which similarity can have a greater effect on identification and narrative transportation.

Empathy as an Exposure Condition

In the field of social psychology, empathy is defined as a cognitive and emotional process that facilitates perspective-taking and the experience of an emotional synchrony with other people (Levenson & Ruef, 1992). Furthermore, empathy is also a strategy to improve intergroup attitudes (Batson et al., 1991; Batson, Polycarpou, et al., 1997; Finlay & Stephan, 2000), and is considered to be one of the mechanisms explaining the effect of intergroup contact on reducing prejudice (Dovidio et al., 2010; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2008; Visintin et al., 2017).

However, in the present study, empathy is considered an exposure condition (Tukachinsky, 2014), that is, a particular psychological state in which people receive the message and which facilitates greater engagement with the story and its characters. Exposure conditions are external elements (independent of the message) that

influence how individuals process narratives. In the field of research on narrative persuasion, variables linked to exposure conditions have received less attention than internal attributes of the message (Dahlstrom et al., 2017), and are usually manipulated experimentally aiming to reduce (Green & Brock, 2000; Kaufman & Libby, 2012) or increase (Igartua et al., 2019; Sestir & Green, 2010) involvement with the message or its characters.

Empathy is also a relevant construct in research on media psychology (Nathanson, 2003; Zillmann, 1991), because it allows understanding of emotional reactions to narrative messages (Davis et al., 1987) and how affective dispositions towards their characters develop (Raney, 2003). Given that empathy is a dimension of the identification construct (Cohen, 2001, 2009; Igartua & Barrios, 2012), and that empathic people engage more intensely with narratives (Davis et al., 1987; Green & Sestir, 2017), we consider that, if instructions to stimulate empathy are given immediately before exposure to a narrative message, both processes (identification and narrative transportation) will increase, especially when the protagonist is presented as similar to the audience.

Only two studies in which empathy was manipulated using instructions that were read immediately before receiving a narrative message and where similarity to the protagonist was manipulated have been found (Batson, Sager, et al., 1997; van den Hende et al., 2012). However, in those works, the manipulation of similarity was based on demographic characteristics such as whether the protagonist went to the same university as the participants (shared vs. unshared group membership; Batson, Sager, et al., 1997), or the national origin of the protagonist (van den Hende et al., 2012). The work by Batson, Sager, et al. (1997) did not evaluate intergroup attitudes but rather the effect of empathy on helping behavior, observing that “the relationship was much the same in both group membership conditions” (p. 506). Meanwhile, in the work of van den Hende et al. (2012, Study 2), objective similarity was manipulated based on the geographical origin of

the protagonist: in the low-similarity condition, the protagonist was an immigrant from Morocco, while in the high-similarity condition, the protagonist was presented as an immigrant from Canada (while participants were European). The results showed that a highly dissimilar protagonist inhibited reader narrative transportation. However, this effect was mitigated using explicit instructions to induce empathy (i.e., “imagine yourself as the main character of the text and visualize the situation”).

The work carried out by Wojcieszak and Kim (2016) also constitutes a starting point for this study. Indeed, in that research, empathy was referred to as a facilitating condition, proving that the induction of empathy before reading a narrative message (compared with an objective or distanced perspective) resulted in greater immersion. Our research is based on these results but incorporates identification and narrative transportation (as primary mediators) as well as counterarguing (as a secondary mediator).

Underlying Processes: Identification, Narrative Transportation, and Counterarguing

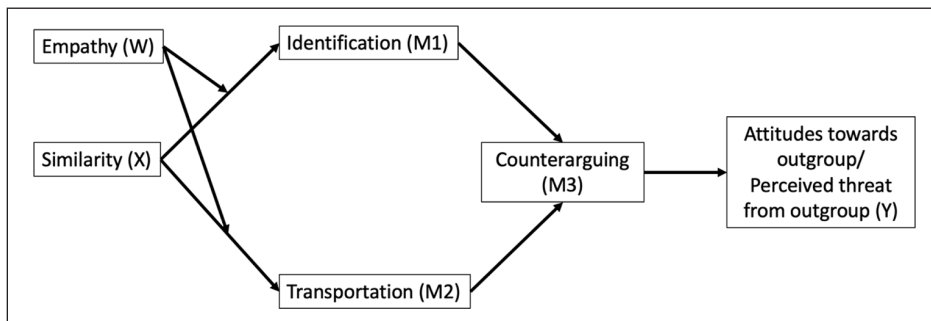
The main theoretical models on narrative persuasion consider that identification with characters and narrative transportation constitute processes that promote persuasive impact, since absorption in the message inhibits the capacity for counterarguing, facilitating attitudinal impact (Bilandzic & Busselle, 2013; de Graaf & van Leeuwen, 2017; Green & Brock, 2000; Moyer-Gusé, 2008; Slater & Rouner, 2002).

Identification is defined as a multidimensional construct that is linked to emotional empathy, cognitive empathy, and the feeling of merging with the character and adopting their goals (Igartua & Barrios, 2012). This constitutes a psychological phenomenon by which members of the audience mentally adopt the position of the protagonist of the narrative, a process that allows the natural tendency to limit one’s vision of things to a single perspective to be overcome (Cohen, 2001; Cohen & Tal-Or, 2017).

Narrative transportation refers to a general absorption in which the audience feels that they are within the world of the story itself. This constitutes a state of engagement that integrates a cognitive dimension (attention focus), an affective dimension (emotional impact), and the production of vivid mental images (Fitzgerald & Green, 2017). Transportation is a key mechanism that also explains the attitudinal impact of narrative messages.

Counterarguing is defined as “the generation of thoughts that explicitly refute a message’s intended persuasive theme” (Niederdeppe et al., 2012, p. 758). This process helps to understand why people who engage with a narrative or identify with its characters are more easily persuaded (Bilandzic & Busselle, 2013; Fitzgerald & Green, 2017; Moyer-Gusé, 2008; Slater & Rouner, 2002). When people are involved in a narrative, their capacity or motivation to counterargue is diminished, thus making it difficult for them to critically analyze the attitudinal information present in the story (Green & Brock, 2000; Green & Sestir, 2017). It is also proposed that identification with the characters and counterarguing are incompatible responses, since when an individual identifies with a character, they (momentarily) acquire (merge with) their identity, thus resulting in a temporary loss of self-awareness that hinders critical reception of the message (Kaufman & Libby, 2012). From this, it can be concluded that involvement or connection with the narrative and its characters and counterarguing are incompatible processes.

Previous research on the role of counterarguing in narrative persuasion processes has been carried out especially in the entertainment-education field (de Graaf & van Leeuwen, 2017; Moyer-Gusé & Dale, 2017). In that context, complex audiovisual messages are used, incorporating attitudinal proposals that have clear benefits for individuals, such as preventing diseases by following medical recommendations (Moyer-Gusé et al., 2011; Moyer-Gusé & Nabi, 2010). The aim of this work is to provide evidence on the role of counterarguing as a secondary mediator, dependent, in turn, on the processes of identification and narrative transportation. However, unlike in

Figure 1. Hypothesized parallel-serial moderated mediation model (H2).

previous studies, we use testimonial narrative messages incorporating an attitudinal proposal without direct benefits for individuals (i.e., improving attitudes towards a migrant group).

Overview and Hypotheses

This study aims to advance knowledge about narrative persuasive processes and their application to reducing prejudice towards stigmatized immigrants in two ways: first, by testing how the combination of empathy (conceived of as an exposure condition) and similarity to the protagonist significantly increases identification and narrative transportation, and second, by analyzing the role of identification with the protagonist, narrative transportation, and counterarguing as mediators acting in sequence, as well as their indirect effect on improving attitudes towards the stigmatized outgroup and reducing threat perception.

To verify our theoretical model (see Figure 1), two experiments were carried out in two different contexts (Spain and the Netherlands). Both experiments used short, written, testimonial first-person messages with a stigmatized immigrant as the protagonist. A similar design and procedure were used in both studies, experimentally manipulating empathy (conceived of as an exposure condition) and similarity to the participants in terms of social identity. We assume that similarity can increase identification with the protagonist and narrative transportation, especially when a state of empathetic reception is activated before exposure to a narrative whose protagonist is a

stigmatized immigrant. Therefore, our first prediction is that the effect of similarity on identification and narrative transportation will be moderated by the induction of empathy before reading a testimonial message.

H1: Similarity will increase identification (H1a) and narrative transportation (H1b) especially when a state of empathy (vs. an objective or distanced perspective) is induced in the participants immediately before reading a narrative message whose protagonist is a stigmatized immigrant.

We consider that, by activating a psychological state that predisposes individuals to empathize with the protagonist of a testimonial narrative with high similarity to the audience, an improvement in attitudes towards the outgroup and a reduction in threat perception will occur, as long as the mediating processes that facilitate an engaged reception are activated. In this context, this study also applies a parallel-serial moderated mediation model, to estimate the conditional indirect effect of similarity (in the empathetic exposure condition but not in the objective or distanced condition) on attitudes toward the outgroup and on threat perception through identification and narrative transportation (as primary mediators) and counterarguing (as a secondary mediator).

H2: Exposure to a narrative whose protagonist is an immigrant showing high (vs. low)

similarity to the audience will increase identification and narrative transportation, and this, in turn, will reduce counterarguing, thus leading to a more positive attitude towards the outgroup (H2a) and lower threat perception (H2b), and this indirect effect will occur in the empathetic condition but not in the objective condition.

Study 1

Method

Design and participants. An online experiment was carried out using Qualtrics to access a panel of 420 people of Spanish origin and whose parents were also Spanish.^{2,3} Sex and age quotas were set to access a representative sample of the Spanish population (49.8% men and 50.2% women; $M_{\text{age}} = 40.44$ years, $SD = 12.50$, range: 18–67 years).

The questionnaire used included three blocks: pretest measures, experimental manipulation, and posttest measures. Sociodemographic variables, level of contact with Moroccan immigrants (1 = *not at all*, 5 = *very much*; $M = 2.27$, $SD = 1.03$), and political self-positioning (0 = *left*, 10 = *right*; $M = 4.33$, $SD = 2.45$) were the pretest measures. Having completed this block of questions, participants were randomized to four experimental treatments according to a 2 (exposure condition: empathy vs. objective and distant reception) \times 2 (similarity: high vs. low) between-subjects factorial design. It must be noted that the two experimental manipulations were organized in a temporal sequence. First, participants were randomly assigned to two different exposure conditions, with half of them receiving instructions to induce empathy with the protagonist of the narrative, while the other half received instructions to induce objective and distanced reception. These instructions were displayed on the screen for 25 seconds. After that, participants read a first-person narrative whose protagonist was a stigmatized immigrant (with high vs. low similarity to the audience). After reading the narrative, posttest measures were presented, which included questions to verify the efficacy of the two experimental manipulations, the

mediating variables (identification with the protagonist, narrative transportation, and counterarguing), and the dependent variables (threat perception and attitude towards immigrants of Moroccan origin).

Independent variables and stimulus materials. To manipulate empathy as an exposure condition (empathy with the protagonist vs. objective and distant reception), instructions used in previous studies were applied (Batson, Polycarpou, et al., 1997; Wojcieszak & Kim, 2016). Instructions to induce empathy with the protagonist of the narrative were as follows:

You are going to read a short story in which a person shares their experiences related to their life in Spain. While reading it, try to put yourself in that person's place and imagine how they feel about the events they describe. Try to experience the emotional impact of the situations that are narrated.

Instructions to induce an objective and distant reception were as follows:

You are going to read a short story in which a person shares their experiences related to their life in Spain. While reading it, try to maintain an objective perspective on the facts that the person describes in the narrative.

To contrast the effectiveness of the manipulations, the following items were included: "While reading the story, I tried to put myself in the place of the protagonist and feel the same emotions" and "I tried to stay objective and distant with respect to the story being told" (1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*).

Using testimonies from websites of immigrant support organizations as reference examples, a first-person narrative was constructed in which a Moroccan immigrant (one of the most stigmatized groups in Spain) recounted their experiences since arriving in Spain. In the narrative, Sa'id (a very popular Moroccan name) alluded to different facts and feelings related to

his migration process and life in Spain, and described his point of view on different aspects such as discrimination and labor exploitation suffered by immigrants. The message had the underlying persuasive goal of reducing rejection towards, and perceived threat from, Moroccan immigrants in Spain.

Two versions of the testimonial message with high (476 words) and low (485 words) similarity to the protagonist were created. To manipulate similarity to the protagonist of the narrative, various features were included (to reinforce this effect; M. Kim et al., 2016): the feeling of belonging (“Above all I feel Spanish” vs. “Moroccan”); having many (vs. some) Spanish friends; spending weekends with Spanish (vs. Moroccan) friends; having a Spanish (vs. Moroccan) favorite dish; using the Spanish (vs. Arabic) language; reading Spanish (vs. Moroccan) newspapers; and identifying with the Spanish (vs. Moroccan) culture. Three items were included to measure perceived similarity with the protagonist of the testimonial message: “Sa’id has many things in common with the people from Spain”; “To what extent you consider that you have things in common with Sa’id?”; and “To what extent you consider that he is like you?” (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *very much*); items composed a reliable scale ($\alpha = .76$).

A pilot study ($N = 150$) was carried out to check the validity of the experimental manipulation of similarity to the protagonist. As expected, participants who read the high-similarity narrative scored significantly higher on perceived similarity than those who read the narrative designed to stimulate low similarity. Furthermore, both versions of the message were comparably valued regarding perceptions of clarity and understanding, credibility, interest, and realism.

Measures

Identification with the protagonist. Identification was assessed using an 11-item scale (Igartua & Barrios, 2012) measuring the degree of identification with a specific character (e.g., “I felt as if I were Sa’id”; 1 = *not at all*, 5 = *very much*; $\alpha = .92$, $M = 3.10$, $SD = 0.81$).

Narrative transportation. Narrative transportation was evaluated using the Transportation Scale-Short Form (Appel et al., 2015), which consists of five items (e.g., “I was mentally involved in the narrative while reading it”; 1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*; $\alpha = .85$, $M = 4.64$, $SD = 1.24$).

Counterarguing. A scale consisting of three items created from the Counterarguing Scale by Moyer-Gusé and Nabi (2010), adapted later by Igartua and Vega (2016), was used (“While reading the narrative, I thought that I did not agree with some of the things said by Sa’id”; 1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*; $\alpha = .75$, $M = 3.47$, $SD = 1.35$).

Attitudes towards Moroccan immigrants. Attitudes towards Moroccan immigrants were evaluated using a feelings thermometer (Wojcieszak et al., 2020) from 0 to 100: “Please indicate how you feel about immigrants from Morocco” (0 = *very cold feelings*, 100 = *very warm feelings*; $M = 52.72$, $SD = 26.12$).

Perceived threat from Moroccan immigrants. Perceived threat from Moroccan immigrants was evaluated using a scale comprising six items (Navas et al., 2012), with the general stem: “To what extent do you feel that, because of Moroccan immigrants, the following services are in danger?” (e.g., “Access to the health system, for example, availability of doctors, ease of receiving necessary care in the hospital”; 1 = *not at all*, 5 = *very much*; $\alpha = .92$, $M = 2.56$, $SD = 1.11$).

Results

Preliminary analysis. Randomization was successful: conditions did not differ significantly on gender, $\chi^2(3, N = 420) = 0.02$, $p = .999$; age, $F(3, 416) = 0.35$, $p = .786$; political self-positioning, $F(3, 416) = 0.81$, $p = .488$; and direct contact with Moroccan immigrants, $F(3, 416) = 1.68$, $p = .169$.

Second, effectiveness of the experimental manipulation of similarity to the protagonist and empathy was verified. An independent-samples

t test found that participants who read the high-similarity testimonial considered that Sa'id was similar to them ($M = 4.95, SD = 1.30$) to a significantly greater extent than participants who read the low-similarity testimonial ($M = 3.97, SD = 1.39$); $t(418) = -7.44, p = .000$. The experimental manipulation of empathy was also effective. Participants in the empathetic condition showed a greater degree of agreement with the statement "While reading the story, I tried to put myself in the place of the protagonist and feel the same emotions" ($M = 5.83, SD = 1.94$) than participants in the objective and distant reception condition ($M = 4.83, SD = 1.47$); $t(418) = -7.65, p = .000$. Furthermore, participants in the objective and distant reception condition showed a higher degree of agreement with the statement "I tried to stay objective and distant with respect to the story being told" ($M = 5.14, SD = 1.41$) than participants assigned to the empathetic condition ($M = 4.25, SD = 1.93$); $t(418) = 5.35, p = .000$.

Effect of similarity and empathy on identification and narrative transportation (H1). Hypothesis 1 proposed an interaction effect of similarity of the audience with the protagonist and of empathy on identification (H1a) and narrative transportation (H1b). In this case, we advanced that the effect of similarity on identification and narrative transportation would be moderated by the induction of empathy before reading a testimonial message. Analysis of variance (ANOVA) revealed that both empathy and similarity significantly influenced identification with the protagonist, $F_{\text{empathy}}(1, 416) = 23.18, p < .001, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .05$; $F_{\text{similarity}}(1, 416) = 12.30, p < .001, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .03$; and narrative transportation, $F_{\text{empathy}}(1, 416) = 16.08, p < .001, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .04$; $F_{\text{similarity}}(1, 416) = 15.44, p < .001, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .04$. Results showed that similarity of the audience with the protagonist induced greater identification ($M_{\text{high}} = 3.24, SE = 0.05$; $M_{\text{low}} = 2.97, SE = 0.05$) and greater narrative transportation ($M_{\text{high}} = 4.87, SE = 0.08$; $M_{\text{low}} = 4.41, SE = 0.08$). Moreover, narrative messages in the empathetic condition led to significantly greater identification and narrative transportation than parallel messages received in an objective

exposure condition (identification: $M_{\text{empathetic}} = 3.29, SE = 0.05$; $M_{\text{objective}} = 2.91, SE = 0.05$; transportation: $M_{\text{empathetic}} = 4.88, SE = 0.08$; $M_{\text{objective}} = 4.41, SE = 0.08$). However, no significant interaction effects were observed; identification: $F_{\text{Similarity} \times \text{Empathy}}(1, 416) = 0.59, p = .441$; transportation: $F_{\text{Similarity} \times \text{Empathy}}(1, 416) = 0.26, p = .610$. This means that the effect of similarity on identification and narrative transportation was not moderated by empathy, indicating that H1 was not supported (see Figure 2).

Indirect effects of similarity and empathy on outgroup attitudes and perceived threat (H2). Hypothesis 2 anticipated a parallel-serial moderated mediation model to test the conditional indirect effect of similarity on attitude towards the outgroup (H2a) and threat perception (H2b) through identification and narrative transportation (as primary mediators) and counterarguing (as a secondary mediator), expecting that this indirect effect would only occur in the empathetic condition. However, since there was not a significant interaction effect between similarity and exposure condition, it was not feasible to test this model. As an alternative, a parallel-serial mediation model was estimated in order to analyze the indirect effect of each independent variable (similarity and empathy) on both outcome variables. In this way, we were able to tease apart the indirect effects of exposure condition (empathy manipulation) and of protagonist similarity, and contrast the mediating role of identification, narrative transportation, and counterarguing.

To test this alternative model, the PROCESS macro for SPSS was used (Model 80; 10,000 bootstrapping samples to generate 95% confidence intervals by the percentile method; Hayes, 2018). We estimated the specific indirect effect from each condition (e.g., similarity) while controlling for the other condition (e.g., empathy as exposure condition), including the three mediators as it had been hypothesized: identification and narrative transportation (as primary mediators) and counterarguing (as a secondary mediator). It was observed that both similarity to the protagonist and empathy increased identification

Figure 2. ANOVA results: Effects of empathy as exposure condition and audience–character similarity on identification and narrative transportation (H1).

(a) Study 1: Spain ($N = 420$); (b) Study 2: The Netherlands ($N = 420$).

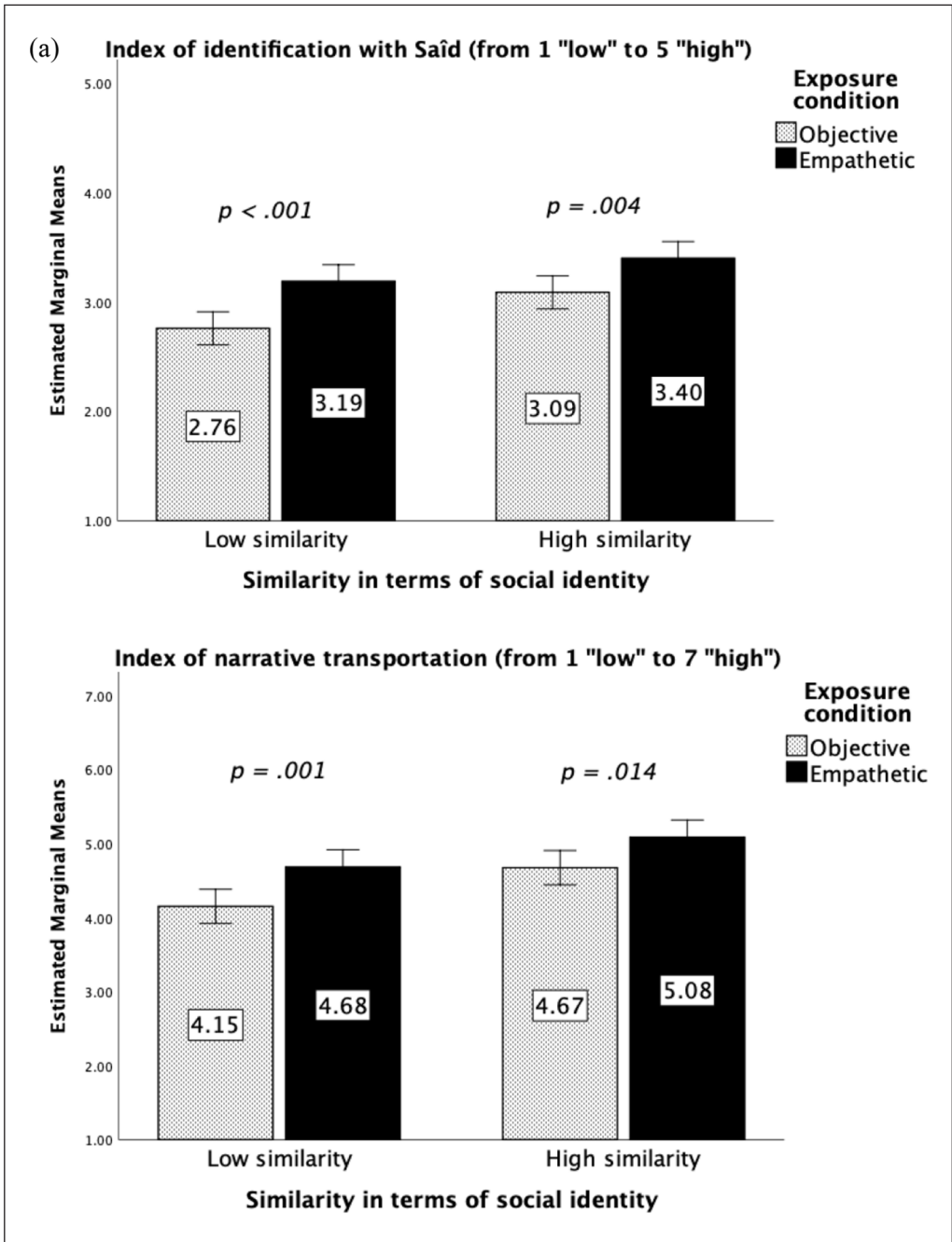
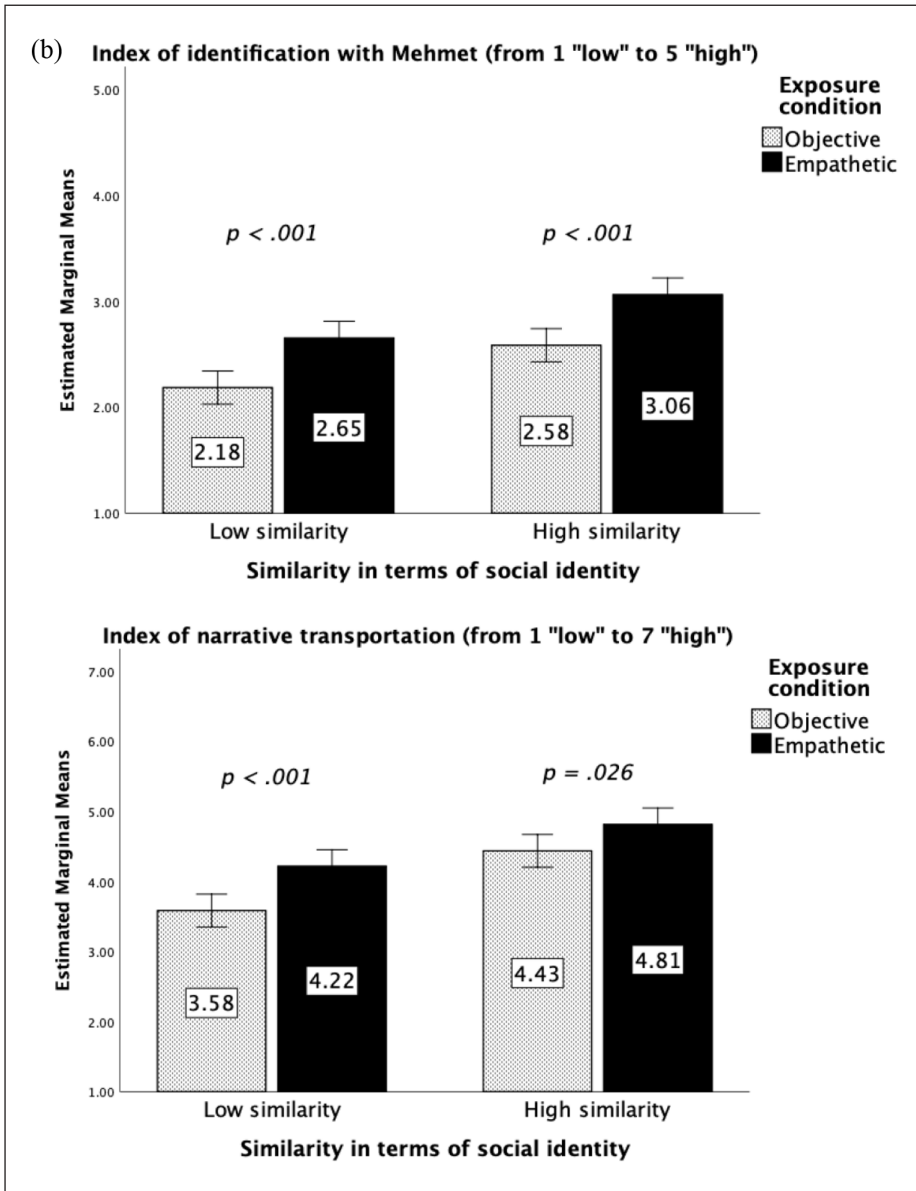


Figure 2. (Continued)



Note. Figures show p values for simple effects analysis of empathy as exposure condition within each level of similarity. Error bars represent 95% CI.

($B_{\text{similarity}} = 0.26, SE = 0.07, p < .001$; $B_{\text{empathy}} = 0.37, SE = 0.07, p < .001$) and narrative transportation ($B_{\text{similarity}} = 0.46, SE = 0.11, p < .001$; $B_{\text{empathy}} = 0.47, SE = 0.11, p < .001$), which in turn reduced counterarguing ($B_{\text{identification}} = -0.39, SE = 0.13, p = .004$; $B_{\text{transportation}} = -0.22,$

$SE = 0.09, p = .014$). Furthermore, the reduction of counterarguing was associated with a more positive attitude towards the outgroup ($B_{\text{counterarguing}} = -5.95, SE = 0.85, p < .001$) and a lesser threat perception ($B_{\text{counterarguing}} = 0.31, SE = 0.04, p < .001$; see Figure 3a and Table 1a).

Figure 3. Results of the mediation analysis (H2).

(a) Study 1: Spain ($N = 420$); (b) Study 2: The Netherlands ($N = 420$).

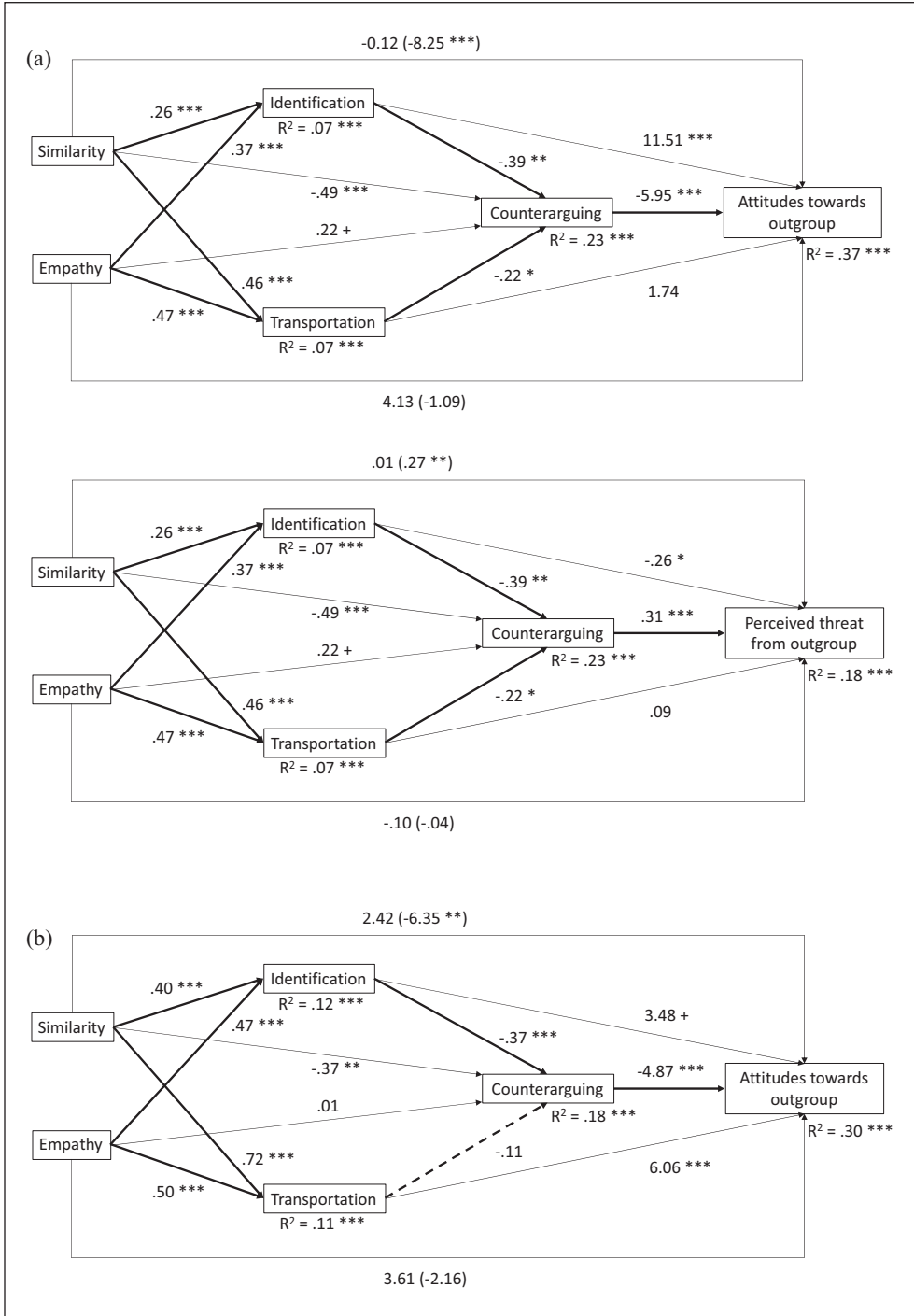
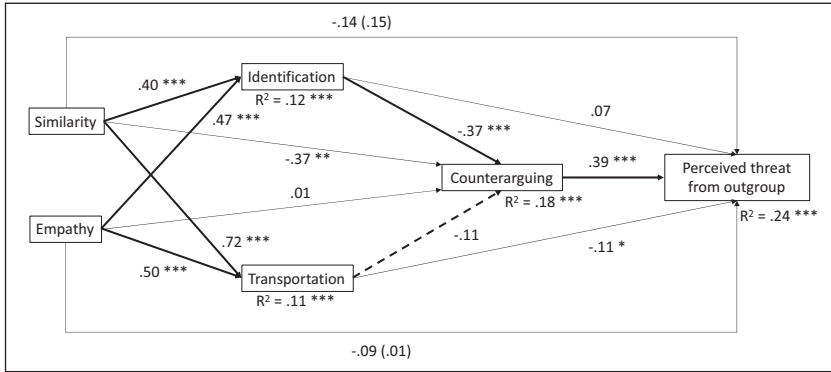


Figure 3. (Continued)



Note. Figures show nonstandardized regression coefficients (B). Coefficients of the direct effects are shown in parentheses. Thicker lines represent the hypothesized model effects; dashed lines represent nonsignificant coefficients in the hypothesized model. +*p* < .10. **p* < .05. ***p* < .01. ****p* < .001.

Table 1. Specific indirect effects of similarity and empathy on outgroup attitudes and perceived threat from immigrants (H2)

(a) Study 1: Spain (*N* = 420)

Specific indirect effects (mediators)	Effect	Boot <i>SE</i>	Boot 95% CI
Similarity → Identification → Outgroup attitudes	3.11	1.14	[1.13, 5.59]
Similarity → Transportation → Outgroup attitudes	0.80	0.79	[-0.64, 2.53]
Similarity → Counterarguing → Outgroup attitudes	2.97	0.86	[1.41, 4.79]
Similarity → Identification → Counterarguing → Outgroup attitudes (H2a)	0.63	0.33	[0.12, 1.40]
Similarity → Transportation → Counterarguing → Outgroup attitudes (H2a)	0.61	0.31	[0.08, 1.33]
Empathy → Identification → Outgroup attitudes	4.26	1.33	[1.95, 7.15]
Empathy → Transportation → Outgroup attitudes	0.82	0.80	[-0.67, 2.48]
Empathy → Counterarguing → Outgroup attitudes	-1.33	0.75	[-2.87, 0.07]
Empathy → Identification → Counterarguing → Outgroup attitudes (H2a)	0.87	0.39	[0.22, 1.75]
Empathy → Transportation → Counterarguing → Outgroup attitudes (H2a)	0.62	0.33	[0.08, 1.38]
Similarity → Identification → Perceived threat	-0.07	0.04	[-0.16, -0.01]
Similarity → Transportation → Perceived threat	0.04	0.04	[-0.03, 0.13]
Similarity → Counterarguing → Perceived threat	-0.15	0.05	[-0.26, -0.08]
Similarity → Identification → Counterarguing → Perceived threat (H2b)	-0.03	0.02	[-0.08, -0.01]
Similarity → Transportation → Counterarguing → Perceived threat (H2b)	-0.03	0.01	[-0.06, -0.01]
Empathy → Identification → Perceived threat	-0.10	0.05	[-0.21, -0.01]
Empathy → Transportation → Perceived threat	0.05	0.04	[-0.03, 0.13]
Empathy → Counterarguing → Perceived threat	0.07	0.04	[-0.01, 0.15]
Empathy → Identification → Counterarguing → Perceived threat (H2b)	-0.05	0.02	[-0.09, -0.01]
Empathy → Transportation → Counterarguing → Perceived threat (H2b)	-0.03	0.01	[-0.07, -0.01]

(Continued)

Table 1. (Continued)

Specific indirect effects (mediators)	Effect	Boot <i>SE</i>	Boot 95% CI
(b) Study 2: The Netherlands (<i>N</i> = 420)			
Similarity → Identification → Outgroup attitudes	1.40	0.91	[-0.26, 3.35]
Similarity → Transportation → Outgroup attitudes	4.38	1.17	[2.25, 6.86]
Similarity → Counterarguing → Outgroup attitudes	1.84	0.72	[0.59, 3.43]
Similarity → Identification → Counterarguing → Outgroup attitudes (H2a)	0.74	0.33	[0.21, 1.49]
Similarity → Transportation → Counterarguing → Outgroup attitudes (H2a)	0.41	0.32	[-0.17, 1.12]
Empathy → Identification → Outgroup attitudes	1.64	1.05	[-0.31, 3.85]
Empathy → Transportation → Outgroup attitudes	3.07	0.94	[1.40, 5.08]
Empathy → Counterarguing → Outgroup attitudes	-0.07	0.59	[-1.18, 1.17]
Empathy → Identification → Counterarguing → Outgroup attitudes (H2a)	0.86	0.38	[0.26, 1.71]
Empathy → Transportation → Counterarguing → Outgroup attitudes (H2a)	0.29	0.23	[-0.12, 0.78]
Similarity → Identification → Perceived threat	0.03	0.04	[-0.04, 0.11]
Similarity → Transportation → Perceived threat	-0.08	0.05	[-0.18, 0.01]
Similarity → Counterarguing → Perceived threat	-0.15	0.04	[-0.25, -0.07]
Similarity → Identification → Counterarguing → Perceived threat (H2b)	-0.06	0.02	[-0.11, -0.02]
Similarity → Transportation → Counterarguing → Perceived threat (H2b)	-0.03	0.02	[-0.09, 0.01]
Empathy → Identification → Perceived threat	0.03	0.05	[-0.05, 0.13]
Empathy → Transportation → Perceived threat	-0.06	0.03	[-0.13, 0.01]
Empathy → Counterarguing → Perceived threat	0.01	0.05	[-0.08, 0.10]
Empathy → Identification → Counterarguing → Perceived threat (H2b)	-0.07	0.03	[-0.13, -0.02]
Empathy → Transportation → Counterarguing → Perceived threat (H2b)	-0.02	0.02	[-0.06, 0.01]

Note. Mediation models with PROCESS (Model 80). Both independent variables were dummy-coded: high similarity and empathy exposure conditions were coded = 1, and low similarity and objective exposure conditions were coded = 0. Significant specific indirect effects are boldfaced.

For both dependent variables, we found statistically significant specific indirect effects of similarity through the serial mediation of identification and counterarguing (attitudes toward the outgroup: Effect = 0.63, *SE* = 0.33, 95% CI [0.12, 1.40]; threat perception: Effect = -0.03, *SE* = 0.02, 95% CI [-0.06, -0.01]) and through the serial mediation of narrative transportation and counterarguing (attitudes toward the outgroup: Effect = 0.61, *SE* = 0.32, 95% CI [0.08, 1.33]; threat perception: Effect = -0.03, *SE* = 0.02, 95% CI [-0.07, -0.01]). Parallel results emerged

for the indirect effect of exposure condition. Empathy improved outgroup attitudes and reduced threat perception through the serial mediation of identification and counterarguing (attitudes toward the outgroup: Effect = 0.87, *SE* = 0.39, 95% CI [0.22, 1.75]; threat perception: Effect = -0.05, *SE* = 0.02, 95% CI [-0.09, -0.01]) and through the serial mediation of narrative transportation and counterarguing (attitudes toward the outgroup: Effect = 0.62, *SE* = 0.33, 95% CI [0.08, 1.38]; threat perception: Effect = -0.03, *SE* = 0.02, 95% CI [-0.07, -0.01]).

Conclusions

This first study showed that similarity of the narrative protagonist to the audience and empathy increased identification and narrative transportation for a message whose protagonist belongs to a highly stigmatized group. Although a significant interaction effect between similarity and empathy was not found, the results obtained are interesting because they suggest that the effects of empathy and similarity are additive. Moreover, identification and narrative transportation acted as primary mediating mechanisms that were associated with less counterarguing. Finally, counterarguing acted as a secondary mediating mechanism, and its reduction was associated with more positive attitudes towards the outgroup and lower threat perception.

The next study will try to replicate the results obtained in Study 1 but slightly varying some characteristics of the message (e.g., with a protagonist belonging to a different immigrant group) and the context (the study was carried out in a different European country). Thus, we used an approach based on replication with minimal variations, or close replication (Lindsay & Ehrenberg, 1993); this is a common practice in communication experimental studies (Boyle & Schmierbach, 2015) and, in particular, in narrative persuasion research (e.g., Walter & Cohen, 2019).

Study 2

Methods

The experiment was carried out using Qualtrics to access a panel of 420 people of Dutch origin and whose parents were also Dutch. Sex and age quotas were set to access a representative sample of the population of the Netherlands (49.8% men and 50.2% women; $M_{\text{age}} = 42.63$ years, $SD = 13.79$, range: 18–75 years).

A 2×2 between-subjects factorial design was used, again manipulating empathy as an exposure condition and similarity to the protagonist of the narrative (Mehmet, an immigrant of Turkish origin). As in Study 1, various aspects were taken into account to reinforce the similarity to the

protagonist of the narrative (e.g., the character saying that they felt Dutch vs. Turkish).

The same measures as in Study 1 were used, but adapted to the Dutch context and focused on immigration from Turkey. The pretest measures included direct contact with Turkish immigrants (1 = *not at all*, 5 = *very much*; $M = 1.99$, $SD = 0.87$) and political self-positioning (0 = *left*, 10 = *right*; $M = 5.11$, $SD = 2.28$). Immediately after the experimental manipulations, participants completed the following measures: perceived similarity ($\alpha = .79$; $M = 3.65$, $SD = 1.39$), identification with the protagonist ($\alpha = .92$; $M = 2.62$, $SD = 0.87$), narrative transportation ($\alpha = .86$; $M = 4.26$, $SD = 1.29$), counterarguing ($\alpha = .72$; $M = 3.52$, $SD = 1.25$), attitudes towards Turkish immigrants ($M = 55.06$, $SD = 23.84$), and perceived threat from Turkish immigrants ($\alpha = .89$; $M = 2.56$, $SD = 1.05$).

Results

Randomization was successful: the conditions did not differ significantly on sociodemographic variables (gender, age, and ideology), or in terms of direct contact with Turkish immigrants (in all cases, $p > .800$). Likewise, the experimental manipulations of similarity to the protagonist and of empathy were effective (in all tests, $p = .000$).

Results of the ANOVA showed that both empathy and similarity significantly influenced identification with the protagonist, $F_{\text{empathy}}(1, 416) = 35.09$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .08$; $F_{\text{similarity}}(1, 416) = 25.66$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .06$; and narrative transportation, $F_{\text{empathy}}(1, 416) = 18.00$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .04$; $F_{\text{similarity}}(1, 416) = 36.78$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .08$. No significant interaction effects were found: identification: $F_{\text{Empathy} \times \text{Similarity}}(1, 416) = 0.00$, $p = .952$; transportation: $F_{\text{Empathy} \times \text{Similarity}}(1, 416) = 1.16$, $p = .281$. As in Study 1, similarity increased identification ($M_{\text{high}} = 2.82$, $SE = 0.05$; $M_{\text{low}} = 2.41$, $SE = 0.05$) and narrative transportation ($M_{\text{high}} = 4.62$, $SE = 0.08$; $M_{\text{low}} = 3.90$, $SE = 0.08$). Replicating Study 1, those who read the narrative message in the empathetic condition

reported greater identification and narrative transportation than those who read the testimonial in the objective exposure condition (identification: $M_{\text{empathetic}} = 2.85$, $SE = 0.05$; $M_{\text{objective}} = 2.38$, $SE = 0.05$; transportation: $M_{\text{empathetic}} = 4.51$, $SE = 0.08$; $M_{\text{objective}} = 4.00$, $SE = 0.08$).

Following the same analytical strategy as in Study 1, the PROCESS macro for SPSS was used (Model 80; see Figure 3b and Table 1b). Replicating the previous study, we found statistically significant specific indirect effects of similarity through the serial mediation of identification and counterarguing on both dependent variables (attitudes toward the outgroup: Effect = 0.74, $SE = 0.33$, 95% CI [0.22, 1.49]; threat perception: Effect = -0.06, $SE = 0.02$, 95% CI [-0.11, -0.02]). However, specific indirect effects of similarity through narrative transportation and counterarguing were not statistically significant (attitudes toward the outgroup: Effect = 0.41, $SE = 0.32$, 95% CI [-0.17, 1.12]; threat perception: Effect = -0.03, $SE = 0.03$, 95% CI [-0.09, 0.01]). Comparable results emerged for the specific indirect effects of exposure condition. Empathy improved outgroup attitudes and decreased threat perception through the serial mediation of identification and counterarguing (attitudes toward the outgroup: Effect = 0.87, $SE = 0.38$, 95% CI [0.26, 1.72]; threat perception: Effect = -0.07, $SE = 0.03$, 95% CI [-0.13, -0.02]), but not through the serial mediation of narrative transportation and counterarguing (attitudes toward the outgroup: Effect = 0.29, $SE = 0.23$, 95% CI [-0.12, 0.79]; threat perception: Effect = -0.02, $SE = 0.02$, 95% CI [-0.06, 0.01]).

Conclusions

The results of Study 2 are broadly consistent with those obtained in Study 1. Working with a different immigrant collective (Turkish citizens) in a different European context (the Netherlands), it was again verified that similarity to the protagonist and empathy increase identification and narrative transportation. Given that the effect of similarity was not moderated by exposure

condition (empathy manipulation), these results reinforce the idea that the effects of similarity and empathy are additive. In addition, partially consistent with H2, a serial mediation process was observed through an increase in identification and a reduction in counterarguing that explain the improvement in attitudes towards the outgroup and the reduction in threat perception. However, this study does not confirm the hypothesized serial mediation process through narrative transportation and counterarguing; although each of these processes individually plays a relevant mediating role, they do not do it in a consistent way.

General Discussion

Most research on the effects of testimonial messages has focused on attitudinal recommendations with clear advantages for the audience (e.g., quitting smoking reduces health problems; M. Kim, 2019). However, few works have addressed the role of personal narratives with a stigmatized character as the protagonist and with the aim of improving intergroup attitudes (e.g., Igartua et al., 2019; Wojcieszak & Kim, 2016). The present work makes a significant contribution to this field and clarifies three important issues. First, it is confirmed that it is possible to increase identification as well as narrative transportation by using messages whose protagonists present themselves as similar to the audience. Second, identification and narrative transportation also increase when such messages are received in an exposure condition that fosters empathy with the stigmatized character. Third, a serial mediation process is confirmed that allows us to conclude that identification and, to a lesser extent, narrative transportation reduce counterarguing, which, in turn, is associated with a more positive attitude and lower threat perception from the outgroup.

The present study builds on previous research on the role of narrative identification and transportation as mechanisms responsible for the attitudinal impact of narrative messages (Tal-Or & Cohen, 2015). Research in this field has followed two complementary directions. On the one hand,

it has focused on determining which characteristics of narrative messages are relevant to increase both of these psychological processes (Tukachinsky, 2014). On the other hand, theoretical reflections have focused on understanding why people who identify with the characters or who engage with the stories modify their attitudes (Bilandzic & Busselle, 2013).

In relation to the first point, this work makes two significant contributions. First, we have argued that, when messages focus on stigmatized protagonists who, by default, elicit greater rejection (Chung & Slater, 2013; Igartua & Frutos, 2017), more powerful narrative resources are necessary to create affective and cognitive ties. It was thus proposed that similarity based on social identity constitutes an especially relevant dimension of similarity in this area (prejudice reduction through narrative messages), where social identity and social categorization processes become very important (Tajfel, 1982; Turner, 1985). Given that ingroup–outgroup categorization is context-dependent (Turner et al., 1987), if certain cues about the social identity of the protagonist in a message are activated (highlighting traits they share with the audience), the protagonist could be seen as a member of the ingroup, thereby increasing identification and narrative transportation. However, the main prediction of our work was that empathy as an exposure condition would help to increase the effect of similarity on identification and narrative transportation. The results of both studies do not corroborate the moderating effect of empathy on the relationship between similarity and identification and narrative transportation. What our results confirm is that empathy does exert a significant effect on both mechanisms, independent of the effect of similarity. In summary, the pattern found in both studies suggests that the effects of similarity and empathy are additive.

Our research complements the results of previous studies that have yielded inconclusive results on the effects of similarity and empathy (Batson, Sager, et al., 1997; van den Hende et al., 2012; Wojcieszak & Kim, 2016). Batson, Sager, et al. (1997) observed main effects of empathy

but did not find independent effects of similarity, nor did they find that empathy interacted with demographic similarity (although they did not evaluate intergroup attitudes but helping behavior). Van den Hende et al. (2012, Study 2) manipulated objective similarity (based on the geographical origin of the protagonist), finding that a highly dissimilar protagonist inhibited reader narrative transportation, but this effect was mitigated using explicit instructions to induce empathy. Finally, Wojcieszak and Kim (2016) pointed out that empathy moderated the effect of evidence type (numerical vs. narrative) on outgroup acceptance, although they did not manipulate similarity to the protagonist.

We consider that our work makes an original contribution by conceiving empathy as an exposure condition, in contrast to previous works where empathy was considered as a strategy to improve intergroup attitudes (e.g., Batson et al., 1991; Batson, Polycarpou, et al., 1997) or a mechanism to explain the effect of intergroup contact on reducing prejudice (e.g., Dovidio et al., 2010; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2008). In addition, in research on narrative persuasion, studies on the influence of elements or internal attributes of the message (e.g., formal literary characteristics such as the narrative voice) are more frequent than analyses of external elements that are independent of the message (for a review, see Dahlstrom et al., 2017). In this context, the expression “exposure condition” was coined by Tukachinsky (2014) and refers to an external element of the message that can influence its processing, thus evoking a particular psychological state in which people receive the message and which facilitates an engaged reception. Tukachinsky’s meta-analysis review on the “effectiveness of experimental manipulations of transportation, immersion, spatial presence, character identification, and perceived similarity” (p. 1) alludes to procedures that seek to create exposure conditions that reduce narrative transportation (e.g., through distraction), but only identifies one work conceiving empathy as an exposure condition (albeit using video clips from commercial films whose protagonists did not belong to stigmatized groups as stimuli; Sestir &

Green, 2010), despite the fact that empathy is a central construct in media reception processes—empathy allows us to understand how emotional reactions to narrative messages are produced (Davis et al., 1987) and also how affective dispositions towards message characters are formed (Raney, 2003).

A key element to understand how persuasive influence occurs through narrative messages is the analysis of explanatory mechanisms (Bilandzic & Busselle, 2013). The role of counterarguing has been highlighted by several theoretical models (Green & Brock, 2000; Moyer-Gusé, 2008; Slater & Rouner, 2002). The experience of absorption in the narrative world and the experience of merging with the protagonist generate a state of temporary involvement in the message that is incompatible with a state of criticism or resistance to it.

The results of the present work corroborate this approach, since it was verified that both identification and transportation were associated with a reduction in counterarguing, which in turn was associated with a more positive attitude towards the outgroup and a lower threat perception. The result is robust in the case of serial mediation through identification and counterarguing, as observed in both experiments and for both dependent variables considered. However, serial mediation through transportation and counterarguing was only significant in one of the experiments (Study 1). Nevertheless, our work supports theoretical proposals indicating that the attitudinal impact of a narrative message is due to the inhibition of critical reflection processes when there is an involved reception (Green & Sestir, 2017; Moyer-Gusé & Dale, 2017).

This work has several limitations requiring attention and additional research. First is the lack of a control condition (one without receiving instructions to manipulate empathy) that would have allowed us to analyze how participants behave under natural circumstances. The objective of the study was to test how the manipulation of exposure condition (individuals' mindset) before reading a message inducing empathy would increase the effect of similarity with the

protagonist on identification with them as well as narrative transportation. In addition, one must consider that the protagonist of the message was an immigrant belonging to a highly stigmatized group. It has been found that stigmatized characters induce less perspective-taking than nonstigmatized ones (Chung & Slater, 2013). Therefore, it was not considered appropriate to include a control condition, but rather to work with two extreme levels of the independent variable (empathy vs. distancing), since this would increase the effect size and statistical power (Aberson, 2019; Lipsey, 1990). However, future studies should test how similarity influences identification and narrative transportation when participants do not receive prior instructions to manipulate their mindset and when the protagonist of the message is a member of a stigmatized group (e.g., an immigrant or refugee).

A second limitation of our work is related to the operationalization of similarity. The concept of similarity in terms of social identity is fundamental to this work, and we consider it to be an innovative contribution to research on narrative persuasion in which objective similarity has been manipulated only in demographic terms (age, gender, race, and group membership; Tukachinsky, 2014). However, since previous references to design the operationalization of similarity in terms of social identity were not available, we acknowledge that the experimental manipulation of similarity in terms of social identity may perhaps be problematic. In particular, it could be considered that our manipulation of similarity may be partially linked to acculturation orientations or strategies (Berry, 1992)—in the high-similarity condition, the protagonist could be manifesting integration (high identification with the culture of origin and also with the host culture) or assimilation (high identification with the host culture but low with the culture of origin), while in the low-similarity condition, the protagonist could be manifesting a separation strategy (high identification with the culture of origin but low with the host culture). In this sense, it is possible that our results are due to participants perceiving the protagonist as similar to themselves

(i.e., the immigrant in the high-similarity condition was perceived to be part of the same ingroup), or it could be that negative attitudes toward immigrants were based on the belief that the protagonist in the low-similarity condition was less invested in the host country (i.e., was unwilling to fully assimilate into the host country), in which case the results are less due to similarity and more to processes related to acculturation strategies. Moreover, it seems that our model predicts that prejudice and perceived threat may be reduced when immigrants adopt the host country's cultural practices. Therefore, in future research, it would be interesting to achieve a better operationalization of similarity in terms of social identity that does not generate doubts about what is being manipulated (similarity vs. acculturation strategies) and that, in addition, allows the proposed model to be confirmed in other stigmatized groups (such as other stigmatized immigrant groups, immigrants in general, or refugees). Future research may also benefit from considering how individual differences in psychological traits such as belief in a dangerous world (BDW) might predict whether the current model would be effective in reducing threat perceptions for an audience that is chronically concerned with physical safety threats (Kerry et al., 2020).

A third limitation of our work is related to the measurement of threat perception. In both studies, the scale developed by Navas et al. (2012) and composed of 13 items (four on symbolic threat and nine on realistic threat) was used. Due to the lack of an adapted and validated Dutch version of this scale, we decided to choose only six items: three related to symbolic threat and three related to realistic threat. To select the items, we considered the results of the factor analysis in the study by Navas et al. (2012), selecting those items that had the highest weights or factor loadings. This meant that an item related to the perception of threat from exposure to diseases (disease perception threats) was not selected, which could be relevant in our research because previous work indicates that immigrants can be perceived as posing disease threats (e.g.,

Faulkner et al., 2004; Rivera-Navarro et al., 2020). In any case, the scale used showed adequate internal consistency, and an exploratory factor analysis extracted a single factor that explained a similar percentage of variance in both countries.

The last limitation of this work is that we measured but did not experimentally manipulate the proposed mediators, which prevents us from drawing a firm conclusion regarding the proposed causal sequence (identification/transportation → counterarguing). This problem is present in other works that have tested mediational models in this field (e.g., Dale & Moyer-Gusé, 2020; Moyer-Gusé et al., 2019). Although temporal order is an important element to establish causal inference, it is also necessary to build a theoretical argument regarding the relationship between mediating mechanisms (Yanovitzky & Greene, 2009). We consider that our work does meet this requirement, as it relies on predictions derived from the main theoretical models of narrative persuasion. However, future research should use other methodological approaches to address such problems of causal inference (Pirlott & MacKinnon, 2016).

Despite these limitations, our work makes a relevant contribution to understanding how to increase the persuasive efficacy of testimonial messages. Although these constitute a less sophisticated form of narrative, they have great potential in the new communication ecosystem, and could be used in combination with more complex narrative approaches based on entertainment-education formats (e.g., Murrar & Brauer, 2018) as part of broader campaigns to reduce racism and xenophobia.

Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This research work was developed with the financial support from the Spanish Ministry of Science and Innovation to the project "Narrative Tools to Reduce Prejudice. Effects of Similarity, Imagined Contact, Empathy and Narrative Voice" (CSO2015-67611-P).

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Notes

1. When the audience is exposed to a testimonial message, they have the opportunity to consider a single idea or point of view; that is, they are exposed to a single persuasive message conveyed by the protagonist. On the other hand, in more elaborate narrative messages such as those involving several protagonists, it is likely that the different characters will express different ideas or points of view (which, on occasions, may also be contradictory), since this constitutes a key element to present conflict in a narrative. For example, in a multi-character narrative, there may be an overtly racist character who expresses their ideas about immigration, and another nonracist character who counter-argues or presents an alternative point of view. In this situation, the “final” message of the narrative may be more diluted than in a testimonial message in which the protagonist expresses a single idea or point of view, which facilitates the reception of the message by the audience.
2. All materials related to the online experiments (data set and syntax files, measures, and narrative messages) are available on the Open Science Framework (OSF; https://osf.io/sbv5t/?view_only=af229325f0404c25b7310f6410fe1f5b).
3. To determine sample size, an analysis was carried out with G*Power (Faul et al., 2009). Calculation of sample size depends on several factors such as type of design, effect size observed in previous studies (or in meta-analysis reviews), Type I error (α), and statistical power ($1 - \beta$; Aberson, 2019). Braddock and Dillard's (2016) meta-analysis was considered to obtain a measure of effect size. Thus, assuming an effect size of 0.17, an α value of .05, a power of .80, and a four-group design, G*Power indicated that a sample size of 384 participants would be necessary. For this reason, both studies were designed to achieve a sample of this size or slightly larger. Given that we had the resources to collect a larger sample, we decided to recruit 420 participants for each experiment (105 participants per condition). The study participants were recruited from an online panel maintained by Qualtrics and received compensation directly from this company. During the data collection

process, common quality control mechanisms were used in the online experiments (e.g., quality filter, stimulus message reading times, survey completion time, and the setting of forced-choice response on all questions in the survey), as agreed with Qualtrics beforehand.

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