

EXAMINING THE LIMITS OF A TARGET'S USE
OF IMAGINED CONTACT TO REDUCE PREJUDICE

By

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Abstract

The contemporary prejudice reduction strategy, Imagined Contact, has seen overwhelming success, particularly as the elaboration is increased. The current study proposes limitations of this strategy, highlighting (1) initial prejudice level and (2) the nature of the prejudice. We hypothesized that increasing the elaboration (and therefore vividness) of Imagined Contact increases disgust, which increases prejudice, among individuals with preexisting high levels of prejudice against obese individuals. Our results support predictions about disgust but do not translate to our liking measure. As prejudice against obese individuals is driven in part by disgust, a strategy that increases disgust must be examined more closely. We suggest future research consider other prejudice outcomes, such as avoidance. This study also proposed a target empowerment application of Imagined Contact, suggesting that the strategy is not restricted to third party interventions and future research should examine source effects.

Examining the Limits of a Target's Use of Imagined Contact to Reduce Prejudice

One of the great endeavors of social psychology is the search for strategies that reduce prejudice and improve intergroup relations. Perhaps the oldest and most researched strategy is intergroup contact. Singer (1948) and Stouffer (1949) examined the racial integration of combat groups during World War II, finding that White soldiers who experienced integrated combat had more positive racial attitudes. Similarly, interdependent White and Black seamen were found to have more positive interracial attitudes (Brophy, 1946). Examining the phenomenon closer, Deutsch and Collins (1950, 1951) studied the effects of apartment assignment on racial attitudes. They found that the White tenants placed in integrated housing showed less racial stereotyping and better racial attitudes, than those in segregated housing. They argued this was because the integrated tenants had more frequent and positive interracial contact.

However, researchers quickly learned that the positive effects of intergroup contact were dependent on the context of the contact. Sherif et al. (1961) explored this notion using young boys in summer camp. They created two groups, built their group identity separately, and then introduced intergroup conflict with competitive activities. They then provided chances for the two groups to have neutral intergroup contact, finding that it was not enough to improve relations. In fact, the neutral contact often increased bias. Relations between the groups improved only through cooperative activities focused on superordinate goals. Historically, intergroup contact through desegregation has also failed due to improper implementation through inattention to the context of the contact (Schofield & Eurich-Fulcer, 2001).

To account for these failings, Allport (1954, 1958) famously developed a version of the Contact Hypothesis that included four elements necessary for successful intergroup contact. In the contact situation, there must be equal status, intergroup cooperation, common goals, and authority support. To this day, extensive research has supported these claims, showing the reduction of bias in a multitude of minority groups after appropriate intergroup contact. Pettigrew and Tropp conducted a meta-analytic review showing that across 203 studies, intergroup contact that included the four critical elements outlined by the Contact Hypothesis was significantly related to decreased intergroup biases (2000). Thus, with a focus on context, intergroup contact has been extensively shown to improve intergroup relations.

The success of direct intergroup contact led to an intriguing theory: Imagined Contact. This indirect form of intergroup contact was first proposed in 2008 by Crisp et al. and then explored by Crisp and Turner (2009). This strategy involves imagining a positive interaction with an out-group member and has been shown to encourage positive behavior between groups and reduce prejudice. Husnu and Crisp (2010) showed that further elaboration of the Imagined Contact increases its effect through an increase in vividness. Though it is a relatively recent discovery, there have been over 70 studies on Imagined Contact. A meta-analysis by Miles and Crisp (2014) showed that this strategy is significantly successful in reducing intergroup bias, measured as attitudes, emotions, intentions, and behavior, across many target groups. The meta-analysis also showed that elaboration, operationalized in numerous ways, always increased the effect of Imagined Contact on those measures.

Limitations of Imagined Contact

Despite success thus far, Imagined Contact is still an emerging area of research. It's possible that this strategy's mechanism is contextually dependent, as direct Contact was found to be, allowing for failures or even backfiring through improper use. For example, despite replicating the methodology and sample size of previous Imagined Contact research, Dermody, Jones, and Cumming (2013) reported the strategy's failure in reducing both explicit and implicit prejudice toward out-group male homosexuals. In fact, their participants showed more explicit prejudice in the imagined contact condition than in their control condition. Though other studies have found positive effects of Imagined Contact on prejudice against homosexuals, the inconsistency raises questions. In their discussion, Dermody et al. (2013) presented potential causes of this failure, such as the time spent imagining contact and sample characteristics. However, in the meta-analysis by Miles and Crisp (2014), length of time spent imagining contact didn't have an effect on the success of the strategy. Also, Dermody et al.'s suggestion that college students are generally low in prejudice and so their sample may not show a further reduction in prejudice should equally apply to the samples of successful Imagined Contact research. It cannot be said for certain, though, because no study in the Imagined Contact research has measured the impact of the initial prejudice level of their participants. Dermody et al. (2013) also considered characteristics of homosexual prejudice as a cause, presenting the possibility that homosexual prejudice is overlearned and so their participants may have been framing their Imagined Contact experience to confirm their preconceptions. They did not, however, consider more fundamental characteristics, such as the mechanism behind

homosexual prejudice. Dermody et al.'s discussion illuminates two significant considerations absent in the Imagined Contact research: initial prejudice level and the nature of the prejudice.

By not accounting for the initial prejudice level of their participants, the Imagined Contact research may be unintentionally obscuring the results of their studies. Herek (1984) showed that certain factors, such as age, high education, and living in the city, predict lower levels of homosexual prejudice. All of these factors are features of student samples used in the Imagined Contact research. Thus, the effects shown in the Imagined Contact research may be driven by the majority of participants with low initial prejudice. Stone and colleagues (2011) accounted for this discrepancy by measuring the initial prejudice of their participants. They found that the strategy confrontation backfires in their highly prejudiced participants, but not their participants with low initial prejudice. One could argue that it matters more for a prejudice reduction strategy to be effective when used on highly prejudiced individuals than on those already exhibiting low prejudice. Thus, the effectiveness of prejudice reduction strategies such as Imagined Contact must be considered within the context of initial prejudice level.

It is also important to address that though the Imagined Contact research encompasses a variety of target out-groups, the differences between these groups must be understood. The prejudice against many of the out-groups explored in the Imagined Contact research is based in a fear or threat reaction. However, prejudices can be based in other reactions. For example, prejudice against obese individuals is based in disgust (Vartanian, 2010). A series of studies by Koball and Carels (2015) showed that though direct contact with an obese individual reduced prejudice, indirect (imagined) contact failed. This may be explained by the process of the strategy. Imagined Contact is said to work through a reduction in intergroup anxiety (Husnu &

Crisp, 2010). When the prejudice against an out-group target is based in fear, imagining the target in a positive interaction is counterstereotypic to the prejudice and its associated stereotypes. However, when the prejudice is based in disgust, as it is with obese individuals, imagining an interaction is not counterstereotypic and so may not be as successful. Further, an elaborated Imagined Contact (Husnu & Crisp, 2010) increases vividness and so may actually increase disgust. A study by Turner and West (2012) found positive effects of Imagined Contact on prejudice against obese individuals. The rest of the publication, however, focused on out-groups with fear based prejudice and did not draw a distinction between the two. They also did not measure the initial prejudice of their participants. Moving forward, we must consider how the type of prejudice affects the efficacy of the Imagined Contact strategy and to do this we must examine participants that actually express that prejudice.

The Present Research

We hypothesized that when high prejudiced people imagine contact with an obese individual, increasing the elaboration (or vividness) of Imagined Contact increases disgust which increases prejudice. Specifically, we predicted that highly prejudiced individuals would show an increase from the control condition in liking with low elaboration Imagined Contact. However, we predicted highly prejudiced individuals would show a decrease in liking when presented with high elaboration Imagined Contact. We also predicted that in low prejudice individuals, condition wouldn't matter and there would consistently be high levels of liking.

Critically, we predicted that when highly prejudiced individuals were introduced to high elaboration Imagined Contact, they would show a decrease in liking because of an increase in

disgust. We predicted there would be an increase in disgust because previous findings have shown that elaborated Imagined Contact increases vividness (Husnu and Crisp, 2010). We predicted that the increase in disgust would cause a decrease in liking because it is a fundamental element in prejudice against obese individuals (Vartanian, 2010).

Method

Participants

A sample of 246 students [mean age = 18.64 years, standard deviation (SD) = 1.01, 181 females] participated in this study. At the beginning of the semester, students completed a mass survey that included measures for anti-fat prejudice. These measures were from Crandall's Antifat Attitudes Questionnaire (1994). Specifically, potential participants rated how much they agreed with statements like "I really don't like fat people much" and "Fat people make me somewhat uncomfortable" using a 1 (strongly disagree) to 9 (strongly agree) scale. The 7 items were combined into one scale in which higher numbers indicated greater prejudice ($\alpha = .81$).

Students who provided responses on the prejudice measures were recruited through email to participate in the study for class credit. Ethical approval was granted by the University of Arizona Institutional Review Board and written informed consent was provided by all participants.

Research Design

This study was a 2x3 design. Participants completed one of three conditions: control, prejudice reduction via Imagined Contact: low elaboration, or prejudice reduction via Imagined

Contact: high elaboration. The measured mediator was feelings of disgust. The primary dependent measure was liking, a combination of the attitudes towards and interest in the target.

Procedure & Materials

Participants were recruited and brought into the lab up to 3 at a time. The experimenter explained the common use of classroom activities early in the semester to enhance learning and foster productive collaboration between students. Then the experimenter discussed the recent increase in online classes and the necessity to learn if there was a way that online teachers could successfully use those activities. Participants were told that the current study was to test an online adaptation to a classroom staple, the Getting Acquainted Exercise, where students begin a new class by learning information about their classmates. They were asked to look through some randomly selected student profiles and share their impressions of them.

The participants were then brought to individual rooms to complete the study on a computer. To randomly assign them to a condition, each participant was associated with a number from one to three based on the order they had signed up for the experiment. On the computer, the experimenters selected each participant's number to begin the task. The experimenters were blind to the task condition connected to each number.

Each participant viewed two profiles presented with Qualtrics software. Each profile, titled "Who am I?" contained sections for the target's photo, name, sex, hometown, graduation year, and a prompt to "tell us more about yourself" with a response that delivered the manipulation. Across all profiles, the sex (male), hometown (Tucson), and graduation year

(2018) were constant. The photo and prompt were the largest sections. The photos were in color and approximately 1.75 x 2.

The first profile was of a thin male named Adam Cole. The profile included a headshot of an average, short haired, clean shaven, brunette, college aged male. This photo was selected because the subject appeared to be of a healthy weight (BMI 18.5 – 24.9). The thin male's response was constant across conditions. It did not utilize a strategy, but rather contained generic statements such as liking movies and having siblings.

The second profile was of an obese male named Ted Palmer. This profile included a headshot of an average, short haired, clean shaven, brunette, college aged male. This photo was selected because the subject appeared to be obese (BMI > 30.0). In all ways, besides weight, he appeared similar to Adam Cole.

Participants completed one of three conditions in the study, which varied the level of Imagined Contact used by the obese student:

Control condition. The obese male's response to the prompt "tell us more about yourself" did not utilize a strategy and contained generic statements such as he likes watching TV and listening to music.

Prejudice reduction via imagined contact: low elaboration condition. The obese male's response to the prompt "tell us more about yourself" contained statements that caused the participants to imagine the target in specific situations. For example, he stated "I'm a huge fan of UA basketball and football. I love the playoffs and tournaments."

Prejudice reduction via imagined contact: hi elaboration condition. The obese male's response to the prompt "tell us more about yourself" contained elaborated statements that

caused participants to imagine the target in specific situations with greater depth and an indication of direct contact with the participant. For example, he stated “I enjoy watching UA basketball and football in the ZonaZoo...it’s fun to cheer on the Wildcats together.”

After each profile, the participants completed the dependent measures. Once done, they were debriefed and thanked for their contribution.

Measures

After viewing the profiles, participants completed a trait rating designed to measure the presence of disgust. Specifically, the items for disgust (disgusted, nauseated, and grossed out) were randomly placed within a diverse list of traits. Participants were asked to rate how much each trait described how they felt about the student on a scale from 1 (not at all descriptive) to 11 (extremely descriptive).

Participants then completed a self-report survey of their attitudes toward the target and their desire to meet them. Specifically, participants rated the questions “How much do you like this student overall?”, “How much do you want to meet this student?”, “How much would you like to work with this student?”, “How much would you like to become friends with this student?”, “How similar is your personality to this student?”, and “How much do you have in common with this student?” ($\alpha = .94$) from 1 (not at all) to 11 (very much).

Results

We ran a 2 (initial prejudice: hi vs. low) x 3 (condition: control vs. low elaboration vs. hi elaboration) regression. On disgust, there was no main effect of prejudice, $\beta = -.21$, $t(242) = -$

1.30, $p = .20$. There was a main effect of condition on disgust $\beta = -.37$, $t(242) = -2.59$, $p = .01$, but it was qualified by an interaction between condition and initial prejudice.

To deconstruct the interaction, we looked at the differences in condition at 1 SD below and 1 SD above the mean for prejudice (see Figure 1). As predicted, in highly prejudiced individuals, the hi elaboration condition created more disgust than the control condition $\beta = .30$, $t(242) = 4.89$, $p < .001$. Also as predicted, the hi elaboration condition created more disgust than the low elaboration condition $\beta = .41$, $t(242) = 6.66$, $p < .001$. There was no difference between the low elaboration condition and the control condition $\beta = .11$, $t(242) = 1.85$, $p > .20$. In low prejudice individuals, as predicted, there were no differences between the conditions $\beta s < .08$, $p s > .20$.

There was no main effect of initial prejudice $\beta = -.23$, $t(242) = -1.44$, $p = .15$ or condition $\beta = .24$, $t(242) = 1.70$, $p = .09$ on liking, our prejudice measure. Opposing our predictions, there was no significant interaction between prejudice and condition on liking $\beta = .07$, $t(242) = .32$, $p = .75$.

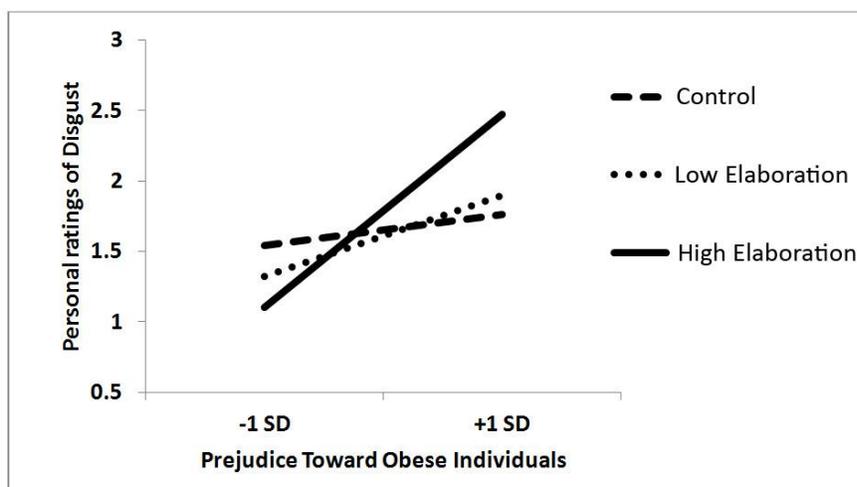


Figure 1 In low prejudice participants, there were no significant differences between conditions on disgust. In high prejudice participants, there was no significant difference between the low elaboration and control condition on disgust. There was, however, a significant difference between the high elaboration and the control and between the high elaboration and the low elaboration on disgust.

Discussion

We found that individuals that were initially high or low in prejudice had different reactions to the obese target. That reaction was noted by the experience of disgust more than any other response, such as fear. This disgust varied across conditions in highly prejudiced individuals and was the strongest after high elaboration Imagined Contact. Thus, a fundamental feature of prejudice against obese individuals, disgust, appears to be aggravated by the elaboration of Imagined Contact, suggesting an increase (rather than a decrease) in bias. Opposing predictions, this disgust did not translate into the liking measure. Regardless, our results support the argument that the outcomes of Imagined Contact strategies are dependent on certain factors, such as initial prejudice level and the nature of the prejudice.

There are limitations to this study, however. Though theoretically the same, there are differences between the methodology of the current study and that of past Imagined Contact research. First, Imagined Contact is usually presented as a third party intervention, whereas the target presented the Imagined Contact in our study. Second, past Imagined Contact research has verbally activated the target's identity, whereas the current study used a picture. It may be possible to attribute the results to these methodological differences.

This opens up a few possible implications. If the results were in fact caused by the difference in source, target vs. third party, it implies that issues arise when a target attempts to use Imagined Contact. Moving forward, the literature should address this concern, as third party interventions are not always possible. Alternatively, if the methodology did not affect the results, it would mean that these issues arose because elaborated Imagined Contact was used with obese targets. This would imply that Imagined Contact works differently for different

target groups and has the potential to backfire. Or, it might be a combination of source and prejudice type. Perhaps Imagined Contact only backfires when presented and elaborated by an obese, or other disgust eliciting, target. Unfortunately, in the current study there is no way to know for certain what aspect or combination was driving the effects.

Future research should address these concerns and build on the theoretical basis of this investigation into the limits of Imagined Contact. The current study should be replicated, but adjusted to more closely follow the methodology used in past Imagined Contact research. If it is found that elaborated Imagined Contact still increases disgust felt towards a target group, it would be essential to examine alternative dependent variables to measure final prejudice. Perhaps the lack of effect found in the current study was because disgust, an affective reaction, does not affect reported liking, a cognitive process. Disgust may instead cause avoidance, another negative behavioral outcome of prejudice, and must be studied. Lastly, in order to examine whether this effect is truly specific to this group, future research should directly compare the use of elaborated Imagined Contact by targets from fear eliciting groups and targets from disgust eliciting groups on the resulting emotions and behavioral outcomes. This could further validate previous research showing the effectiveness of elaboration on prejudice against fear eliciting groups, while illuminating a pathway through disgust that causes Imagined Contact to backfire in certain target groups.

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