

BRIEF REPORT

Promoting Intergroup Contact by Changing Beliefs: Group Malleability, Intergroup Anxiety, and Contact Motivation

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Intergroup contact plays a crucial role in moderating long-term conflicts. Unfortunately, the motivation to make contact with outgroup members is usually very low in such conflicts. We hypothesized that one limiting factor is the belief that groups cannot change, which leads to increased intergroup anxiety and decreased contact motivation. To test this hypothesis, we experimentally manipulated beliefs about group malleability in the context of the conflict between Greek and Turkish Cypriots and then assessed intergroup anxiety and motivation to engage in intergroup contact. Turkish Cypriots who were led to believe that groups can change (with no mention of the specific groups involved) reported lower levels of intergroup anxiety and higher motivation to interact and communicate with Greek Cypriots in the future, compared with those who were led to believe that groups cannot change. This effect of group malleability manipulation on contact motivation was mediated by intergroup anxiety.

Keywords: group malleability, intergroup contact, intergroup anxiety

One of the most influential contributions to the study of prejudice is Allport's (1954) contact hypothesis, which holds that intergroup contact, under appropriate conditions, leads to positive changes in attitudes toward outgroup members (Brown & Hewstone, 2005; Pettigrew, 1998). Pettigrew and Tropp's (2006) meta-analysis of more than 500 studies powerfully supported this hypothesis, revealing a robust and positive impact of contact on intergroup attitudes regardless of target group, age group, geographical area, or contact setting.

Despite its benefits, intergroup contact can reduce prejudice only when group members are motivated to engage positively with outgroups. Interventions seeking to capitalize on the power of contact

must therefore find ways to stimulate an interest in engaging positively with members of the other community. In multicultural communities, where many groups live in close proximity to one another, there may be many ways to open minds to this possibility. There are, however, some situations in which there is a complete absence of motivation to engage positively with the outgroup.

Barriers to Contact in Intractable Conflict

In long-term intractable conflicts, the parties involved have a long history of rivalry, aggression, and failed attempts at conflict resolution (Bar-Tal, 2001; Coleman, 2003; Vallacher, Coleman, Nowak, & Bui-Wrzosinska, 2010). The lack of motivation for intergroup contact is considered one of the key reasons why efforts to promote peaceful resolutions fail (Crisp et al., 2010). Indeed, in most of these conflicts (e.g., the Middle East, Cyprus, Kashmir, Sri Lanka, Chechnya, and Rwanda), the parties are physically separated, and for direct contact to take place, they have to invest in significant logistical, financial, and psychological efforts. In such contexts, with little motivation to engage in contact, none of the benefits of contact can be realized. Ironically, therefore, it is precisely where contact interventions are needed the most that the *will* to engage in meaningful dialogue with the other community is at its lowest.

Research on contact theory has established *intergroup anxiety* as the chief underlying cause of contact avoidance (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). Intergroup anxiety is the negative emotional reac-

This article was published Online First May 28, 2012.

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We thank Duriye Celik for her invaluable assistance in data collection.

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tion that occurs at the prospect of having to engage in an intergroup encounter. It is most likely to arise where there has been minimal previous contact, or where previous contact has induced negative feelings. In such cases, intergroup anxiety can result from negative expectations of discrimination during cross-group interactions, or fears that the respondents may behave in an offensive manner that would cause negative psychological, behavioral, and/or evaluative consequences for the self or the group (Stephan & Stephan, 1985). These fears are more frequent in intractable conflicts than in other settings, mainly because of the long history of intergroup violence (Husnu & Crisp, 2010). As such, they often lead the parties involved in these conflicts to avoid intergroup contact (Brown & Hewstone, 2005).

Increasing Contact Motivation by Changing Beliefs About Group Malleability

How might it be possible to enhance the motivation to engage in contact with outgroup members? One possibility is trying to directly engineer changes in the beliefs and emotions regarding the rival group. However, it has been shown that, especially in the context of intractable, violent conflicts, such direct attempts to alter attitudes toward an adversary frequently fail and at times even backfire (Bar-Tal & Rosen, 2009). Hence, an indirect way of changing negative intergroup attitudes and emotions may be called for to promote peace.

One indirect way to increase contact motivation is suggested by the literature on implicit theories (Dweck & Leggett, 1988; Dweck & Molden, 2005). Within the domain of interpersonal conflict, it has been found that those who believe people's characteristics are malleable (vs. fixed) are less likely to attribute wrongdoing to a person's fixed qualities, less likely to recommend punishment for a wrongdoer, and more likely to recommend negotiation (Chiu, Hong & Dweck, 1997; Chiu, Dweck, Tong & Fu, 1997). Rydell and colleagues (2007) applied this idea to groups by showing that beliefs about whether or not groups (instead of individuals) can change can influence the formation of social stereotypes (see also Levy et al., 1998). In a direct application of these ideas to ongoing conflict, Halperin et al. (2011) demonstrated the benefits of promoting beliefs about group malleability in the Middle-East conflict. This work showed that when Jewish-Israelis, Palestinian-Israelis, and Palestinians in the West Bank were brought to believe that group characteristics can be changed, they expressed more positive attitudes toward their outgroup in the conflict and, in turn, expressed more willingness to make concrete compromises to that outgroup during peace negotiations. These findings suggest that altering beliefs about group malleability may be critically important in efforts to establish peace in intractable conflicts. Could altering these beliefs also be the key to breaking cycles of contact avoidance?

Such a possibility is suggested by the idea that in intractable conflicts people get "fixed" into thinking rigidly about the outgroup and, in particular, thinking that the outgroup wishes to hurt them. After all, in intractable conflicts, intergroup fear and anxiety are at their peak and the outgroup's image in many cases is of evil incarnate (Bar-Tal, 1990). Believing that outgroup members can change might, in this context, reduce some of that anxiety, and in turn promote contact motivation. When societies see each other as an ongoing existential threat, anxiety becomes the key affective

process that is elicited from the appraisal that the outgroup is fixed and will not change. If, instead, people are taught to believe that outgroup members can change and are a product of their environments, then it provides the opportunity to believe that it might be possible to interact peacefully with an outgroup member. Therefore, we predict that the incremental mindset prime will reduce the appraisal that the outgroup is fixed and correspondingly reduce anxiety about the prospect of intergroup relations, leading to enhanced future contact intentions.

The Present Study

The goal of the present study was to test the hypothesis that a simple malleable ("incremental") versus fixed ("entity") mindset priming would reduce intergroup anxiety and enhance motivation to make contact with the outgroup. We carried out our study in a context of the prolonged conflict between Greek and Turkish Cypriots. The "Cyprus Problem," as it is known today, arose from communal differences between Greek and Turkish Cypriots that were politicized by foreign interests. Specifically, a rise in nationalism led to Greek Cypriots' aspirations for Enosis, or union with Greece, which was countered by Turkish Cypriots' desire for Taksim, or partition of the island between Greece and Turkey (Hadjipavlou-Trigeorgis & Trigeorgis, 1993). This culminated in intergroup violence and the eventual intervention of Turkey in 1974, regarded as an illegal invasion by Greek Cypriots but as a peace operation by Turkish Cypriots. The result was a cease-fire line that left Turkish Cypriots in the northern one third of the island and Greek Cypriots in the south. Today a UN mediation effort continues with UN soldiers remaining on the "Green Line," which separates the two ethnicities. Over the years, despite many attempts, an agreement is yet to prevail and Nicosia is widely regarded as the last divided capital in the world. In April 2003, the Turkish Cypriot administration announced a new policy of opening up the borders. The Greek Cypriots followed suit, and this has given the communities the opportunity to visit the "other" side. Despite the removal of the physical border separating Greek from Turk, the two communities remain very much segregated on their own side of the island, hence the psychological border remains untouched. Given the high level of continuing animosity, and the limited contact between the two communities, this conflict provided an ideal context for testing our research question.

Method

Participants and Procedure

Sixty-two Turkish Cypriots (31 women) aged 21 to 71 ($M = 35.64$, $SD = 12.65$) took part in what they believed were two separate studies. In the first study, described as a reading comprehension task, participants were randomly assigned to read an article that portrayed aggressive groups as having a fixed nature or a malleable nature. Later, in a second and ostensibly unrelated study on the ongoing conflict, levels of intergroup anxiety and motivation to engage in intergroup contact with Greek Cypriots were assessed.

Participants were randomly assigned to read one of two *Psychology Today*-style scientific articles. The articles were in the participants' own language and described groups that were in-

involved in violent actions, conflicts, and had strong separatist tendencies. The articles also reported studies showing that, over time, these groups had (malleable condition) or had not (fixed condition) changed these negative behaviors and tendencies (e.g., *The major finding in this study is that extreme negative behavior of the overwhelming majority of ethnic groups and their unwillingness to compromise or negotiate **changed dramatically** (malleable condition)/**stayed fixed** (fixed condition) throughout the years and **was greatly** (malleable condition)/**not** (fixed condition) influenced by the political context in which subjects lived*). In the malleable condition, research suggested that these tendencies resulted from extreme leadership or environmental influence, whereas in the fixed condition, research suggested that the tendencies were rooted in the culture of the groups. Neither version referred to the Turkish–Greek conflict. All participants then completed a set of questionnaires in which we embedded measures assessing beliefs about groups, intergroup anxiety, and the willingness to interact with outgroup members. Finally, all participants were debriefed.

Measures

Beliefs about groups were measured with four items ($\alpha = .76$) (rated from 1, *strongly disagree* to 6, *strongly agree*) (see Halperin et al., 2011), with no items mentioning the Greek Cypriots or the specific conflict: “As much as I hate to admit it, you can’t teach an old dog new tricks—groups can’t really change their basic characteristics,” “Groups can do things differently, but the important parts of who they are can’t really be changed,” “Groups that are characterized by violent tendencies will never change their ways,” and “Every group or nation has basic moral values and beliefs that can’t be changes significantly.”

Intergroup anxiety was assessed with five items ($\alpha = .92$) (rated 1, *not at all* to 6, *very much*). Participants were asked to rate how much they thought they would feel each of the following if they were to meet a Greek Cypriot in the future: suspicious, defensive, anxious, self-conscious, and careful.

Contact motivation was assessed by telling participants that “*In the following weeks we will be carrying out a study in which we bring Turkish and Greek Cypriots together to discuss the possibility of resolving the conflict,*” and asking them “*If we asked you to take part in such a study, who would be your preferred conversation/debating partner?*” Participants were asked to rate the extent to which (rated 1, *not at all* to 6, *to a very large extent*) they would prefer to have Turkish Cypriot as a conversation partner and Greek Cypriot as a conversation partner. The contact motivation score was calculated by subtracting the preference score for the Turkish Cypriot from the preference score for the Greek Cypriot. A positive score means that the participant would prefer a Greek Cypriot conversation partner more than a Turkish Cypriot.

Results

Preliminary Analyses

The manipulation was successful in altering beliefs about groups: participants in the malleable condition had significantly higher (more malleable) scores ($M = 3.51, SD = .66$) than those

in the fixed condition ($M = 3.04, SD = .72; t(60) = 2.67, p < .05; d = .68$). No significant interaction with gender was found.

Malleability Beliefs and Contact Motivation

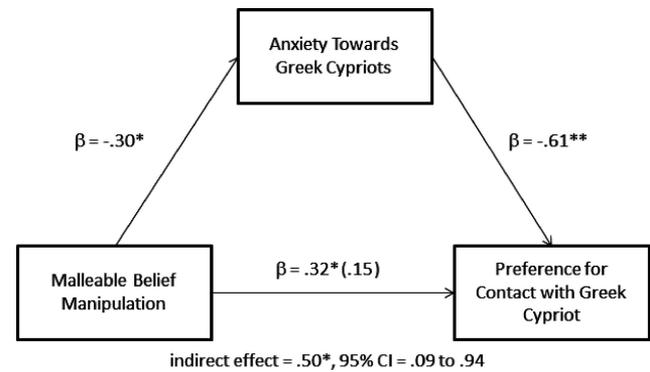
First, we tested the effects of the group malleability manipulation on the willingness to have contact with Greek Cypriots. Participants in the malleable condition were more willing to have contact with Greek Cypriots ($M_{\text{malleable}} = 0.16, SD = 1.48, M_{\text{fixed}} = -0.80, SD = 1.37; t(60) = 2.63, d = .67, p < .05$). That is, for participants in the malleable condition, there was no difference (i.e., their contact difference score did not differ significantly from zero) in their willingness to have a Greek versus Turkish Cypriot as a conversation partner, $t(31) = 0.60, ns$, whereas participants in the fixed condition preferred to converse with a Turkish Cypriot, $t(29) = 3.19, p < .05$.

The Mediating Role of Intergroup Anxiety

Next, we tested the hypothesis that this effect would be mediated by decreased levels of intergroup anxiety. Indeed, the results showed that participants in the malleable condition had significantly less anxiety about Greek Cypriots ($M = 2.50, SD = 1.40$) than those in the fixed condition ($M = 3.35, SD = 1.40; t(60) = 2.37, d = .61, p < .05$). Lower anxiety, in turn, predicted a greater willingness to have contact with Greek Cypriots ($r = -.61, p < .01$). A formal test of this mediational model revealed that intergroup anxiety was a significant mediator of the relation between the incremental intervention and contact (anxiety indirect effect = .50, 95% CI = .09 to .94, $p < .05$). Indeed, the effect of the manipulation on contact was reduced from $\beta = .32, p < .05$ to $\beta = .15, ns$ when anxiety was added to the model (see Figure 1).

Discussion

Our results show that within the context of a widely recognized long-term intractable conflict, a simple manipulation of group malleability (vs. fixedness) led to a decreased feeling of intergroup anxiety and to an increased motivation to interact and communi-



* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$

Note. Value in parentheses equals unmediated effect.

Figure 1. Mediated effect of malleable belief manipulation on contact motivation, through its effect on intergroup anxiety.

cate with outgroup members. These findings suggest that when people believe the outgroup is capable of going through substantive change, they feel less anxious about possible interactions with outgroup members, and in turn express higher willingness to engage in intergroup interactions.

The current findings have both theoretical and practical implications. On the theoretical level, they add to our limited understanding of people's motivation to interact with outgroup members in the context of long term conflicts. If one sees the outgroup as permanently evil, any interaction may seem both dread-filled and useless. The present findings are consistent with preliminary indications of an association between group malleability beliefs and willingness to hear to outgroup's positions in the Israel–Palestinian conflict (Halperin et al., 2011). However, the current study is the first to test whether intergroup anxiety mediates the effect of group malleability manipulation on intergroup contact motivation. Another meaningful theoretical contribution of the current results is the incorporation of intergroup emotion (i.e., anxiety) into the model examining the role of implicit theories about groups in intergroup conflicts. In future research other emotions, for example despair and hatred, should also be tested within this framework—a framework previously dominated exclusively by cognitive factors (e.g., Rydell et al., 2007; Halperin et al., 2011).

From an applied perspective the current results also have implications for possible interventions to motivate intergroup contact in long-term conflicts. These findings extend work on the antecedents and consequences of intergroup contact conducted in the context of various intractable conflicts, among them the conflicts in Northern Ireland (e.g., Paolini, Hewstone, Cairns, & Voci, 2004; Tausch, Hewstone, Kenworthy & Cairns, 2007) and the Middle-East (e.g., Maoz, 2011). Importantly, these interventions can be conducted without mentioning the outgroup itself or its role in the conflict. In this way, the ground can be prepared for constructive interaction while avoiding the obvious defensive reactions so common in the context of long term conflicts. More generally, the findings provide some indication about what sequence of steps future interventions should adopt. First, messages of group malleability should be conveyed in a unilateral setting, and only then should the possibility of bilateral contact or compromise be introduced.

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Received January 21, 2012

Revision received April 3, 2012

Accepted April 6, 2012 ■