

## SHORT COMMUNICATIONS

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### POLISH-JEWISH INTERGROUP COMMUNICATION: THE MEDIATING ROLE OF PERSONALIZED COGNITION

The goal of the present study was to test the mediating role of personalized cognition (perception of others as similar to self) in the impact of intergroup communication programs on the improvement of intergroup attitudes. In Study 1, consistent with the contact hypothesis, the participants (N=190 Polish students) showed an increase of liking when they had more opportunities to meet and to communicate with outgroup members. This effect was mediated by the perception of outgroup as similar to self. Thus the present results support the personalization theory of intergroup contact. Study 2 (N=97 Jewish students) replicated the results of Study 1 in an experimental model, with random assignment to contact and no-contact conditions, and demonstrated the mediating role of personalized cognition in the effectiveness of intergroup communication programs. Both studies reveal the psychological nature of the positive effects of intergroup communication and suggest the direction for future real-life interventions.

One of the most important tasks of current social psychology is to define psychological processes that mediate the reduction of prejudice as an effect of successful intergroup contact and communication (Dovidio, Gaertner & Kawakami, 2003; Gallois, 2003). The present studies focus on the role of one of such processes, personalized cognition, in the improvement of Polish-Jewish relations after the intergroup communication program.

In the personalization process, members of a group focus on information about an outgroup member that is relevant to the individual person rather than to the

member of the group (Brewer & Miller, 1984). Persons are categorized primarily in terms of their similarity or dissimilarity to self. Thus, in a personalized interaction, some outgroup members are seen as similar to self as are ingroup members. Miller (2002) emphasizes self-disclosure, perception of familiarity, and empathy as phenomena somehow related to personalized intergroup contact. However, the most important feature of a personalized interaction is that an individual responds to others in terms of their relationship to self: whether they are similar or dissimilar to self.

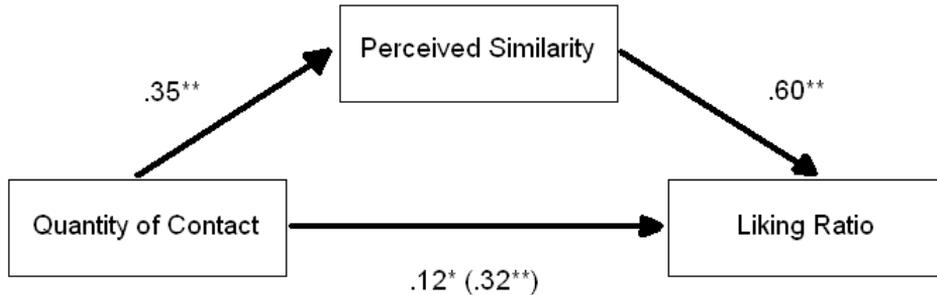
Polish-Jewish relations provide a useful context within which one can explore the contact hypothesis because, once having lived together, now the two groups have nearly no chance of encounter. The geographical segregation of two communities that have a long history of sharing common space results in strong stereotypes, based mostly on historical representations (Krzemiński, 1993; Bilewicz, in press). Current Polish anti-semitism shapes the perception of Jews as a highly entitative group, attaining its goals collectively, and extremely hostile towards Poles (Kofta, 1995; Kofta & Sędek, 2005). Such perceptions are the exact opposite to what is described as personalized perception (Miller, 2002).

Based on these assumptions it may be hypothesized that creating an opportunity for intergroup communication between young Poles and Jews should improve relations between the two groups, and that personalized perception (perceiving others as similar to self) may act as a mediating factor in this process. The two studies presented in this paper focus on the role of personalization in the improvement of Polish-Jewish intergroup relations. Both studies were performed during the March of the Living, a dynamic educational program which brings students from all over the world to Poland, where they explore the aftermath of the Holocaust (see Stier, 1995). The very dynamic character of such visits creates formal constraints (e.g., a need for short questionnaires) in the naturally occurring real-life studies presented in this paper.

## Study 1

A cross-sectional study examined the perceived similarity of outgroup to self as a mediator between the extent of contact and level of outgroup-liking toward Jews among Polish students.  $N=190$  Polish students participated in the intergroup communication program with Jewish students from Australia, Canada and USA. The study was performed in Polish schools after meeting with Jewish students. The questionnaire they completed indicated the extent of contact they had with young Jews (ranging from “0” to “4 or more meetings”), a 7-point scale of perceived similarity of self to young Jews (“Overall, how similar would you rate yourself to young Jews?”) and a 7-point scale of liking (“Do you think that you like young Jews?”).

Figure 1. Perception of similarity as a mediating process linking the contact and liking ratios among Polish students



\*  $p < 0.05$ . \*\*  $p < 0.001$

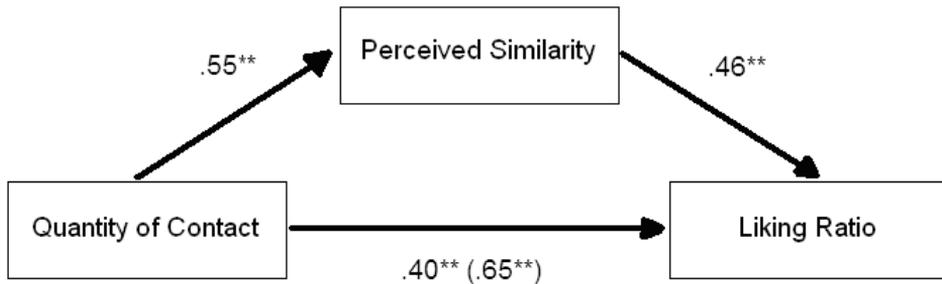
## Results

Mediation analysis was carried out in order to determine whether the effect of contact on liking was a function of perceived similarity (Baron & Kenny, 1986). There was a significant direct effect of quantity of contact on liking,  $\beta=.32$ ,  $t(1,186)=4.60$ ,  $p<.001$  and a significant relationship between the quantity of contact and perceived similarity to out-group members,  $\beta=0.35$ ,  $t(1,185)=5.10$ ,  $p<0.001$ . When the quantity of contact and the perceived similarity were entered simultaneously into the equation, the perceived similarity was significantly predictive of liking,  $\beta=0.60$ ,  $t(2,183)=10.04$ ,  $p<0.001$ , while the predictive power of quantity of contact decreased from  $\beta=0.32$  to  $\beta=.12$ ,  $t(2,183)=2.04$ ,  $p<0.05$ . The Sobel  $z$  test (Sobel, 1982) showed that the perceived similarity significantly mediated the impact of quantity of contact on liking,  $z=4.55$ ,  $p<0.0001$  (see Figure 1).

## Study 2

The second study was performed in order to determine whether the effect observed in Study 1 could be replicated also among the Jewish participants of the intergroup communication programs. The study was performed in a quasi-experimental paradigm. 97 Jewish students visiting Poland during March of the Living visits were randomly assigned to contact and no-contact conditions. The first group completed a questionnaire after taking part in an hour-long program of communication in ethnically diverse small groups (consisting of 4-5 Polish and 4-5 Jewish students). The control-condition participants completed a questionnaire without any interaction with Polish students. The questionnaire included a question about perceived similarity to out-group, indicated on a 7-

Figure 2. Perception of similarity as a mediating process linking the contact and liking ratios among Jewish students



\*\*  $p < 0.001$

point scale (“Overall, how similar would you rate yourself to young Poles?”), and the question about liking (liking ratio) was indicated on a 7-point scale (“Do you think that you like young Poles?”).

## Results

A significant mediation of perceived similarity between the quantity (presence) of contact and liking was obtained. Contact was predictive of liking (direct effect),  $\beta=0.65$ ,  $t(1,87)=8.06$ ,  $p<0.001$ , and there was a reliable relationship between contact and perceived similarity to out-group members,  $\beta=0.55$ ,  $t(1,89)=6.26$ ,  $p<0.001$ . When tested simultaneously, perceived similarity was predictive of liking,  $\beta=0.46$ ,  $t(2,85)=5.35$ ,  $p<0.001$ , and the predictive power of contact decreased to  $\beta=0.40$ ,  $t(2,85)=1.72$ ,  $p<0.001$ . The Sobel test ( $z$ ) showed a significant effect of perceived similarity mediation between the contact and liking ratio,  $z=4.07$ ,  $p<0.0001$  (see Figure 2.).

## Discussion

Dovidio, Gaertner, and Kawakami (2003) in their review of research on the contact hypothesis distinguished four types of mediating mechanisms that underlie the effects of intergroup encounter: functional relations between the groups, behavioral responses, affective reactions to members of other groups, and cognitive responses to outgroup and ingroup members. Results presented above contribute to the last type specified by Dovidio and colleagues.

The present findings suggest that the perception of outgroup similarity to the self bears the influence of contact on the attitude toward the outgroup. Personalization is thus an important cognitive mediator of the effectiveness of intergroup contact and communication. Development of personalized representations during

intergroup contact creates more favorable intergroup attitudes toward outgroup members than are present in the contact situation.

The main role of the mediators is to explain how external physical events take on internal psychological significance (Baron & Kenny, 1986). The present results show the psychological mechanism underlying the effectiveness of Polish-Jewish intergroup communication. Research on intergroup friendships (Hamberger & Hewstone, 1997; Hewstone, Clairns, Voci, Hamberger, & Niens, 2006) shows that personalized interactions may reduce intergroup bias even among historically conflicted groups like Irish Catholics and Protestants. Segregated and historically prejudiced groups, such as Poles and Jews, develop highly entitative representations of each other over decades. Any opportunity for intergroup contact creates a chance for personalized perception that is opposite to what both groups know about each other. The present results show that such personalization leads to a general improvement of intergroup attitudes.

Authors of studies elaborating intergroup communication conclude that it is crucial to understand intercultural communication as simultaneously intergroup and interpersonal (Gallois, 2003; Gallois et al., 1995). Understanding personalization underlying such communication processes creates possibilities of successful interventions and improvement of intercultural relations.

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