

CAN IMAGINED CONTACT FAVOR THE “HUMANIZATION” OF THE HOMELESS?

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Research on imagined contact, a new prejudice-reduction strategy, has demonstrated its beneficial effects on several aspects of intergroup relations. Emerging evidence has shown that this form of contact can positively affect humanness perceptions. The present study examined imagined contact as a means to improve humanity attributions to the homeless — a stigmatized group strongly dehumanized. Participants (university students) were asked to imagine either a positive interaction with a homeless person or a control scene. Humanity attributions were assessed by using uniquely human (e.g., rationality) and non-uniquely human (e.g., impulsiveness) traits. As expected, after the mentally-simulated encounter, the homeless were perceived as more clearly characterized by uniquely human features. Practical implications of findings are discussed.

Key words: Humanity attributions; Imagined contact; The homeless; Humanity bias reduction; Promoting tolerance.

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It is not unusual to encounter a homeless person squatting near the entrance of a church or sitting motionless on a railway station bench. He/she looks like a heap of rags, and you look at him/her absent-mindedly. If the homeless person asks you for something, you may feel anxious and may walk away. The tendency to avoid the homeless results in increased marginalization. In this study, we explore whether imagined contact (Crisp & Turner, 2012) — the mental simulation of a positive encounter with a homeless person — may attenuate dehumanization, namely their assimilation to animals or objects.

Humanity Attributions to Outgroups

In the last 14 years, after the first publication of the pioneering work by Leyens and colleagues (2000), the effect of outgroup dehumanization has received increasing interest from social psychologists (for a recent review, see Haslam & Loughnan, 2014). Early studies revealed an inhumanization effect (Leyens, Demoulin, Vaes, Gaunt, & Paladino, 2007) consisting in a greater attribution of secondary (uniquely human) emotions (e.g., hope, remorse) to the ingroup

than the outgroup. Conversely, primary emotions, which are perceived as shared by humans and animals (e.g., pleasure, anger), are not assigned differently to the two groups. Besides experiencing complex emotions, other uniquely human features (for instance, consciousness, rationality, and self-control) are generally assigned more to the ingroup than the outgroup (see, e.g., Capozza, Falvo, Favara, & Trifiletti, 2013; Costello & Hodson, 2014; Hodson & Costello, 2007).

However, outgroups are not only typically ascribed a lower human status (infrahumanized), they may also be dehumanized. According to Haslam's (2006) dual model, outgroups are assimilated to animals when they are denied the unique features of human species (animalistic dehumanization; see, e.g., Capozza, Andrighetto, Di Bernardo, & Falvo, 2012; Goff, Eberhardt, Williams, & Jackson, 2008; Viki et al., 2006). Outgroups are assimilated to machines/robots when they are denied the typical characteristics of human nature (mechanistic dehumanization; see, e.g., Loughnan & Haslam, 2007; Loughnan, Haslam, & Kashima, 2009). In one study regarding humanness attributions to the homeless (Harris & Fiske, 2006), it was found that they are experienced not as social subjects but as objects. Harris and Fiske, in fact, found that vagrants' pictures did not activate the medial prefrontal cortex which normally occurs when we think about persons as opposed to objects.

Infrahumanization and dehumanization may have detrimental consequences. They may promote avoidance reactions (Capozza, Di Bernardo, Falvo, Vianello, & Calò, 2014), aggression, and violence (e.g., Goff et al., 2008; Viki, Osgood, & Phillips, 2013). Furthermore, the attribution of a lower human status to an outgroup may hinder prosocial behavior (Cuddy, Rock, & Norton, 2007) and forgiveness (Wohl, Hornsey, & Bennett, 2012). Thus, strategies have to be identified to curb this pervasive bias. One possibility is offered by intergroup contact which has emerged as the most effective psychosocial strategy for ameliorating intergroup relationships (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006, 2011).

Imagined Contact and Outgroup Humanization

Research has demonstrated the effectiveness of different forms of contact as a means for reducing prejudice, ranging from direct, face-to-face interactions with an outgroup member, to more indirect forms, such as extended contact — the knowledge that an ingroup member has a friendship relation with outgroup members (Wright, Aron, McLaughlin-Volpe, & Ropp, 1997). Another type of indirect contact is imagined contact: a mentally-simulated positive interaction with an unknown outgroup member (Crisp & Turner, 2009). Imagined contact is considered a useful tool for reducing prejudice, mostly when actual intergroup encounters are scarce or problematic (for instance, in segregated contexts). In addition, imagined contact involves a simple imagery task, easily applicable in different social contexts (e.g., educational or work settings). As confirmed by a recent meta-analysis (Miles & Crisp, 2014; for reviews, see Crisp & Turner, 2012, 2013), imagined contact boosts positive explicit (e.g., Turner, Crisp, & Lambert, 2007) and implicit attitudes (Turner & Crisp, 2010; Vezzali, Capozza, Giovannini, & Stathi, 2012), stereotype change (e.g., Brambilla, Ravenna, & Hewstone, 2012), self-efficacy concerning contact (Stathi, Crisp, & Hogg, 2011), intentions to engage in future contact (Husnu & Crisp, 2010), behavioral approach tendencies (Turner, West, & Christie, 2013), and positive nonverbal behaviors (Turner & West, 2012).

Consistent evidence exists that contact has beneficial effects when humanness attributions are at play (for a review, see Capozza, Falvo, Di Bernardo, Vezzali, & Visintin, 2014). The effects of imagined contact on humanness attributions were first explored by Vezzali, Capozza, Stathi, and Giovannini (2012). Participants were Italian fourth-graders involved in a multi-session experimental intervention in which they were asked to imagine positive encounters with an unknown immigrant peer in different settings (at school, in the neighborhood, at the park). Results showed that imagined contact increased the attribution of uniquely human (secondary) emotions to the outgroup through the mediation effect of enhanced outgroup trust. In a subsequent study, Falvo, Capozza, Hichy, and Di Sipio (2014) found that imagined contact reduced the inclination to attribute more primary than secondary emotions to individuals with intellectual disabilities. It is worth noting that both studies, based on a longitudinal design, have provided evidence of a long-term impact of imagined contact on outgroup humanization.

When the target category is represented by the homeless, a negatively-stereotyped group (see the stereotype content model, SCM; Fiske, Cuddy, Glick, & Xu, 2002), interventions based on direct contact or direct and indirect cross-group friendships are hard to apply. People generally feel fear and disgust toward the homeless and try to avoid contact with them. In contrast, interventions based on imagined contact are easier to implement. In a recent investigation, Hodson, Dube, and Choma (2014), by considering the homeless as the outgroup, tested the effectiveness of imagined contact in attenuating the link between intergroup disgust (an affective revulsion response to the outgroup) and prejudice. Hodson et al. found that both a standard imagined contact (Crisp, Stathi, Turner, & Husnu, 2009) and an elaborated imagined contact manipulation (involving, for instance, the imagination of physical contact and cooperation), produced a reduction of the association between disgust and prejudice; additionally, in the elaborated imagined contact condition, this association was mediated by increased outgroup trust.

The goal of the current study is to explore whether imagined contact can be an effective strategy in favoring the humanization of the homeless. To the best of our knowledge, this is the first time that the relationship between imagined contact and humanness attributions to this stigmatized group has been investigated.

Overview of the Study

In this study, university students were instructed to either imagine interacting with a homeless person or, in the control condition, an outdoor scene. To assess humanness attributions, we used uniquely human (UH) and non-uniquely human (NUH) traits which, as shown by previous studies, are sensitive measures of humanity perceptions (see Capozza, Trifiletti, Vezzali, & Favara, 2013, for ethnic outgroups, and Capozza, Di Bernardo, et al., 2014, for stigmatized outgroups). Our hypothesis is that the attribution of UH traits will be stronger in the imagined contact than in the control condition. The two conditions should, instead, not differ for NUH traits. Previous research (e.g., Capozza, Trifiletti, et al., 2013) showed that contact does not affect the attribution of NUH traits; furthermore, the non-uniquely human dimension is not typically used to differentiate the ingroup from outgroups (Leyens et al., 2007).

METHOD

Participants

Eighty students from a large Italian university volunteered to participate. Participants, ranging in age from 19 to 38 years, were randomly assigned to the imagined contact condition ($n = 40$) or the control condition ($n = 40$). Participants' age was similar across the two conditions ($M = 23.43$, in the imagined contact condition, and $M = 22.33$, in the control condition, $t(78) = 1.75$, $p < .09$). With respect to gender, women were 20 in the imagined contact and 21 in the control condition (men were 20 and 19, respectively).

Procedure

Participants were examined individually. On arrival, they were informed that they would be involved in a series of unrelated tasks: one concerned their imagery capacity, a second concerned the ability of completing word fragments, the third was related to intergroup relations. For the imagination task, we created two sets of instructions, following the standard procedure (see, e.g., Crisp & Turner, 2009). Instructions for the imagined contact condition were: "We would like you to take some minutes to imagine yourself meeting a homeless person for the first time. Imagine that the interaction is positive and comfortable. During the encounter you notice some pleasant, interesting, and unexpected aspects about the homeless person." Instructions for the control condition were: "We would like you to take some minutes to imagine a landscape. Try to imagine the main aspects of the scene (e.g., is it a beach, a forest, are there trees, hills, what is on the horizon?)." To reinforce the effect of the mental simulation, two tactics were used: during the imagination task, participants were asked to keep their eyes closed; after it, they were asked to write about the imagined scene, reporting as many details as possible. Following the manipulation, participants completed a set of word fragments and answered a short social attitudes questionnaire including the dependent measures.

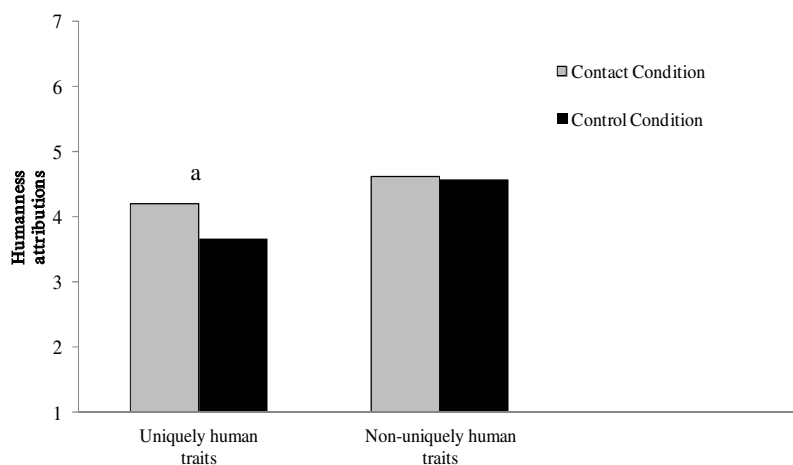
Measures

To assess humanness attributions, eight items were used: four UH traits (reasoning, rationality, morality, intellectual abilities), and four NUH traits (instinct, drive, impulsiveness, impetus); the eight traits were presented in a randomly-ordered sequence. As pilot studies show, the two sets of traits do not differ in valence (see Capozza, Trifiletti, et al., 2013). For each attribute, participants had to indicate whether it was a characteristic of the homeless. A 7-step scale was used anchored by 1 (*absolutely false*) and 7 (*absolutely true*), with 4 designating *neither true nor false*. Alphas were: .86 (contact condition) and .71 (control condition), for the UH traits; .76 (contact condition) and .75 (control condition), for the NUH traits.

After providing demographic information, participants were debriefed and gave their final informed consent. No participant expressed any suspicion about the study hypotheses.

RESULTS

In both conditions, for each dependent measure a composite score was obtained by averaging the scores relative to the respective four items. For the UH traits, means were: $M = 3.66$ ($SD = 0.89$), in the control condition, and $M = 4.19$ ($SD = 1.14$), in the contact condition, $t(78) = 2.30$, $p < .03$, $d = 0.52$. Regarding the NUH traits, means were: $M = 4.56$ ($SD = 0.88$), in the control condition, and $M = 4.62$ ($SD = 0.91$), in the contact condition, $t < 1$. Findings thus show that imagined contact favored the humanization of the homeless, while it did not affect the non-uniquely human dimension (Figure 1).



Note. On the 7-step scale, higher scores indicate greater attribution of uniquely human or non-uniquely human characteristics. The difference between conditions is only significant for the uniquely human dimension, $p < .03$. a = the 95% CI for the difference between the two conditions is [0.07, 0.98].

FIGURE 1
Attributions of uniquely human and non-uniquely human traits to the homeless.

DISCUSSION

This study shows that mentally simulating a positive interaction with an unknown homeless person leads to humanizing the entire category which, after the imagination task, is perceived as more characterized by uniquely human traits. Interestingly, the relationship between thinking about idiosyncratic characteristics of individual homeless people and their humanization was also demonstrated by Harris and Fiske (2007) using neurological measures (fMRI). Thus, the current study confirms the beneficial effects of imagined contact as a means to boost outgroup humanization (see, Falvo et al., 2014; Vezzali, Capozza, Stathi, et al., 2012). In addition, it considers an “extreme” outgroup, negatively stereotyped as cold and incompetent (see the SCM; Fiske et al., 2002), and dehumanized (Harris & Fiske, 2006). It should be noted that studies investigating the effectiveness of imagined contact have only recently begun to consider emarginated and stigmatized outgroups, such as schizophrenics (see Birtel & Crisp, 2012; Giacobbe, Stukas, & Farhall, 2013; Stathi, Tsantila, & Crisp, 2012; West, Holmes, & Hewstone, 2011) and intellectually dis-

abled people (see Falvo et al., 2014). As we said, for these groups, imagined contact is particularly useful, because opportunities for direct contact are limited and it is often avoided.

Concerning measures of humanity attributions, it is worth noting that they are less influenced by social desirability concerns than self-report measures of attitude. In this relation, Eyssel and Ribas (2012) showed that humanity attributions do not change when participants respond spontaneously or are, conversely, invited to respond as prejudiced or non-prejudiced toward the target group. In addition, the indirect nature of humanity perception measures makes them less open to demand characteristic effects. It would be interesting, however, to replicate findings using implicit measures of humanization, based, for instance, on reaction times.

Future research should also discover the mechanisms through which imagined contact enhances the humanization of the homeless. Probably, affective processes play a crucial role; there is evidence, in fact, that imagined contact reduces intergroup anxiety (see, e.g., Husnu & Crisp, 2010; Turner et al., 2013) and improves trust toward the outgroup (see, e.g., Hodson et al., 2014; Turner et al., 2013; see also the review by Vezzali, Crisp, Stathi, & Giovannini, 2013). Trust was found to be a significant mediator of imagined contact effects also when humanness perceptions are the outcome (Vezzali, Capozza, Stathi, et al., 2012). The mental simulation of a positive encounter with a homeless person could, therefore, improve humanness attributions by eliciting emotional processes: it may favor, for instance, feelings of trust and empathic reactions which allow the discovery of uniquely human characteristics.

Our findings have practical implications for designing interventions in real social settings. People working in homeless shelters — but also students at school — should be periodically trained to imagine pleasant encounters with unknown homeless persons, in which unexpected characteristics of the homeless are discovered. The consequent humanization of this category could restrain violence and promote approach responses and prosocial behaviors that should help the homeless to break away from marginalization.

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