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Abstract

Research has shown that intergroup contact is one of the most powerful approaches for improving outgroup attitudes. Further, it has been revealed that contact exerts its effects on prejudice reduction mostly by inducing positive affective processes. The present study ($N = 146$) investigated whether stereotype content enhancement along the core dimensions of competence, sociability, and morality might represent a basic cognitive mechanism driving the contact effects. Results showed that face-to-face encounters with immigrants increased their perceived competence, sociability, and morality. However, only increased perceived outgroup morality mediated the effect of contact on outgroup responses. Our findings extend prior research on the mediators of intergroup contact, showing the key role of perceived morality in driving the contact effects. The importance of these findings for improving intergroup relations is discussed.

Keywords

intergroup contact, morality, warmth, competence, stereotype content

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In 1954 Gordon Allport proposed that face-to-face encounters between members of opposing groups may lead to more harmonious intergroup relations (Allport, 1954). Since its formulation, the contact hypothesis has stimulated a large body of research and has received support across a variety of settings and social groups (Hewstone, 2009; Hewstone & Swart, 2011; Pettigrew, 2008). Indeed, a meta-analysis of over 500 studies showed a robust, highly significant effect of contact in reducing prejudice and hostile behaviours (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). Contact

theory has now been extended in new directions and researchers have moved from merely demonstrating that contact reduces prejudice to showing how contact promotes prejudice

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reduction (Pettigrew, 2008; see also Hewstone & Swart, 2011). In other words, research has started to address the mediating mechanisms that drive the effects of intergroup contact. Thus, it has been shown that contact exerts its effects on intergroup relations mostly by reducing intergroup anxiety and threat and by inducing positive affective processes (e.g., empathy and perspective taking) (for reviews, see Brown & Hewstone, 2005; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2008). As a case in point, intergroup contact enables one to empathize with and take the perspective of members of the outgroup. With this new view of the outgroup, hostility declines over time (Swart, Hewstone, Christ, & Voci, 2011). Similarly, face-to-face contact reduces the anxiety and the threat previously associated with intergroup encounters and, in turn, reduces negative attitudes (Blascovich, Mendes, Hunter, Lickel, & Kowai-Bell, 2001; Islam & Hewstone, 1993; Tausch, Tam, Hewstone, Kenworthy, & Cairns, 2007). Besides these affective mediators, research has identified outgroup knowledge as a further basic cognitive mechanism mediating the contact effects (Allport, 1954; see also Pettigrew & Tropp, 2008). Hence, intergroup encounters facilitate learning about the outgroup, and this new knowledge in turn reduces prejudice.

The present research sought to add to the work on the mediators of intergroup contact by integrating research on contact with recent evidence showing that two basic stereotype dimensions, namely warmth and competence, predict attitudes and behaviours toward social groups (Cuddy, Fiske, & Glick, 2007, 2008; Fiske, Cuddy, Glick, & Xu, 2002). Warmth is predominantly associated with other or service orientation and involves cooperation, forming connections with others as well as moral behaviour (e.g., being caring, friendly, and honest). Competence, on the other hand, is predominantly associated with achievement orientation (e.g., being intelligent, efficient) (Abele, Cuddy, Judd, & Yzerbyt, 2008; Judd, James-Hawkins, Yzerbyt, & Kashima, 2005). Research has revealed that these two dimensions are particularly effective at capturing the content of a wide range of group stereotypes

across different cultural contexts (Cuddy et al., 2008; see also Fiske, Cuddy, & Glick, 2007). Indeed, empirical evidence has been obtained from both samples of convenience (Fiske et al., 2002) and representative samples (Cuddy et al., 2007), and from correlational as well as experimental designs (Caprariello, Cuddy, & Fiske, 2009).

Despite the centrality of these two dimensions in shaping group judgments, few studies have addressed the relationship between intergroup contact and perceptions of warmth and competence. However, one study has shown that imagined intergroup encounters can lead to more positive stereotyping, enhancing the perception of warmth and competence ascribed to outgroups (see Brambilla, Ravenna, & Hewstone, 2012) as has one longitudinal field study of direct contact (Al Ramiah & Hewstone, 2012). No study has, however, tested whether the enhancement of warmth and competence perceptions might represent a key mechanism driving the effects of intergroup contact on emotional and behavioural aspects of outgroup attitudes. Yet, prior work has established that warmth and competence perceptions predict a complex texturing of intergroup emotional and behavioural responses (Cuddy et al., 2007, 2008; Ufkes, Otten, van der Zee, Giebels, & Dovidio, 2012). Specifically, research has shown that the combination of high (vs. low) warmth and competence judgments elicits discrete intergroup emotions, such as admiration, contempt, and anger (Fiske et al., 2002; Ufkes et al., 2012). In a similar vein, warmth and competence information together predict a wide range of behavioural responses, including offensive and avoidant action tendencies (Becker & Asbrock, 2012; Cuddy et al., 2007). The present paper sought thus to investigate whether stereotype content enhancement could represent a key cognitive factor mediating the effects of contact on outgroup behavioural tendencies. Specifically, we extended and complemented prior work that has considered general outgroup knowledge as a key cognitive factor driving the contact effects, by taking into account specific content dimensions describing outgroups.

Importantly, recent work has revealed that the warmth dimension is shaped by two distinct characteristics: sociability and morality (Leach, Ellemers, & Barreto, 2007; see also Brambilla, Rusconi, Sacchi, & Cherubini, 2011; Brambilla, Sacchi, Rusconi, Cherubini, & Yzerbyt, 2012). Whereas sociability refers to the willingness to connect with others (e.g., friendliness, kindness), morality pertains to the perceived correctness of social targets (e.g., trustworthiness, honesty). Accordingly, at the interpersonal level sociability and morality represent two distinct personality factors (De Raad & Peabody, 2005; see also Trafimow & Trafimow, 1999). At the group level, morality, rather than sociability and competence, represents the strongest basis for group-level self-concepts such as pride in and identification with the group (Leach et al., 2007; see also Ellemers, Pagliaro, Barreto, & Leach, 2008). Further, recent research has shown that moral information has a prominent role over other information in shaping group impressions and behaviours. Indeed, when people are asked to gather information on ingroup and outgroup members they are inclined to search for information pertaining to morality, rather than to competence or sociability (Brambilla et al., 2011). In addition, when people are asked to evaluate an unknown outgroup, affective and behavioural reactions are better predicted from morality than competence or sociability trait ascriptions (Brambilla, Sacchi, et al., 2012; see also Leach, Bilali, & Pagliaro, in press). These findings fit with the functionalist approach to social judgment (Ames, Fiske, & Todorov, 2011). Indeed, prior work has shown that moral traits are more relevant than sociability and competence traits in defining whether someone represents an opportunity or a threat and in establishing their intentions (Willis & Todorov, 2006). Further, the sociobiological model (Alexander, 1987) suggests that morality might be fundamental for group survival and it works as a protective mechanism against intergroup threat. In line with this reasoning, research based on functional neuroimaging showed that the detection of trustworthiness in faces is a spontaneous, automatic process linked

to activity in the amygdala (Winston, Strange, O'Doherty, & Dolan, 2002), a subcortical brain structure implicated in the detection of potentially harmful stimuli (Engell, Haxby, & Todorov, 2007). Given that establishing other intentions is crucial in social judgment (Cuddy et al., 2008; Fiske et al., 2007), it is not surprising that moral traits would be weighted more heavily than sociability and competence traits in the impression formation process and in predicting outgroup responses.

Based on all this evidence, we first predicted that intergroup contact would enhance the perception of competence, sociability, and morality of outgroups. Indeed, previous studies have shown that positive intergroup contact reduces intergroup distance, thus increasing the perceived similarity between ingroup and outgroup members (Brown & Hewstone, 2005; Gaertner, Mann, Dovidio, Murrell, & Pomare, 1990). Accordingly, individuals tend to perceive the ingroup as more competent, sociable, and moral than stigmatized outgroups (see Cuddy et al., 2008; Fiske et al., 2002). In line with this reasoning, recent work has shown that intergroup contact enhances the perceived friendliness, likeability, competence, and trustworthiness ascribed to stigmatized outgroups (Al Ramiah & Hewstone, 2012; Brambilla, Ravenna, et al., 2012). More importantly, given the prominent role of the morality component of warmth in predicting outgroup evaluations (Brambilla, Sacchi, et al., 2012; Leach et al., in press), we further hypothesized that the enhancement of perceived outgroup morality would be a key factor underlying the effects of contact on outgroup perceptions and evaluations. Thus, we hypothesized that morality would mediate the relationship between contact and outgroup judgments. Given that sociability and competence seem to be less relevant in predicting outgroup responses, we anticipated that they would play a less important role in mediating the effects of contact.

The Present Study

We conducted a study to investigate whether the enhancement of perceived outgroup morality

would mediate the effects of contact on outgroup behavioural intentions. The study was conducted in Italy, and considered immigrants in general as a target group. Indeed, hostility and prejudice toward immigrants appear to be firmly entrenched in Europe (Pereira, Vala, & Costa-Lopes, 2010; Zagefka, Brown, Broquard, & Martin, 2007) and are stronger in Italy than in several other UE countries (Eurobarometer, 2008). Indeed, a recent survey revealed that more than 50% of Italians perceive immigrants as criminals who should not be helped in finding either a job or accommodation. In a similar vein, more than 65% of the respondents believe that in Italy there are too many immigrants, and would not vote for proimmigration parties (Istat, 2012). Against this background, immigration seems an appropriate context for testing our predictions.

Method

Participants. One hundred and forty-six Italian adults, 91 students and 55 nonstudents,¹ recruited in public places (e.g., libraries, universities and cafeterias) of a city in the North of Italy, participated in the study. They were between 18 and 72 years old, with a mean age of 26.09.

Measures and procedures. Participants were asked to fill out a questionnaire about various social issues. The questionnaire contained items related to direct contact, perceived morality, sociability, and competence, as well as behavioural intentions toward immigrants.

Contact. Self-reported contact was measured by two items: How many immigrants do you know? (1, *none*; 7, *many*); How many friends do you have who are immigrants? (1, *none*; 7, *many*) ($\alpha = .85$ see Davies, Tropp, Aron, Pettigrew, & Wright, 2011).

Perceptions of morality, sociability, and competence. Participants rated the target group on traits related to morality (i.e., honest, sincere, trustworthy; $\alpha = .92$), sociability (i.e., friendly, warm, likeable; $\alpha = .89$), and competence (i.e., intelligent, competent, skilful; $\alpha = .91$). The traits were taken from a set of traits previously validated for favourability and for

their rated competence, sociability, and morality (see Brambilla, Sacchi, et al., 2012). Responses were made on 7-point scales (1, *not at all*; 7, *extremely*).

Behavioural intentions. Participants were asked to report the extent to which they would like to: vote for a party that opposes the discrimination against immigrants; display a sign, banner or badge opposing the discrimination against the immigrants; sign a petition against the discrimination of the immigrants; attend a rally against the discrimination of immigrants; join an organization acting against the discrimination of immigrants in Italy; or recruit others to become involved in an organization acting against the discrimination of immigrants in Italy. ($\alpha = .94$ For a similar procedure see Iyer, Schmader, & Lickel, 2007). Responses were made using 7-point scales (1, *not at all*; 7, *extremely*). Finally, participants completed demographic questions before being thanked and debriefed.

Results

As a first step, to confirm that morality, sociability, and competence operated as distinct characteristics in this study, we ran a confirmatory factor analysis (Brambilla et al., 2011; Leach et al., 2007). This control is important, especially considering that previous studies have tended to collapse sociability and morality into a single broader construct (i.e., warmth; Cuddy et al., 2008; Fiske et al., 2002). In the analysis each item was specified to indicate only its hypothesized factor and the latent factors were allowed to correlate with each other. Three different factor models were tested. In Model 1, all nine items loaded on one factor. In Model 2, the items loaded on two different factors (i.e., competence, and morality combined with sociability). In Model 3, the items loaded on three different factors (i.e., competence, sociability, and morality). The analysis revealed that the three-factor model fitted better ($\chi^2/df = 1.51$; RMSEA = 0.06; SRMR = 0.02; CFI = .99) than either the two-factor ($\chi^2/df = 3.39$; RMSEA = .13; SRMR = 0.03; CFI = .98) or the one-factor model ($\chi^2/df = 7.69$; RMSEA = .22; SRMR = 0.06; CFI = .93). Next, we computed bivariate correlations between

our measures (see Table 1). All significant relationships were in the expected direction. More contact was related to higher competence, sociability, and morality perceptions. Similarly, contact was positively correlated with behavioural intentions toward immigrants. Competence, sociability, and morality scores were positively correlated. In particular, consistent with the fact that sociability and morality are theoretically conceived as two distinct characteristics falling along the general dimension of warmth, they were highly correlated (Brambilla et al., 2011; Leach et al., 2007).

Next, we conducted a mediation analysis to test whether the effect of contact on positive behavioural intentions toward immigrants was mediated by perceived outgroup morality, competence, and sociability. Specifically, we used a bootstrapping procedure (Preacher & Hayes, 2008) for estimating direct and indirect effects with multiple potential mediators considered simultaneously (for a similar procedure applied to research on intergroup contact, see Gomez, Tropp, & Fernandez, 2011). Thus, self-reported

contact predicted behavioural intentions toward immigrants ($B = .30, SE = .08, p = .001$). Furthermore, contact positively predicted competence ($B = .18, SE = .05, p = .001$), sociability ($B = .23, SE = .06, p = .001$), and morality scores ($B = .28, SE = .05, p = .001$). Finally, when competence, sociability, and morality were included in the regression equation, morality positively predicted the behavioural intentions ($B = .75, SE = .19, p = .001$), whereas the direct effect of contact on behaviours was no longer significant ($B = .03, SE = .08, p = .73$). Moreover, neither sociability ($B = .29, SE = .19, p = .13$) nor competence ($B = -.21, SE = .17, p = .22$) predicted the behavioural intention measure. According to Preacher and Hayes (2008), the significance of mediators is judged in relation to whether the bias corrected 95% confidence interval includes 0. The results of this analysis provided support for the mediating role of morality (CI = LL: .09; UL .39) but not of either sociability (CI = LL: -.03; UL .18), or competence (CI = LL: -.11; UL .02), using 5,000 bootstrap resamples² (see Figure 1).

Table 1. Correlations between variables.

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5
1. Contact	3.89	1.75	1	.28**	.33**	.41**	.28**
2. Competence	5.05	1.08		1	.73**	.71**	.37**
3. Sociability	4.70	1.20			1	.82**	.52**
4. Morality	4.36	1.22				1	.58**
5. Beh. Intentions	4.27	1.83					1

Note. ** $p < .01$.

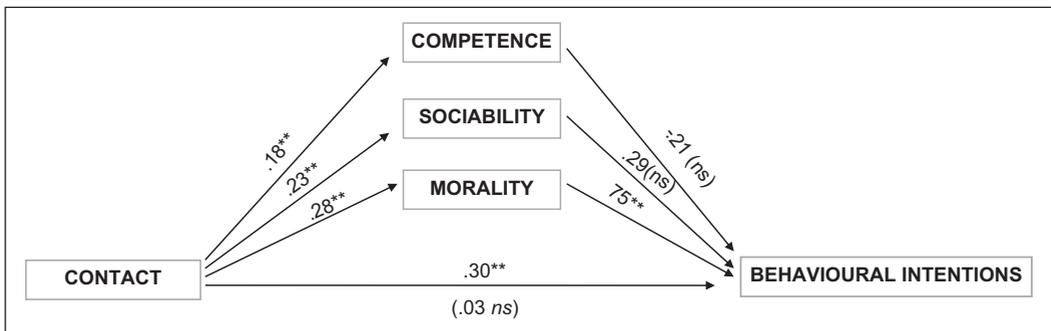


Figure 1. Multiple mediation model for the effect of contact on positive behavioural intentions.

Note. ** $p < .001$; coefficients are unstandardized.

Moreover, we also tested the reverse model, in which the positive behavioural intentions were used as the potential mediator and the perception of morality as the dependent variable. Results indicated that self-reported contact continued to significantly affect the perception of morality ($B = .19$, $SE = .04$, $p = .002$) after controlling for the intentions toward immigrants ($CI = LL: -.01$; $UL .03$).

We further tested two additional reversed models, using morality as the predictor variable. In the first model, direct contact and behavioural intentions were the mediator and the dependent variables, respectively. In the second model, the behavioural intention measure was considered as the mediator. Neither the first ($CI = LL: -.08$; $UL .11$), nor the second ($CI = LL: -.13$ $UL .21$) model was significant.

Discussion

The present study advanced our knowledge about how contact between members of different groups can improve intergroup attitudes by investigating how contact changes the content of specific stereotypes ascribed to outgroups. Specifically, we showed that contact with immigrants promoted a more positive perception of the group along the dimensions of competence, sociability, and morality. Further, intergroup contact led to more positive behavioural intentions toward the immigrants. However, although contact increased perceived outgroup morality, sociability, and competence, only morality mediated the effect of direct contact on behavioural dispositions. Importantly, the traits we used to measure morality, sociability, and competence characteristics were carefully selected to convey equal favourability. Thus, the key role of morality traits in shaping the contact effects was not driven by their greater favourability.

The present research makes a valuable contribution to the literature on contact and on the fundamental dimensions of social judgment. First, our data advance our understanding of the cognitive mediators of intergroup contact (i.e., in this case, stereotypical traits). Most studies in this area have mainly considered the affective mediators

underlying contact effects, showing the key role of anxiety, threat, empathy, and perspective taking. Studies exploring the cognitive mediators of intergroup contact have been few in number, but have shown that contact can exert its effect on prejudice reduction, in part, by increasing outgroup knowledge (Allport, 1954; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2008). The present research, showing that direct contact exerts its effects on intergroup behavioural tendencies by enhancing perceived outgroup morality, has further extended the evidence for the cognitive mechanisms underlying the effects of contact, going beyond the notion of general outgroup knowledge. Specifically, we showed that increased perceptions of outgroup morality have a crucial role in promoting positive intergroup relations, while sociability and competence perceptions have a less relevant role.

Second, our findings corroborate previous research showing that intergroup contact may enhance specific stereotype content. Indeed, a previous study showing the impact of contact on stereotype content considered an indirect form of contact, namely imagined contact (see Brambilla, Ravenna, et al., 2012). The present research complemented these prior findings by considering the more traditional form of contact, namely direct contact. Further, the one previous study that investigated direct contact and stereotypes had to collapse sociability and morality into the broader dimension of warmth, and failed to test whether intergroup encounters increased the sociability and morality components of warmth (Al Ramiah & Hewstone, 2012). The present research showed that face-to-face encounters enhanced the perception of warmth in general, and of both sociability and morality in particular.

Third, our findings corroborate and complement prior evidence showing the prominent role of morality in social judgment (Brambilla et al., 2011; Leach et al., 2007; see also Ellemers et al., 2008). Indeed, our data clearly showed that perceived morality has a role over and above sociability and competence in mediating contact effects. Thus, morality seems to have a prominent role, not only in the impression formation process (Brambilla, Sacchi, et al., 2012) and in

predicting ingroup pride (Leach et al., 2007), but also in promoting more positive intergroup relations. Even though sociability and morality were highly correlated, confirmatory factor analyses showed that they were empirically distinct (see also, Brambilla et al., 2011; Leach et al., 2007). Further, by showing the distinct role of morality and sociability in predicting the effects of contact, we further underlined the necessity of distinguishing between the two components of warmth, rather than considering warmth as an undifferentiated dimension.

Despite the promising results of our research, it should be acknowledged that our research is based on cross-sectional data, as are most of the studies on intergroup contact (for a similar argumentation see, Gomez et al., 2011). This prevents us from making causal claims. Thus, future research should examine the hypothesized relationship using experimental or longitudinal designs, to allow for stronger causal inferences regarding the effects of direct contact on perceived outgroup morality and intergroup attitudes. In addition, future studies should corroborate our findings by going beyond immigrants as a target group and considering a wider range of intergroup situations and measures (e.g., implicit measures). Based on these findings, one further direction that would be interesting to take in future research is to compare different types of mediating mechanisms in a single study. Previous findings suggested that affective mediators are more important than cognitive mediators in driving contact effects (Pettigrew, 2008). However, prior work has mainly considered outgroup knowledge as a cognitive mediator. Thus, it would be interesting to investigate whether increased perceived outgroup morality may represent a stronger cognitive mediator than the general increase in outgroup knowledge, and to compare its effects with those pertaining to affective mediators.

Moreover, it should be noted that in the current study we considered morality mainly in terms of trustworthiness and honesty (see also Ellemers et al., 2008; Leach et al., 2007). Even if the moral domain might be conceived more broadly than this definition implies (see Graham et al., 2011;

Haidt & Kesebir, 2010), our operationalization of morality is widespread in Western cultures (Haidt, Koller, & Dias, 1993). In line with this reasoning, research revealed that among the different aspects of morality, trustworthiness is the most important in Western countries because it is most inferentially necessary to judgments of who is moral (see Leach et al., in press; Leach et al., 2007). Moreover, trustworthiness and honesty are more generally and more strongly considered moral than are other relevant traits (Leach et al., in press). Notwithstanding, one direction that would be interesting to take in further research is to investigate how intergroup contact impacts different aspects of perceived outgroup morality, such as trustworthiness, loyalty, and spirituality.

To conclude, our findings add to the burgeoning literature on the mediators of intergroup contact by showing that stereotype content enhancement along the core dimension of morality could be a basic mechanism for improving intergroup relations. This results confirm, generally, the key role of morality in shaping different aspects of social judgment.

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Notes

1. Preliminary analyses did not yield any significant difference between students and nonstudent participants, all p 's > .20.
2. We also tested our mediation model using latent variables. In the path model, contact was entered as the predictor, while competence, morality, and sociability were entered as the mediators. The measure of behavioural intentions toward immigrants served as the dependent variable. We allowed correlations between the three mediators. Moreover, the direct path from contact to behavioural intentions was estimated (results do not change when excluding the direct path). The model fit the data well ($\chi^2/df = 1.93$; RMSEA = 0.086; SRMR = 0.043; CFI = .98). Moreover, results mirrored those with regression analyses. Indeed, contact is associated with increased competence ($B = .21$, $SE = .07$, $p = .01$), sociability ($B = .36$, $SE = .08$, $p = .001$),

and morality ($B = .44$, $SE = .08$, $p < .001$). In turn, only morality is significantly associated with behavioural intentions toward immigrants ($B = .58$, $SE = .25$, $p < .05$); the associations of competence ($B = -.34$, $SE = .21$, ns) and sociability ($B = .41$, $SE = .32$, ns) with behavioural intentions are nonsignificant ($ps > .11$). The direct relation between contact and behavioural intentions ($B = .03$, $SE = .08$, ns) is not significant, indicating total mediation.

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