Imagined contact in high conflict settings: The role of ethnic group identification and the perspective of minority group members

Sabahat Cigdem Bagci | Zeynep Ecem Piyale | Efsane Ebcim

Department of Psychology, Isik University

Correspondence
Sabahat Cigdem Bagci, Department of Psychology, Isik University 34980 Sile/Istanbul, Turkey
Email: cigdem.bagci@isikun.edu.tr

Funding information
Isik University [Scientific Research Project Grant at Isik University, BAP], Grant/Award Number: 15B101

Abstract
Recent contact literature has shown that imagining a positive intergroup encounter improves intergroup attitudes and behaviors, yet less is known about the effects of imagined contact in high conflict settings. We conducted three studies to understand the potential effects of imagined intergroup contact among ethnic Turks (majority status) and ethnic Kurds (minority status) in the Turkish-Kurdish interethnic conflict setting. Study 1 (N = 47, Turkish) tested standard imagined contact effects (neutral vs. standard imagined contact condition) among majority Turks and showed that imagined contact was effective on outgroup attitudes, perceived threat, intergroup anxiety, and support for multiculturalism only among participants with higher ethnic identification. Study 2 (N = 107, Turkish) examined how ethnic identification of the contact partner would influence the effectiveness of the standard imagined contact scenario (neutral vs. standard vs. ethnic identification condition) and demonstrated that imagined contact effects were more negative when the contact partner identified with his/her ethnic group during imagined contact. Study 3 (N = 55, Kurdish) investigated imagined contact effects (neutral vs. standard imagined contact condition) among an ethnic minority group and showed that imagined contact did not improve minority group members’ outgroup attitudes, but did decrease intergroup anxiety and perceived discrimination (marginally significantly) and increased perceived positive attitudes from the majority group. Practical implications of the use of imagined intergroup contact strategy in conflict-ridden settings were discussed.

1 | INTRODUCTION

In a world where intractable conflict between groups still exists and many disadvantaged groups suffer from the detrimental effects of discrimination, prejudice-reduction interventions are critical to build intergroup harmony and peace. Intergroup relations scholars have shown positive intergroup contact to be an effective strategy that consistently promotes positive intergroup relationships (e.g., Allport, 1954; Pettigrew, 1997; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006; Tropp & Pettigrew, 2005). Recent improvements in this research area have demonstrated that not only direct forms of contact are effective on attitudes, but also indirect forms of intergroup contact such as extended contact (Wright, Aron, McLaughlin-Volpe, & Ropp, 1997) and imagined contact (Turner, Crisp, & Lambert, 2007) are able to foster intergroup relationships. Particularly, imagined intergroup contact has been shown to be a practical and effective intervention strategy to improve attitudes and behaviors toward various disadvantaged groups in the society, including the elderly, immigrants, schizophrenics, and homosexuals (e.g., Abrams et al., 2008; Turner, West, & Christie, 2013), providing many of the previously identified benefits of direct contact (e.g., Turner & Crisp, 2010; Vezzali, Capozza, Giovannini, & Stathi, 2012). Imagined contact has been suggested to be an advantageous strategy to improve positive outgroup attitudes especially in settings characterized by high levels of intergroup conflict, yet few studies to our knowledge have examined imagined contact effects within such settings (Husnu & Crisp, 2010a,2015) and in particular investigated its effects among minority status groups (but see Stathi & Crisp, 2008). The current study aims to extend imagined contact literature by presenting findings from three studies conducted within the Turkish-Kurdish intergroup conflict setting.
1.1 | Turkish-Kurdish intergroup setting in Turkey

Although Turkish society has experienced many intergroup conflicts since the early years of Turkish Republic, conflict between Turkish and Kurdish groups in Turkey has been the most influential and intractable one among all others. Historically, Turkish State’s assimilationist political attitudes towards ethnic minority groups have led the Kurdish society to become an oppressed minority group since the 1990s (Mutlu, 1996; Saatci, 2002; Yegen, 1996). Kurdish people, although forming the numerical majority of the population in the Southeast of Turkey (currently around 18% of the total population; Konda, 2011), were not allowed to use their native language for years (Gündüz-Hosgör & Smits, 2002; Icduygu, Romano, & Sirkeci, 1999) and have been often considered a minority group that should be assimilated into the mainstream society forming a part of the Turkish national group (Bikmen & Sunar, 2013). Along with the socio-political aspect of the conflict, at the intergroup level, Turkish and Kurdish group members in Turkey hold negative intergroup attitudes and low levels of trust toward each other, display negative outgroup stereotypes, and blame the outgroup for the conflict (Bilali, Çelik, & Ok, 2014; Çelebi, Verkuyten, Köse, & Maliepaard, 2014; Seta/Pollmark, 2009).

Recently, there has been increased attention payed to the investigation of psychological processes in Turkish-Kurdish intergroup relationships. For example, examining conflict perception of Turkish and Kurdish ethnic groups, Çelebi et al. (2014) showed that construing the conflict between the two ethnic groups compared to other conflict frames led to lower outgroup trust. Other research has focused on intergroup contact effects and showed that interethnic contact led Turkish participants to support minority rights to a greater extent (Çelebi, Verkuyten, & Smyrnioti, 2016). Bagci and Çelebi (2017a) demonstrated that cross-group friendships between Turkish and Kurdish group members were associated with positive outgroup attitudes and support for multiculturalism among both group members, but this association depended on the perceived level of intergroup conflict. In summary, this relatively new research literature indicates that contact between Turkish-Kurdish group members is an essential part of intergroup relationships in Turkey and there is indeed an urgent need to concentrate on effective contact-inducing strategies to promote intergroup harmony between the two groups.

1.2 | Recent advances in imagined contact theory

Although intergroup contact theory research (Allport, 1954; Pettigrew, 1998) has consistently demonstrated the positive link between intergroup contact and positive outgroup attitudes (e.g., Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006), sometimes providing settings where positive intergroup contact occurs may be practically impossible. Contact effects may even become negative in settings characterized with high hostility and competition (e.g., Pettigrew, 1997) and providing opportunities for contact may not necessarily improve intergroup relationships unless structural inequalities in the society are reduced (e.g., Dixon, Durheim, & Tredoux, 2005). Hence, if direct positive intergroup contact is difficult to occur naturally, such a positive contact may be mentally simulated. Therefore, the basic idea behind imagined contact research has been providing diverse positive intergroup outcomes such as improved explicit and implicit attitudes (Turner & Crisp, 2010; Vezzali, Capozza, Giovannini, & Stathi, 2012), positive behavioral intentions towards the outgroup (Husnu & Crisp, 2010a), projection of positive traits to the outgroup (Stathi & Crisp, 2008), outgroup trust (Turner, West, & Christie, 2013), and reduced prejudice and intergroup anxiety (Kuchenbrandt, Eyssel, & Seidel, 2013) by simply asking participants to imagine positive contact with an outgroup member.

Recent research in this field has also started to explore when imagined contact is an effective strategy in an intergroup setting because of recent failures to replicate strong imagined contact effects in some circumstances (e.g., Klein et al., 2014). Previous research has mostly concentrated on contextual factors as potential moderating mechanisms in the contact scenario. Stathi, Crisp, and Hogg (2011), for example, indicated that a person-focused scenario was more effective than a group-based scenario. Other research has demonstrated that details about the contact scenario enhanced imagined contact effects on attitudes (Husnu & Crisp, 2010b, Miles & Crisp, 2014). West and Bruckmüller (2013) showed that cognitively more difficult tasks decreased the influence of imagined contact, whereas Bagci, Piyale, Bircek, and Ebci (2017) demonstrated that adding friendship features to the contact scenario increased the benefits of the strategy.

Previous research has also shown that individual factors may moderate the effectiveness of imagined contact studies. For example, Asbrock, Gutenbrunner, and Wagner (2013) tested the effect of imagined contact on outgroup emotions and future contact engagement and found that imagined contact was more effective among individuals with high levels of right-wing authoritarianism. Similarly, Hoffarth and Hodson (2016) found that imagined contact was more effective among participants with lower levels of previous intergroup contact compared to participants with higher levels of previous intergroup contact. These recent advances in the investigation of imagined contact scenario demonstrates that it is critical to identify key mechanisms that influence the effectiveness of the imagined contact scenario on outgroup attitudes. The current research investigated the role of ingroup identification on the effectiveness of the standard imagined contact strategy (Study 1) and examined whether contact partner’s ethnic identification influenced the effectiveness of the standard contact scenario (Study 2) among the Turkish group. In Study 3, the perspective of the minority Kurds has been examined by testing the standard imagined contact strategy on participants’ outgroup attitudes, intergroup anxiety, perceived discrimination, and perceived outgroup’s attitudes.

2 | STUDY 1

In Study 1, we tested the effectiveness of imagined intergroup contact among Turkish participants and investigated ingroup identification as a moderating mechanism. Ingroup identification has been previously demonstrated to be a key mechanism in intergroup relations research (Social Identity Theory, Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Accordingly, group members strive to maintain a positive self-esteem through identifying
with (and favoring) a social group they belong to. Ethnic identities become a critical aspect of intergroup relationships especially in societies where interethnic conflict exists (e.g., Verkuyten & Yildiz, 2007). In such settings, both ethnic minority and majority group members show ingroup favouritism as a result of identifying with their ethnic ingroup (Masson & Verkuyten, 1993) and consequently hold more negative outgroup attitudes.

We suggested that the extent to which imagined intergroup contact is effective on outgroup attitudes would be dependent on the level of ingroup identification. Ethnic identification is particularly important within the context of Turkish-Kurdish relationships in Turkey. Previous research in this setting has demonstrated that both Turkish and Kurdish people identify strongly with their ethnic ingroup (Bilali, 2014; Celebi et al., 2014) and both group members display similarly low levels of intergroup trust (Celebi et al., 2014), making ethnic identities a salient feature of intergroup and interpersonal relationships in Turkey. Previous research on the associations between ethnic identification and outgroup attitudes have shown that a sense of a strong ethnic identity is substantially related to ingroup preference (Masson & Verkuyten, 1993), stronger vulnerability to discrimination (Operario & Fiske, 2001), prejudice (Negy, Shreve, Jensen, & Uddin, 2003), and negative outgroup attitudes (Mummendey, Klink, & Brown, 2001).

Only one study to our knowledge focused on group identification as a moderator in the imagined contact scenario (Stathi & Crisp, 2008). The authors explored imagined contact in the English–French intergroup relations setting and proposed that a strong national identity would moderate the effectiveness of imagined contact on projection to outgroups such that imagined contact would be less effective for high national identifiers who are resistant to strategies that involve close interpersonal relationships with outgroup members. However, other research in contact literature has shown that contact effects would be stronger among people who initially hold more negative outgroup attitudes (Dhont & Van Hiel, 2009; Hodson, 2008; Hodson, 2011). More specifically, ingroup identification has been previously found to moderate the effects of direct contact on outgroup attitudes (Mari, Capoza, Hichy, Falvo, & Volpato, 2007; Voci, Hewstone, Swart, & Veneziani, 2015), such that contact was positively related to forgiveness only for individuals who reported high levels of ethnic identification. Voci et al. (2015) suggested that high ingroup identifiers are prone to show stronger contact effects since they initially hold more extreme attitudes and contact effects may generalize more strongly and easily for high ingroup identifiers for whom group membership is a salient aspect of intergroup relations (e.g., Brown & Hewstone, 2005). Studies in imagined contact literature have also confirmed this by demonstrating imagined intergroup contact to be more effective among high right-wing authoritarian groups (Asbrock et al., 2013) and the ones who had lower levels of previous direct contact (Hoffarth & Hodson, 2016) and higher levels of initial prejudice (West, Hotchin, & Wood, 2017). Therefore, we argued that Turkish participants with higher levels of ethnic ingroup identification would show greater contact effects and benefit more from imagined contact.

We examined the effects of imagined contact on previously studied intergroup outcomes including outgroup attitudes, perceived group threat, and intergroup anxiety (Bagci et al., 2017; Turner et al., 2013). Moreover, we extended previously examined outgroup outcomes in imagined contact literature by including support for multiculturalism. Multiculturalism is defined as recognizing the distinctiveness of different ethno-cultural groups within the same political framework (Verkuyten & Martinovic, 2006) and emphasizes the importance and/or the benefits of cultural diversity within the same society. Previous research has found that direct intergroup contact was associated with higher endorsement of a multiculturalist ideology through extending the individual’s perspective about their own cultural norms (Celebi et al., 2016; Gonzalez, Verkuyten, Weesie, & Poppe, 2008; Verkuyten, Thijis, & Bekhuis, 2010). Therefore, we expected imagined contact to function similarly and promote the level of support for multiculturalism. Support for multiculturalism is also critical in the context of Turkish-Kurdish interethnic relationships, since the conflict between the two groups is often about rights that have not been granted to Kurdish ethnic group members (Icduygü, Romano, & Sirkeci, 1999).

2.1 | Method

2.1.1 | Participants and procedure

We initially recruited 61 undergraduate university students, but excluded 14 participants who identified themselves with an ethnic background other than Turkish which resulted in a total of 47 Turkish ethnic group participants (22 males and 25 females, \( M_{\text{age}} = 23.96, SD = 3.92 \)). The mean subjective socio-economic status (SES) of participants ("How would you rate your socio-economic status in the society," ranging from 1 (extremely low) to 7 (extremely high)) was upper-middle class (\( M = 4.19, SD = 0.88 \)).

Data were collected in a psychology lab through online questionnaires and participants received a small amount of payment for their participation. Participants were randomly assigned to one of two conditions. In the imagined contact condition, we used a standard positive contact scenario in which participants were asked to think about a random midday, sitting alone in a familiar café. Next, they were asked to imagine a Kurdish student approaching their table and asking to sit next to the participant. Finally, they were told to imagine that they had a conversation with the Kurdish student during 20–30 min and that the conversation was pleasant and interesting (e.g., Stathi & Crisp, 2008). To enhance the imagined contact scenario, we also told participants to imagine that they could be friends with this person in the future. Next, participants were asked to write what they could have talked about next to the participant. Finally, they were told to imagine that they had a conversation with the Kurdish student during 20–30 min and that the conversation was pleasant and interesting (e.g., Stathi & Crisp, 2008).

The control condition included a mental imagery task with a standard non-contact scene (imaging an outdoor scene and describing the details of this scene, see Stathi & Crisp, 2008, Experiment 2).

2.1.2 | Measures

Unless otherwise stated, all items ranged from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree) and higher scores indicated higher levels of the relevant concept. All reliabilities were assessed by Cronbach’s alpha coefficients. To assess pre-intervention ethnic identification, four items were taken from a previously used ethnic identification scale (Verkuyten & Yildiz, 2007; for example, "I am proud of my ethnic group" and "I feel..."
connected to my ethnic group", $\alpha = 0.89$). Among the dependent variables, we used a three-item outgroup attitude scale assessing feelings towards Kurdish people on bipolar adjectives (negative/positive, cold/warm, hostile/friendly) which have been used in previous research (e.g., Bagci et al., 2017; Swart, Hewstone, Christ, & Voci, 2010; Wright, Aron, McLaughlin-Volpe, & Ropp, 1997, $\alpha = 0.96$). Perceived group threat was measured by three items (Schlueter, Schmidt, & Wagner, 2008); one item was discarded, because it reduced reliability ("Kurdish children in schools damage the quality of education Turkish children receive"). The scale with two items ("Kurdish people in Turkey enrich our culture (R)" and "Kurdish people in Turkey are a burden to our social security system") showed satisfactory reliability ($\alpha = 0.73$). Intergroup anxiety was measured by three items (adapted from Stephan & Stephan, 1985) asking participants to rate how anxious, concerned, and doubtful they would be when they engaged in contact with a person from a Kurdish background ($\alpha = 0.92$). A five-item support for multiculturalism scale was adapted from Verkuyten (2005) and assessed how much participants supported multiculturalism in relation to the Kurdish ethnic group (e.g., "It is difficult to understand Kurdish people (R)" and "I think I can learn a lot from Kurdish people", $\alpha = 0.81$).

### 2.2 Results

We used PROCESS macros (Hayes, 2009) to test the moderating role of ingroup identification on the effectiveness of imagined contact on outgroup attitudes, perceived threat, intergroup anxiety, and support for multiculturalism. Condition was dummy coded as 0 (neutral condition) and 1 (contact condition).

Regression analyses showed that ingroup identification was negatively and marginally significantly associated with outgroup attitudes ($B = -0.30$, SE = 0.16, $t = -1.89$, 95% CI [-0.51, -0.02], $p = .06$), whereas the main effect of condition was not significant ($B = -1.55$, SE = 1.10, $t = -1.52$, 95% CI [-3.61, .50], $p = .13$). The moderation effect was significant ($B = 0.56$, $SE = 0.26$, $t = 2.17$, 95% CI [0.04, 1.07], $p = .03$). Among participants with higher ingroup identification (at 1 SD above the mean), imagined contact significantly improved attitudes towards the Kurdish group ($B = 1.49$, $p = .03$), while among participants with lower ingroup identification (at 1 SD below the mean) the positive effects of imagined contact on outgroup attitudes seemed to disappear ($B = -0.52$, $p = .41$).

Ingroup identification was positively associated with perceived threat ($B = 0.37$, SE = 0.19, $t = 1.99$, 95% CI [-0.00, 0.74], $p = .05$). The main effect of imagined contact on perceived threat was not significant ($B = 1.75$, $t = 1.44$, 95% CI [-0.71, 4.20], SE = 1.22, $p = .16$). The moderation effect was marginally significant ($B = -0.61$, SE = 0.31, $t = -2.00$, 95% CI [-1.23, 0.00], $p = .05$), such that the benefits of imagined contact on decreasing perceived threat were only intact for individuals with higher ingroup identification ($B = -1.59$, $p = .04$). Imagined contact effects were not effective for individuals with lower ingroup identification ($B = 0.62$, $p = .41$).

The regression model predicting intergroup anxiety showed that the main effect of ingroup identification was positive and significant ($B = 0.44$, SE = 0.17, $t = 2.52$, 95% CI [0.09, 0.79], $p = .01$). The main effect of condition was marginally significant ($B = 2.35$, SE = 1.14, $t = 2.07$, 95% CI [0.64, 4.64], $p = .05$). Contrary to our expectations, intergroup anxiety was higher in the imagined contact group compared to the neutral group. There was a significant interaction effect ($B = -0.76$, SE = 0.29, $t = -2.64$, 95% CI [-1.33, -0.18], $p = .01$), such that imagined contact led to reduced intergroup anxiety among high ethnic identifiers ($B = -1.78$, $p = .02$), but not among low ethnic identifiers ($B = 0.95$, $p = .18$).

Finally, the model predicting support for multiculturalism indicated that ingroup identification had a marginally significant and negative effect ($B = -0.30$, SE = 0.15, $t = -2.00$, 95% CI [-0.60, .00], $p = .05$). The effect of condition was not significant ($B = -1.41$, SE = 0.96, $t = -1.46$, 95% CI [-3.35, .54], $p = .15$). The moderation effect was significant ($B = 0.56$, SE = 0.24, $t = 2.30$, 95% CI [0.07, 1.05], $p = .03$). In line with our initial suggestion, imagined contact led to higher endorsement of multiculturalism only among those with higher ingroup identification ($B = 1.63$, $p = .01$), but not among those with lower ingroup identification ($B = -0.39$, $p = .51$).

### 2.3 Discussion

Study 1 showed that the main effects of imagined contact scenario (in the sample as a whole) were non-significant, and imagined contact even led to higher intergroup anxiety. Previous research has shown imagined contact to be an influential strategy that improves outgroup attitudes across diverse populations and contexts. A 70-studies meta-analysis (Miles & Crisp, 2014), for example, indicated that imagined contact successfully improved outgroup attitudes and behaviors. However, recent research has also shown inconsistencies about the effectiveness of imagined intergroup contact, taking into account studies that failed to replicate imagined contact effects (e.g., Klein et al., 2014). Similar to our finding, in a recent study, Hoffarth and Hodson (2016) demonstrated that the imagined contact scenario did not lead to improved attitudes towards Muslims in the US. The researchers indicated that this could be related to increased levels of Islamophobia and intergroup anxiety against Muslims, which are likely to inhibit the benefits of imagined contact effects for improved intergroup relationships. The lack of significant main effects in our study may be also explained by increased anti-Kurdish discourses and attitudes in the public sphere (e.g., Bora, 2006).

On the other hand, the relevant literature has also demonstrated various conditions such as regulatory focus (promotion vs. prevention) and cognitive difficulty of the task to moderate imagined contact effects on outgroup attitudes and behaviors (West & Bruckmüller, 2013; West & Greenland, 2016). Based on previous findings in the direct contact literature, we suggested that ingroup identification may function as a potential moderator of imagined contact effects on outgroup attitudes such that high ingroup identifiers would benefit more from the imagined contact effects compared to low ingroup identifiers (Voci et al., 2015). In line with this, we found that the benefits of imagined contact on positive intergroup relationships were only present among those who reported higher ethnic ingroup identification. These findings are consistent with previous research in direct and
imagined contact literature, showing contact effects to be stronger for those who are initially higher in prejudice (e.g., Dhont & Van Hiel, 2009; Hodson, 2008; West et al., 2017).

Our findings are inconsistent with Stathi and Crisp’s (2008) study which showed that low ingroup identifiers benefited more from imagined contact compared to high ingroup identifiers. The lack of consistency across the two studies may highlight the difference between contexts in terms of conflict; while we focused on a high conflict interethnic context where ethnic identification is a salient aspect of intergroup relations and majority-minority status group differences are large and visible, Stathi and Crisp (2008) focused on national identification in a relatively less salient intergroup context (French-English nationals). Therefore, it is possible that ethnic identification which is a more critical aspect of the Kurdish identity (Bora, 2006; Duman & Alacahan, 2011) played a different role on the association between imagined contact and outgroup attitudes.

3 | STUDY 2

Study 1 demonstrated that while majority group participants with higher ethnic group identification benefitted from the positive effects of imagined contact strategy, the ones with lower ethnic identification did not report improved outgroup attitudes after imagining intergroup contact. In Study 2, we aimed to extend this finding by focusing on the ethnic identification of the imagined contact partner. More specifically, we tested how ethnic identification of the imagined contact partner would influence the effectiveness of the imagined contact strategy among Turkish participants.

Although previous research has shown a great deal of information about how an individual’s own ethnic identification may be related to outgroup attitudes (e.g., Masson & Verkuyten, 1993), only a small amount of research has investigated how outgroup members’ ingroup identification may affect the level of outgroup attitudes. In one study, Bagci and Çelebi (2017b) examined how perceived cross-group friend’s ethnic identity level may be related to outgroup attitudes and multiculturalism. The authors found that although own ethnic identification was negatively associated with positive outgroup attitudes and support for multiculturalism, perceived cross-group friend’s ethnic identification was positively related to the outcome variables. Based on the distinctiveness threat theory, one can suggest that perceiving the other group member as identified with their own ingroup may increase the perception of distinctiveness and thus lead to more positive outgroup attitudes (Brewer, 1999). Other research has shown that majorities may prefer that minority group members identify less with their ingroup; Zagetka, Brown, Broquard, and Martin (2007) found that ethnic minorities’ desire for culture maintenance led to more negative outgroup attitudes among majority group participants. Therefore, we expected ethnic minority group member’s ethnic identification during imagined contact to either strengthen or weaken the effectiveness of the standard imagined contact scenario on outgroup attitudes, perceived threat, intergroup anxiety, and support for multiculturalism.

3.1 | Method

3.1.1 | Participants and procedure

The initial sample was composed of 127 university students, but we excluded 20 participants who self-identified with an ethnic group other than Turkish, resulting in a total of 107 Turkish university students in the final sample (26 males, 81 females, M_{age} = 21.25, SD = 2.19). Participants’ mean SES was 4.36 (SD = 0.86) (on a 7-point scale, 7 being highest).

Online questionnaires were completed in a psychology lab with the help of research assistants, and participants received course credits for their participation. Participants were randomly assigned to one of three groups: neutral, standard positive contact, and standard positive contact with partner’s ethnic identification. The neutral and the standard contact conditions were the same as Study 1. In the ethnic identification condition, we merged the following sentence to the scenario: “During the conversation, this person tells you how he/she is attached to her/his ethnic identity and how he/she is proud of his/her ethnic identity”. Similar to the standard condition, the instruction was followed by a positive statement (“the conversation was pleasant and interesting”) and friendship potential (“you think you could be friends with this person”).

3.1.2 | Measures

Unless otherwise stated, all items ranged from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree) and higher scores indicated higher levels of the relevant concept. All reliabilities were assessed by Cronbach’s alpha coefficients.

Outgroup attitudes were assessed by feelings towards Kurdish people on three bipolar adjectives (e.g., Wright et al., 1997, see Study 1, α = 0.94), Perceived group threat was measured by two items used in Study 1 (α = 0.73). Intergroup anxiety was measured by three items (adapted from Stephan & Stephan, 1985, see Study 1, α = 0.93). A five-item support for multiculturalism scale was adapted from Verkuyten (2005) and assessed how much participants supported multiculturalism towards the Kurdish ethnic group (see Study 1, α = 0.79).

3.2 | Results

A MANOVA procedure was applied to test differences between the three conditions (neutral, standard positive contact, and standard positive contact with partner’s ethnic identification) on outgroup attitudes, perceived threat, intergroup anxiety, and support for multiculturalism. The multivariate effect of condition on dependent variables was significant, F(8, 92) = 2.07, p = .04, Wilks’ Lambda = 0.85, η^2 = 0.08.

The univariate effect of condition on outgroup attitudes was significant, F(2, 99) = 3.85, p = .02, η^2 = 0.07. A further LSD (least significant difference) post-hoc analysis demonstrated that standard contact condition (M = 4.71, SD = 1.32) yielded more positive outgroup attitudes compared to the neutral condition (M = 4.30, SD = 1.19), but the difference did not reach statistical significance (p = .15). The difference between the neutral and ethnic identification conditions (M = 3.97, SD = .89) was also non-significant. However, it was found that ethnic identification led to significantly more negative attitudes compared to the standard contact condition (p = .01).
The univariate effect of condition on perceived threat was marginally significant, $F(2, 99) = 2.82, p = .06, \eta^2 = 0.05$. LSD post-hoc tests indicated that although threat in the neutral condition ($M = 3.17, SD = 1.67$) was higher compared to threat in the standard contact condition ($M = 2.93, SD = 1.55$), the difference was not statistically significant ($p = .55$). The difference between the neutral and ethnic identification condition ($M = 3.80, SD = 1.65$) was not significant ($p = .12$), whereas standard contact led to significantly lower threat compared to the ethnic identification condition ($p = .02$).

Concerning intergroup anxiety, the univariate effect was also significant, $F(2, 99) = 4.11, p = .02, \eta^2 = .08$. Further LSD post-hoc tests showed that ethnic identification condition ($M = 3.21, SD = 1.78$) led to significantly higher intergroup anxiety compared to both neutral ($M = 2.22, SD = 1.08$) and standard contact conditions ($M = 2.48, SD = 1.44$), $p = .01$ and $p = .04$, respectively. The difference between the neutral and standard contact conditions was not significant ($p = .49$).

Finally, the univariate effect of condition on support for multiculturalism was significant, $F(2, 99) = 5.59, p = .04, \eta^2 = 0.06$. Findings indicated that the difference between the standard ($M = 4.88, SD = 1.52$) and the neutral conditions ($M = 4.30, SD = 1.25$) was marginally significant ($p = .08$). While the difference between the neutral and ethnic identification conditions ($M = 4.13, SD = 1.13$) was non-significant ($p = .59$), the difference between the standard and the ethnic identification conditions was significant ($p = .01$). Means and standard deviations across three groups are displayed in Figure 1.

3.3 Discussion

Study 2 examined whether adding an ethnic identification feature to the standard imagined contact scenario would increase or decrease the effectiveness of the strategy on outgroup attitudes, perceived threat, intergroup anxiety, and support for multiculturalism. Consistent with Study 1, although standard imagined contact condition seemed to lead to more positive outgroup attitudes and support for multiculturalism, and lower threat and intergroup anxiety compared to the neutral condition, these differences did not reach statistical significance. On the other hand, we found a consistent pattern regarding the effect of contact partner’s ethnic identification; imagined contact scenario led to more negative attitudes, higher threat and intergroup anxiety, as well as lower support for multiculturalism when the scenario involved contact partner’s ethnic identification. Therefore, the salience of the contact partner’s ethnic identity seemed to deteriorate the effectiveness of imagined contact rather than strengthening its benefits.

We initially predicted that the effect of partner’s ethnic identification in an imagined intergroup contact scenario may be either enhancing or deteriorating. First, based on the literature proposing the role of distinctiveness in ethnic group relations, we proposed that ethnic majority participants may have had more positive attitudes toward an ethnic minority contact partner who identified with his/her ethnic group, because this would have implied the distinctiveness of ethnic groups. In fact, research has shown that outgroup members’ ethnic identification level may be associated with more positive attitudes towards the target outgroup (Bagci & Celebi, 2017b). However, other research has shown that majorities may not be supportive of ethnic minorities’ culture maintenance (Zagefka et al., 2007). Confirming the latter evidence, we found that, even though we added same enhancing elements (positivity and cross-group friendship potential) to both standard contact and ethnic identification conditions, contact partner’s ethnic identification actually led to more negative attitudes, greater threat perception and intergroup anxiety, as well as lower support for multiculturalism compared to the standard contact condition.

One can posit that contact partner’s ethnic identification may have increased the salience of group membership in the contact situation and led participants to focus on the differences in terms of group membership, consequently resulting in more negative intergroup outcomes. Enhancing ethnic identification of the contact partner may have therefore led to the “decategorization” process where ethnic group differences are salient (Gaertner & Dovidio, 2000). A recent study indicated that adding balanced similarity (where both similarities and differences are added) to the imagined contact scenario enhanced the effectiveness of the strategy on intergroup anxiety and contact self-efficacy (Ioannou, Hewstone, & Al Ramiah, 2015). Therefore, focusing only on the differential aspect of the relationship may have inhibited imagined contact effects’ benefits. Future research should examine which specific processes explain the overall negative consequences of the contact partner’s ethnic identification in the imagined contact scenario.

4 STUDY 3

Study 1 indicated that imagined contact worked effectively among Turkish participants who highly identified with their ethnic ingroup, confirming the greater contact effect (those who need the most intervention benefit more from the intervention, Hodson, 2011). Study 2 showed that contact partner’s ethnic identification had a significant effect such that the imagined intergroup contact condition where the contact partner stated his/her ethnic identity led to more negative attitudes compared to the standard contact condition. Although these studies illustrated partly how imagined intergroup contact strategy may function in the context of Turkish-Kurdish intergroup relationships, it only depicts one aspect of the conflict, demonstrating the perspective
of the majority group. In Study 3, we tested imagined contact effects among a sample of Kurdish minority group members. Previous research in direct contact studies have consistently indicated that intergroup contact tends to be a more effective strategy among the majority group compared to the minority group, since ethnic minority group members are likely to see themselves more in terms of group membership, anticipate higher levels of prejudice from outgroup members, and enjoy contact to a lesser extent (see Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006; Pettin, 1999; Pettin, 2002; Tropp & Pettigrew, 2005). Therefore, intergroup contact is often a more challenging and anxiety-provoking experience for ethnic minority groups, making contact a less effective strategy in the promotion of intergroup relationships.

To our knowledge, only one experiment has previously investigated whether imagined contact would function as an intervention among minority status groups. Stathi and Crisp (2008, Experiment 1) examined imagined contact effects on self-outgroup positive trait overlap in Mexico, using both majority and minority ethnic groups. Their findings indicated that imagined intergroup contact was an effective strategy among the majority group, but not among the minority group. We extended this research in a number of ways. First, we tested imagined contact among ethnic minorities within a high-conflict setting. The Turkish-Kurdish relationship at both socio-political and interpersonal level represents a historically-based, long-term relationship which does not only involve status differences, but is also characterized by conflict, violence, and outgroup attribution of responsibility (e.g., Çelebi et al., 2014). Second, we proposed that imagined intergroup contact for ethnic minorities may be more effective in changing minorities’ expectations from the majority group, rather than changing their overall outgroup attitudes and behaviors. So far, imagined contact studies have only examined how imagined contact may lead to improvements in attitudes and behaviors toward the outgroup. In the current experiment, in addition to outgroup attitudes, we aimed to investigate imagined contact effects on ethnic minorities’ perceived ethnic discrimination, anticipation of anxiety, and perceived positive attitudes from the majority group.

Previous research in the contact literature has shown that, apart from promoting majority status members’ outgroup attitudes toward the minority group, direct positive contact can also affect how the majority group is perceived by the minority group. Direct contact among minority status participants has been found to reduce the perception of discrimination (Dixon, Durheim, Tredoux, Tropp, Clack, & Eaton, 2010), improve positive attitudes toward the majority group (e.g., Phinney, Ferguson, & Tate, 1997), and lead to lower levels of anticipated intergroup anxiety (Jasinska-Jahti, Mähönen, & Liebkind, 2011). Therefore, we suggested that imagined intergroup contact would produce similar effects and would lead to reduced levels of perceived discrimination and intergroup anxiety and improved outgroup attitudes. We also proposed that imagined intergroup contact would improve minorities’ perceived positive attitudes from the majority group, since previous research in direct contact studies demonstrated contact to increase positive expectations from the majority status group (Saguy, Tausch, Dovidio, & Pratto, 2009).

4.1 | Method

4.1.1 | Participants and procedure

We recruited 60 participants for the study, but excluded 5 participants who self-identified with an ethnic background other than Kurdish, which resulted in 55 participants in the final sample (M<sub>age</sub> = 25.82, SD = 8.24, 37 males, 17 females, 1 unknown). The mean SES of participants was lower-middle (M = 3.67, SD = 1.12).

Data were collected through convenience sampling with the help of research assistants. Online questionnaires were completed in private where participants felt comfortable. Participants were randomly assigned to two conditions. The neutral condition was the same as the neutral condition in Study 1 and Study 2. Participants in the imagined contact condition were given the basic contact instruction (e.g., see Stathi & Crisp, 2008), enhanced with the friendship potential (Bagci et al., 2017):

"Imagine you are going out on an ordinary weekday and take the bus to reach your destination. In the bus, a Turkish stranger sits next to you and you start a conversation for 30 minutes. After this person gets off the bus, you think that the conversation was really interesting and pleasant and you find out positive things about this person. You think you could be friends with him/her in the future."

Next, participants were asked to think about what they could have talked to their contact partner and write few sentences about this experience.

4.1.2 | Measures

Unless otherwise stated, all items ranged from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree) and higher scores indicated higher levels of the relevant concept. All reliabilities were assessed by Cronbach’s alpha coefficients. To assess perceived discrimination, we used two items: “To what extent do you think you are personally discriminated?” and “To what extent do you think your ethnic group is discriminated?” (Tropp, Hawi, van Laar, & Levin, 2012). The response scale ranged from 1 (not at all) to 7 (all the time) and the scale reliability was acceptable (α = 0.70). We used a three-item outgroup attitude scale assessing feelings towards Turkish people on three bipolar adjectives (see Study 1, α = 0.86). Intergroup anxiety was measured by an adapted version of Stephan and Stephan’s (1985) intergroup anxiety scale (see also Study 1), asking participants to rate how concerned, happy (r), awkward, and defensive they would be when they engaged in contact with a person from a Turkish background (α = 0.71). Finally, we measured perceived attitudes of the majority group by three items adapted from previously used scales (e.g., Bagci & Çelebi, 2017a). The items were: “I think Turkish people are friendly to Kurdish people”, “I think Turkish people like to spend time with Kurdish people”, and “I think Turkish people are nice to Kurdish people” (α = 0.89).
4.2 Results

A MANOVA test was conducted to test the effect of condition (neutral vs. standard imagined contact) on attitudes, perceived ethnic discrimination, intergroup anxiety, and perceived majority’s outgroup attitudes. Findings showed that the overall multivariate effect of condition was significant, $F(4, 38) = 3.33, p = .02$. Wilks’ Lambda = 0.74, $\eta^2 = 0.26$.

The effect of condition on attitudes towards Turkish was not significant, $F(1, 41) = 0.23, p = .64$, $\eta^2 = 0.01$ (M = 4.44, SD = 1.04 for the neutral condition and M = 4.26, SD = 1.29 for the imagined contact condition). The effect of condition on perceived ethnic discrimination was marginally significant, $F(1, 41) = 3.16, p = .08$, $\eta^2 = 0.07$. Mean perceived discrimination was higher in the neutral condition (M = 4.91, SD = 2.42) compared to the imagined contact condition (M = 3.71, SD = 1.98). The effect of condition on intergroup anxiety was significant, $F(1, 41) = 4.42, p = .04$, $\eta^2 = 0.10$. Accordingly, intergroup anxiety was significantly higher in the neutral condition (M = 4.32, SD = 1.42) compared to the imagined contact condition (M = 3.46, SD = 1.24). The effect of condition on perceived majority group’s attitudes was also significant, $F(1, 41) = 6.48, p = .01$, $\eta^2 = 0.14$; participants in the imagined contact condition (M = 3.38, SD = 1.71) perceived majority group’s attitudes as more positive compared to participants in the control condition (M = 2.16, SD = 1.22). Figure 2 demonstrates means and standard deviations across groups.

4.3 Discussion

Study 3 aimed to test the effectiveness of imagined contact scenario on attitudes towards the minority group in a high intergroup conflict area. We hypothesized that similar to the effects of direct intergroup contact, imagining positive contact with a member of a majority group would improve minority group members’ attitudes towards the majority group, decrease intergroup anxiety and perceived ethnic discrimination and lead to more positive perceptions of majority group’s attitudes towards the minority group. Findings demonstrated that imagined intergroup contact failed to change minority groups’ own attitudes towards the majority group. However, we found a marginally significant effect of the imagined contact scenario on decreasing perceived ethnic discrimination. Moreover, as expected, we found imagined contact to significantly decrease intergroup anxiety and improve perceived majority group’s attitudes towards the minority group.

The fact that we did not find any evidence regarding the effectiveness of the strategy on minority group participants’ outgroup attitudes is not surprising given that minorities are often more reactive to contact strategies and consequently benefit less from the positive effects of such strategies in terms of attitude change (Tropp & Pettigrew, 2005). Previous research has also shown that contact effects may not be always as positive as expected especially among ethnic minorities in a high conflict area (Bagci & Celebi, 2017a). In line with this finding, Stathi and Crisp (2008) found that the imagined contact strategy failed to lead to higher projection of positive trait to the outgroup among the minority group.

We further found that imagined intergroup contact led to reduced perceived ethnic discrimination and intergroup anxiety among ethnic minority members. This is in line with previous research in direct contact literature showing the effects of direct contact among minority group members (Dixon et al., 2010; Jasinskaja-Lahtli et al., 2011). The fact that imagined contact can lead to reduced levels of perceived discrimination and intergroup anxiety is a critical finding given that perceived ethnic discrimination and anticipation of intergroup anxiety have negative influences on the psychological well-being of ethnic minorities and often lead these group members to avoid further contact with the majority group (Major, Quinton, & McCoy, 2002; Schmitt & Branscombe, 2002). On the other hand, findings may have critical implications for the understanding of contact effects among minority groups. Recent research has shown that contact may have a ‘sedative effect’ among minority group members by creating false expectancies about social equality between the minority and majority group and thereby may deter them from social change (e.g., Cakal, Hewstone, Schwar, & Heath, 2011; Wright & Lubensky, 2009). Further research may examine whether imagined contact reduces collective action tendencies and/or backfires by creating more conflict in future intergroup encounters among minority group members.

We also demonstrated that the imagined contact scenario can promote how the minority group sees the outgroup. One of the prominent reasons why ethnic minority groups experience intergroup anxiety and show negative outgroup attitudes is that they have negative expectations from the part of the majority group members (e.g., Saguy et al., 2009). Previous research has shown that awareness and concern of being the target of prejudice leads to the negative evaluation of outgroup members (e.g., Shelton, 2003; Pinel, 1999). Direct contact studies demonstrated that contact may counteract the negative effects of such concerns. For example, Mendoza-Denton and Page-Gould (2008) demonstrated that cross-group friendships may buffer the negative effects of race-based rejection sensitivity on minorities’ well-being. Therefore, imagining a positive contact with a majority group member may indeed change minorities’ perceived majority group’s attitudes towards the minority group. This also has critical implications for the imagined contact strategy; especially for minorities who may not be easily influenced by contact strategies, imagined contact may serve to improve how the other group is seen. It is especially important to note that most of the contact scenarios so far (e.g., Stathi & Crisp, 2008;
Three studies were conducted to test imagined intergroup contact strategy within the context of Turkish-Kurdish interethnic relations setting. Previous research has shown that contact strategies may be difficult to implement in high conflict settings because of structural inequalities in these societies (e.g., Dixon et al., 2005). Therefore, imagining positive contact may be a powerful strategy to improve intergroup relationships in such settings. Study 1 showed that imagined contact was beneficial only among Turkish participants with higher ethnic identification. Study 2 investigated the role of contact partner’s ethnic identification in the contact scenario and indicated that the salience of contact partner’s ethnic identification led to more negative outgroup attitudes, increased group threat and intergroup anxiety and reduced support for multiculturalism, suggesting that even though the contact scenario was positive, the salience of ethnic identification may lead to more negative imagined contact effects. Study 3 tested imagined contact theory among minority status participants; although imagining contact with a majority group member did not increase minority participants’ outgroup attitudes, it decreased perceived discrimination (marginally significantly) and intergroup anxiety and increased perceived majority group’s positive attitudes towards the minority group.

Overall, we found that, comparing the neutral and the imagined contact conditions, imagined contact was not as effective as expected, since the main effects of condition on the outcome variables were often small and did not reach statistical significance. One reason for this may be the conflictual nature of the relationship between the Turkish and Kurdish groups and imagined contact may not be sufficient to change strong negative attitudes that have been part of the relationship for years. Kurdish group members have been a stigmatized group since the beginning of the conflict and both groups have been shown to display negative stereotypes, low intergroup trust, and attribute responsibility of the conflict to the other group (e.g., Çelebi et al., 2014). Nevertheless, the current study contributes to the imagined contact literature by showing the role of own as well as contact partner’s ethnic identification level as important attributes of imagined contact effects. More importantly, we showed that imagined contact may be an effective intervention strategy among ethnic minorities, not directly improving their attitudes towards the majority group, but at least changing their negative expectations from the majority group.

Findings also have practical implications for the use of imagined contact strategy in high conflict settings. Previous research has suggested that imagined contact may be a useful tool to improve intergroup attitudes in settings where direct contact is less likely to occur. (Husnu & Crisp, 2010a). Especially, in the Turkish-Kurdish setting where both minority and majority group members perceive a high level of intergroup conflict (Bagci & Çelebi, 2017a), imagining a positive intergroup encounter may work as a first step of a more direct contact intervention (Crisp & Turner, 2009). In fact, it is now known that previous positive contact experiences may protect group members from the detrimental effects of present negative contact experiences in high conflict settings (Paolini, Harwood, Rubin, Husnu, Joyce, & Hewstone, 2014). Therefore, imagined contact may function as a buffering mechanism against future negative direct contact experiences. Nevertheless, we need to highlight the potential undesirable effects of imagined contact among ethnic minorities; by reducing perceived discrimination and improving perceived outgroup attitudes, imagined contact may create false expectations about social equality and thereby hinder minorities’ motivations for social change (Wright & Lubensky, 2009).

We need to note some limitations of the current research. First, Study 1 and 2 included a student sample from a private university where students’ SES is middle-upper class. Therefore, findings may not be generalizable to other Turkish citizens with lower SES backgrounds. The Kurdish sample in Study 3 was recruited from a big metropolitan city (Istanbul) and therefore may not represent the overall Kurdish minority group (especially the ones living in Southeast Turkey). Our sample sizes in Study 1 and Study 3 were relatively low which was mostly due to the difficulties of identifying Kurdish participants and the sensitivity of the topic in the society. Further research may replicate the studies among a larger and more representative sample. We also need to take into account possible variations in the perception of perceived interethnic conflict in Turkey. For example, Bagci and Çelebi (2017a) found that direct cross-group friendships among Kurdish ethnic minorities had a negative association with outgroup attitudes when perceived interethnic conflict was high. Future imagined contact research, especially the ones applied in high conflict settings, may investigate perceived interethnic conflict as a possible moderator on the effectiveness of the strategy.

Study 1 and 2 also concentrated only on ethnic identification which is a salient aspect of interethnic relationships in Turkey, but failed to demonstrate how the effects of imagined contact scenario on attitudes may be moderated by national identification. Previous research in Turkey has shown that ethnic and national identities are often compatible among Turkish participants, but not among Kurdish participants, and identification under the common ingroup identity of nationality may lead groups to hold a shared conflict understanding, improving interethnic relationships (Bilali, 2014; Gaertner & Dovidio, 2000). Future research may also incorporate whether both ethnic and national identification (dual identity) would provide more benefits for the imagined contact strategy among Turkish and Kurdish participants.

We also call researchers to concentrate more frequently on how imagined intergroup contact can contribute to the well-being of ethnic minority groups in various ways. We found that the strategy reduced (marginally significantly) perceived discrimination levels and intergroup anxiety and increased positive perceptions on the part of the majority group. We now know that especially perceived ethnic discrimination and intergroup anxiety are major obstacles for ethnic minority group
members to anticipate positive direct contact with majority group members. Therefore, by providing an imagery positive expectation on the part of the majority group, it is possible to create a more peaceful encounter anticipation for ethnic minority members. On the other hand, such positive expectancies may also backfire and create more conflict when minority group members experience real life negative contact experiences. Further research is needed to disentangle various mechanisms through which imagined contact may be more or less effective among minority and majority group members in various contexts.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We would like to thank Isik University for funding this research (Scientific Research Project Grant at Isik University, BAP Grant No: 15B101).

ORCID

Sabahat Çağdem Bagci http://orcid.org/0000-0003-1642-2067

REFERENCES


How to cite this article: Bagci SC, Piyale ZE, Ebcim E. Imagined contact in high conflict settings: The role of ethnic group identification and the perspective of minority group members. J Appl Soc Psychol. 2018;48:3–14. https://doi.org/10.1111/jasp.12485