Imagine all the people

Siân Jones considers contact interventions and prejudice towards immigrants in schools

The division-free world that John Lennon imagined in 1971 seems like a far cry from the one we see today. The wake of the EU referendum in the UK in 2016 saw a 42 per cent rise in hate crime towards immigrants (peaking the day after the result was announced). This rise was attributed by the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination to negative portrayals of immigrants by politicians and the media. An anti-immigrant rhetoric continues in US and European media today (Moore & Ramsay, 2017), and this anti-immigrant sentiment has penetrated schools (Taylor, 2015).

Concurrently, research has found a high degree of loneliness amongst adolescent immigrants, with 20 per cent of one sample reporting feeling that they do not belong (Oxman-Martinez et al., 2012). It is known that immigrants may be particularly vulnerable to anxiety and depression arising from prejudice directed towards them (Strohmeier et al., 2011). Moreover, when negative discrimination targets someone’s race or ethnicity, the psychological impact may be greater, as an immigrant identity is an unchangeable and core part of that person’s identity (McKenney et al., 2006).

These risks to wellbeing surrounding prejudice, together with research showing that high quality contact with immigrants benefits harmonious group relations for everyone (e.g. Vezzali Capozza et al., 2012) mean that timely, evidence-based interventions aimed at reducing prejudice towards immigrants in schools are needed.

In spite of increasing research on the content of intergroup attitudes in children and adolescents, interventions to reduce prejudice in childhood are not
commonly implemented, and seem rarely to draw upon developmental or social psychology (Killen et al., 2011). Instead programs focus on the use of print and multimedia-based intervention programs without addressing the social context or developmental nuances in which the interventions are set (see Paluck & Green, 2009). This is despite there being a burgeoning body of social-developmental research, which highlights that Gordon Allport’s intergroup contact theory from the 1950s might usefully be applied to anti-immigrant prejudice in schools, hints at the mechanisms that underpin that prejudice, and at the interventions that might promote harmonious intergroup relations.

Contact theory is based on the now well-established premise that positive contact (meeting Allport’s conditions of co-operation, common goals, equal social status, and institutional support) between members of different groups can promote positive intergroup attitudes. Contact may be direct; for example, involving cross-group friendships between individuals. However, it can also be indirect: can knowing about or simply imagining fellow group members’ amiable relationships with those from other groups bring about the social inclusion of immigrant youth?

**Extended contact interventions**

Extended contact is based in other fellow group members’ positive relationships with a member of a different group (Wright et al., 1997). Evidence is growing that it may help to reduce prejudice in schools where direct contact is not feasible. Along these lines, in a 2006 study Lindsey Cameron and colleagues read stories to British children about other British children interacting positively with a refugee child. Attitudes toward refugee children were more positive among children in the intervention condition, compared to their counterparts in a control group. Beyond this,
Loris Vezzali’s team examined the effects of extended contact among Italian primary school children. Here, extended contact was linked to reduced implicit prejudice, but only for those who themselves had fewer immigrant friends. This finding parallels research in the UK which showed that an extended contact intervention markedly reduced explicit prejudice in a non-diverse location but had little effect in an ethnically diverse area (Cameron et al., 2011). Further, a study of children from an ethnically diverse community in Germany (Feddes et al., 2009) found that direct but not extended contact between German and Turkish children was associated with positive outgroup ethnic attitudes. In other words, the evidence on extended contact suggests that it reduces biases against ethnic minority groups or immigrants particularly effectively when direct contact between different groups does not occur.

**The power of imagination**

The other form of indirect contact, known as imagined contact, is – in the words of Richard Crisp and Rhiannon Turner – ‘the mental simulation of a social interaction with a member or members of an outgroup category’. What might this add to interventions intending to reduce prejudice?

Unlike direct or extended contact, imagined contact does not require someone to be living where they have contact with outgroup members, or where other outgroup members have a good relationship with someone in the ingroup. Rather, it is practical where intergroup bias is likely to take shape without being challenged (e.g. Rutland et al., 2005). This means imagined contact has the potential to be of use in low diversity settings where children experience anti-immigrant prejudice.

There is now a growing body of research demonstrating the effectiveness of imagined intergroup contact in attenuating prejudice among young people (e.g. Stathi et al., 2014; Cameron et al., 2011). Regarding immigrants, Vezzali’s team published a three-week study in 2012 where Italian children imagined an outing with an immigrant child in different social settings. Afterwards, compared to a control condition, children in the imagined intergroup contact condition had firmer intentions to befriend immigrant children and less implicit prejudice towards them. When it comes to adolescents, Turner et al. (2013) showed British students aged 16–17 years a picture of an asylum seeker from Zimbabwe. Those who imagined contact with the asylum seeker reported a stronger inclination to befriend asylum seekers than did a control group.

In my research (Jones et al., 2017) my colleagues and I have examined the effectiveness of a novel form of imagined contact with immigrants. We reasoned that contact will be more effective when it actively involves the child, as opposed to learning about intergroup interactions through books or television. Developmental research tells us that children will pay more attention when key features of the world are perceptually salient and the social group memberships taking part in an interaction are rendered highly visible (Cameron, Rutland et al., 2006). We carried out imagined contact via pretend play with toys, meaning that children imagined their interactions in a 3D space. We found that the attitudes of British children aged between 5–9 years from an ethnically and culturally diverse area were moderated positively by imagined contact with an immigrant.

Together, these studies suggest that imagined contact may be an effective and flexible strategy that is easily adaptable to the age group being targeted.

**Beyond imagination**

The study of imagined contact holds promise for the reduction of anti-immigrant prejudice. Studies show that outgroup attitudes become more positive and friendship intentions stronger following such interventions. However, there is one gap in the literature that it will be important for future research to address: the nature and power of children’s
imaginations has arguably yet to be fully harnessed.

Sofia Stathi and her co-researchers uncovered something of the potential for channeling children’s imaginations in their 2015 study. They showed that stories about extended contact are valuable even when the contact does not involve an ingroup member, or real-life social groups. In their study, primary school children read passages that presented themes of prejudice from J.K. Rowling’s Harry Potter books, over a six-week period. They found this was effective in weakening prejudice towards immigrants: an indication that the collective power of children’s imaginations may be exploited to enhance the positive impact of imagined contact.

There’s also evidence that combining the power of children’s imaginations may be a fruitful endeavour. In one study, Italian and immigrant primary school children aged 8-10 years worked in small groups of three to six children (Vezzali et al., 2015). All children were given a minimal group classification. To test the effects of imagined contact, children were assigned to the ‘yellow’ or ‘blue’ group and small group memberships were mixed, yellow and blue. In another condition, all children were assigned to the ‘blue’ group. Direct contact between immigrants and Italian children in the small groups was also manipulated as another factor in the research design. Children in all conditions were asked to cooperate towards a superordinate goal. Results showed positive effects of both direct (mixed groups of Italian and immigrant children) and imagined (mixed groups of ‘yellow’ and ‘blue’ group children) contact on reduced stereotyping of immigrants, and intentions to help them if they needed it. Importantly, for considering the collective power of imagination, there was no evidence that direct contact has stronger effects than imagined contact in this study.

Both of these studies show that children’s imaginations may be exploited to enhance the positive influence of imagined contact on anti-immigrant attitudes. Perhaps the potential of contact interventions to reduce prejudice towards immigrants is now limited only by the researchers’ own imaginations…

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