

Summary

The Role of Cross-Group Friendships, Outgroup Perspective-Taking, and Ingroup Identification on Competitive Victimhood Beliefs

Sabahat Çiğdem Bağcı¹

Sabancı University

Zeynep Ecem Piyale

Işık University

Ezgi Şen

Işık University

Selin Karaköse

Işık University

Following the introduction of intergroup contact theory (Allport, 1954), contact has been demonstrated to be an effective strategy to reduce prejudice, especially when contact conditions are satisfied. In a large meta-analysis, Pettigrew and Tropp (2006) found that contact was negatively associated with prejudice, particularly when it included friendship potential. Moreover, it has been found that intergroup contact and friendships that cross group boundaries reduce negative attitudes through various processes such as decreased intergroup anxiety, and increased empathy and perspective-taking (e.g., Swart, Hewstone, Christ, & Voci, 2011; Turner, Hewstone, & Voci, 2007), showing contact to be an effective strategy to improve intergroup relationships.

Other research studies in the contact literature have examined whether intergroup contact and cross-group friendships were effective in improving attitudes in various socio-cultural contexts. For example, contact has been found to be related to outgroup trust and forgiveness in the context of Catholic-Protestant conflict in Northern Ireland (Hewstone, Cairns, Voci, Hamberger, & Niens, 2006), increased empathy and decreased intergroup anxiety in South Africa (Swart et al., 2011), greater tendency to forgive outgroup members in Bosnia (Cehajic, Brown, & Castano, 2008), and greater efforts for reconciliation in Northern Ireland and South Africa (Tropp et al., 2017). Studies conducted in the Turkish-Kurdish context also reveal that cross-group friendships are likely to improve positive outgroup attitudes and support for multiculturalism (Bağcı & Celebi, 2017b), as well as support for reconciliation processes (Uluğ & Cohrs, 2017). Therefore, beyond attitudes, cross-group friendships may form an important predictor of reconciliation-related intergroup outcomes in conflict-ridden social settings.

In this study, we aimed to test the association between cross-group friendships and competitive victim-

hood beliefs in the context of Turkish-Kurdish interethnic relationships. In many intractable conflict areas, group members often perceive themselves as the undeserved, moral, and victimized party of the conflict and blame the outgroup for being the illegitimate evil perpetrator (Bar-Tal, 2000; Bar-Tal, Chernyak-Hai, Schori, & Gundar, 2009). When this deep sense of victimization is accompanied by group members' need to compete with each other, the extent to which the ingroup has suffered more relative to the outgroup becomes a core concept in intergroup relationships. Such *competitive victimhood beliefs* serve various functions for the ingroup including justifying past suffering and blaming the outgroup (Noor et al., 2008; Noor, Shnabel, Halabi, & Nadler, 2012). So far, studies have often focused on the negative outcomes of competitive victimhood (e.g., Noor, Brown, & Prentice, 2008) and empirical research examining the predictors of competitive victimhood beliefs is relatively restricted.

Drawing on intergroup contact theory, we argued that cross-group friendships would be a significant predictor of competitive victimhood beliefs (H1). Based on previous studies showing the positive role of intergroup contact on various reconciliation processes (e.g., Tropp et al., 2017; Uluğ & Cohrs, 2017), it is suggested that intergroup contact would lead to lower levels of competitive victimhood beliefs. In fact, Noor, Shnabel, Halabi, and Nadler (2012) proposed contact to be a possible strategy to reduce such beliefs. Another empirical research has shown that extended contact was indeed associated with reduced competitive victimhood beliefs in the context of Kosovan-Serbian relationships in Bosnia (Andrighetto, Mari, Volpato, & Behluli, 2012). Extending this research, we measured intergroup contact as cross-group friendship quality which is a more effective form of intergroup contact (Pettigrew, 1997) and tested our research questions in a different conflict area.

Address for Correspondence: ¹Assoc. Prof. Sabahat Çiğdem Bağcı, Sabancı University, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, Department of Psychology, Tuzla / İstanbul

E-mail: cigdem.bagci@sabanciuniv.edu

We further proposed that perspective-taking and ingroup identification would significantly mediate the association between cross-group friendships and competitive victimhood beliefs. Previous research has shown contact to be related to understanding other groups and lead to increased empathy and perspective-taking (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2008). In turn, research studies have shown perspective-taking to be an important predictor of outgroup attitudes and behaviors (e.g., Vescio, Sechrist, & Paolucci, 2003). In fact, Andrighetto et al. (2012) found extended contact to reduce competitive victimhood beliefs by increasing perspective-taking. In line with this, we expected cross-group friendships to be associated with decreased competitive victimhood through increased outgroup perspective-taking (H2).

Another mediating mechanism we suggested as a mediator was ingroup identification. Previous research in the contact literature indicates that intergroup contact does not only change attitudes towards other groups, but it also modifies how the ingroup is evaluated. Based on the deprovincialization hypothesis (Pettigrew, 1997), one can posit that contact would increase social distance towards the ingroup by providing an opportunity to learn and understand different perspectives. Empirical research has supported this assumption showing contact to be related to higher support for multiculturalism and ingroup social distance (Verkuyten, Thijs, & Bekhuis, 2010). On the other hand, based on the Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986), as a result of ingroup identification, people would be inclined to favour the ingroup over the outgroup which eventually leads to more negative intergroup relationships. Hence, we suggested that cross-group friendships would be related to lower levels of competitive victimhood beliefs by decreasing ingroup identification (H3).

We applied our research in the Turkish-Kurdish interethnic context. Since the 1990's, the Turkish-Kurdish relationship has fluctuated and armed conflict and violence between PKK and Turkish military has led to the death of thousands of people and forced migration of many others (Kirişçi ve Winrow, 2011; Yeğen, 1996). Both groups often report high levels of ingroup identification and conflict and attribute responsibility to the other party (Bağcı & Çelebi, 2017a). Previous research in this context has shown cross-group friendships to be related to higher levels of multiculturalism and positive attitudes (e.g., Bağcı & Çelebi, 2017b; Bağcı, Piyale, Sen, & Yıldırım, 2019), but no research has been conducted to explore the association between contact and competitive victimhood beliefs, which may provide a critical research avenue for understanding the underlying mechanisms behind this prolonged conflict.

In this study, we focused on both Turkish and Kurdish participants. Competitive victimhood research demonstrates both advantaged and disadvantaged group members to perceive victimhood (Bar-Tal et al., 2009). Hence although ethnic Turks seem to be the socially and economically privileged party in the society (Çakal, Hewstone, Güler, & Heath, 2016), they are also likely to perceive competitive victimhood in a high conflict and threat environment (Bar-Tal et al., 2009). In fact, in a national survey, both group members reported being victimized as a result of the Turkish-Kurdish conflict (Konda, 2011). On the other hand, previous research has shown intergroup contact to be less effective among minority group members (Tropp & Pettigrew, 2005). However, recent research in Turkey has shown positive contact experiences to be predictive of positive attitudes among both Turkish and Kurdish group members (Bağcı & Turnuklu, 2019; Bağcı et al., 2019). Hence, we proposed that cross-group friendships would be related to lower competitive victimhood beliefs through the same mechanisms among both groups.

In summary, the current research aimed to contribute to the literature in three ways. First, previous research in this context has shown both Turks and Kurds to perceive victimhood beliefs and form effective cross-group friendships that improve intergroup relationships, but no research to date has incorporated the two constructs. At the applied level, this can inform us about strategies that are likely to reduce competitive victimhood beliefs and demonstrate paths towards reconciliation processes in a conflict society. Second, by including mediators that have been previously found to link contact and attitudes, we aimed to have a clear understanding of how competitive victimhood beliefs emerge. Finally, we included both advantaged and disadvantaged group members to the study in order to provide a more thorough understanding of contact-competitive victimhood relationship in this context.

Method

Participants and Procedure

A total of 234 people completed questionnaires (152 women, 81 men, 1 unknown; $M_{age} = 22.39$, $SD = 3.96$; 142 Turkish, 92 Kurdish). Ethnic group was measured by a single item asking participants' self-reported ethnic group. Most participants were university students recruited from various cities in the West of Turkey. Participants were given informed consents that strictly stated ethical procedures of the study and they could withdraw from the study if they felt uncomfortable. At the end of the study, debriefing forms were given to the participants.

Measures

The *socio-demographic form* consisted of ethnic group (0 = *Kurdish*, 1 = *Turkish*), gender (0=Men, 1=Women), subjective socio-economic status, and political view. In addition, cities participants lived in were recorded to ethnic composition based on the numerical density of Kurdish people in the city (0 = *Turkish dominant*, 1 = *Kurdish dominant*).

Unless otherwise stated, all items were measured on a 7-point response scale. *Cross-group friendships* was measured by cross-group friendship quality and included the interaction and intimacy of the participants with their Turkish/Kurdish friends (Bagci, Rutland, Kumashiro, Smith, & Blumberg, 2014, $r = .82$ for Turkish and $r = .80$ for Kurdish). To measure *perspective-taking* (Aberson & Haag, 2007), we asked participants to report to what degree they understood outgroups' point of view ($r = .87$ for Turkish and $r = .79$ for Kurdish). *Ingroup identification* was measured by 4 items (Verkuyten, 2005; adapted to Turkish by Çelebi, Verkuyten, Köse, & Maliepaard, 2014) and assessed the level of belongingness to the ethnic group ($\alpha = .92$ for Turkish and $.89$, for Kurdish). *Competitive victimhood beliefs* construct was assessed by 5 items (Noor et al., 2008, one item was removed since it reduced reliability) and evaluated perceived victimization of the ingroup relative to the outgroup ($\alpha = .81$ for Turkish and $.89$ for Kurdish).

Results

Preliminary Analyses

Independent sample t-tests were performed to examine the effect of group status on cross-group friendships, outgroup perspective taking, ingroup identification and competitive victimhood. Kurds' perception of intergroup contact with Turks ($M = 3.62$, $SD = 1.26$) was more positive than the Turks' ($M = 3.29$, $SD = 1.25$) perception of intergroup contact with Kurds ($t(230) = -1.98$, $p = .048$). Moreover, when compared with Turks ($M = 3.40$, $SD = 1.14$), Kurds' ($M = 3.85$, $SD = 1.06$) ingroup identification was significantly higher ($t(226) = -3.02$, $p = .003$). Results indicated that Kurdish participants ($M = 4.18$, $SD = .88$) perceived themselves to be more victimized than other ethnic groups in comparison with Turks ($M = 3.04$, $SD = .82$; $t(196) = -9.12$, $p < .001$). The effect of ethnic group on outgroup perspective was not significant.

Mediation Analysis

In order to investigate the mediating role of outgroup perspective-taking and ingroup identification on the relationship between intergroup contact and competitive victimhood, a mediation analysis was conducted

using PROCESS Macro (Model 4, Hayes, 2013). Ethnic group status, ethnic composition, SES, and political tendencies were controlled. For indirect effects, bootstrapping procedure with %95 confidence interval with 5000 sample was used.

The first step showing cross-group friendships to predict the first mediator, perspective-taking, revealed a significant model ($R^2 = .06$, $F_{5, 191} = 2.59$, $p = .02$). There was a significant positive association between cross-group friendships and outgroup perspective-taking ($\beta = .21$, $t = 3.55$, $p = .001$). In the second step whereby cross-group friendships predicted the second mediator, ingroup identification, the model significantly explained 15% of the variance ($R^2 = .15$, $F_{5, 191} = 6.50$, $p < .001$) and cross-group friendships significantly and positively predicted ingroup identification ($\beta = -.19$, $t = -2.91$, $p = .004$).

In the final step where both cross-group friendships and mediators were modelled to predict competitive victimhood beliefs, the predictors explained 48% of variance in the dependent variable ($R^2 = .48$, $F_{7, 189} = 24.61$, $p < .001$). Among the covariates, ethnic group ($\beta = -.96$, $t = -6.71$, $p < .001$) and SES ($\beta = -.11$, $t = -2.00$, $p = .046$) significantly predicted competitive victimhood beliefs. Accordingly, Kurdish participants and participants with lower SES seemed to have higher competitive victimhood beliefs compared to Turks and participants with higher SES. The direct association between intergroup contact and competitive victimhood beliefs was also marginally significant and negative ($\beta = -.09$, $t = -1.94$, $p = .05$); as the quality of intergroup contact increased, the perception of competitive victimhood decreased. Both outgroup perspective-taking ($\beta = -.12$, $t = -2.25$, $p = .03$) and ingroup identification ($\beta = .27$, $t = 5.33$, $p < .001$) were significantly related to competitive victimhood beliefs.

Indirect effect tests indicated that cross-group friendships reduced competitive victimhood beliefs through increased perspective-taking and decreased ingroup identification. Indirect effects with bootstrapping analysis using %95 confidence interval with 5000 samples revealed significant results for the mediating role of outgroup perspective-taking and ingroup identification ($B = -.03$, $SE = .02$, 95% CI [-.08, -.002] and $B = -.05$, $SE = .02$, 95% CI [-.11, -.01], respectively).

Discussion

First, in relation to our findings regarding group differences, we found Kurds to report higher levels of competitive victimhood beliefs, although Turks also indicated that they engage in competitive victimhood beliefs to a degree. Previous research has shown both

advantageous and disadvantageous group members to engage in competitive victimhood beliefs (Bar-Tal et al., 2009). Findings in Turkey demonstrates that both Turks and Kurds (Kurds, to a stronger degree) reported they have been collectively victimized as a result of the intergroup conflict (Konda, 2011). These findings suggest that competitive victimhood beliefs are socially constructed, but the disadvantaged group may compete more over the victimhood compared to the advantaged group. In the same line, the Kurdish group reported higher ingroup identification, which may explain why competitive victimhood was higher among this group. We also found Kurds to report higher quality cross-group friendships. Research in the contact literature has shown that minority groups are often more reactive to contact strategies and usually avoid close intergroup contact experiences (Stathi & Crisp, 2008). Other research has shown majority group members to give less importance to their cross-group friendships (Pica-Smith, 2011). This may explain why the Turkish group reported lower quality cross-group friendships, which may also partly reflect their overall negative attitudes towards minorities.

Regarding the main hypotheses, as expected, we found high quality intergroup contact to be related to lower competitive victimhood beliefs which play a pivotal role in the continuation and escalation of intergroup conflict (Noor, Brown, & Prentice, 2008). Confirming our second and third hypotheses respectively, we found increased outgroup perspective-taking and decreased ingroup identification to significantly mediate this association. Specifically, cross-group friendships were associated with higher outgroup perspective-taking and lower ingroup identification which, in turn, predicted lower levels of competitive victimhood beliefs.

This research contributes to the social psychology literature at both theoretical and applied levels, by finding out the precursors of competitive victimhood beliefs. By examining which processes lead to the formation of these beliefs in the light of intergroup contact theory may help in designing direct or indirect contact strategies (such as imagined or vicarious contact interventions) that could potentially decrease these destructive beliefs which are often responsible for negative intergroup relationships. On the other hand, some limitations of the current study should be acknowledged. Methodologically, the low sample size for the Kurdish group and whether this group can represent the overall Kurdish population in Turkey is a critical question. Further research may investigate whether experiencing intergroup conflict may directly or indirectly moderate the role of contact on the perception of competitive victimhood. Although theoretically it is sound to suggest that contact leads to competitive victimhood beliefs, it is also possible to argue

that competitive victimhood beliefs would predict the quality of cross-group friendships, which requires further longitudinal or experimental research to disentangle the causal relationships between the two variables. At the applied level, one can also include the concept of 'inclusive victimhood' to the contact strategy, in order to highlight a common victimhood identity among both groups (Vollhardt, 2015; Vollhardt & Bilali, 2015). Imagined contact techniques (Turner, Crisp, & Lambert, 2007), which suggest the use of mental simulation of a positive intergroup encounter may also reduce competitive victimhood beliefs. Further research may attempt to design various contact interventions to pave the way to the facilitation of reconciliation processes between the two groups.