



# The Imagined Contact Hypothesis: Prejudice towards asylum seekers in Australia

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The present study was prompted by awareness of prejudicial attitudes towards refugees evident in Australian media and politics. It used some innovative measures of prejudice including the distance apart in chair placements made by respondents prior to sitting next to a refugee and estimates of the hypothetical dollar value of resources to be allocated to refugees in comparison with the amount to be allocated to indigenous Australians and other social groups. More conventional attitude scale measures were also used (the Attitudes Towards Asylum Seekers Scale, an inhumanisation measure, an empathy measure, a measure of perspective taking). In an attempt to reduce prejudice levels, the social psychology technique of imagined contact with an outgroup (asylum seekers who travel to Australia by boat) was used. The experimental design used randomised, independent groups (imagined contact and control conditions) with repeated measures for time (post intervention and follow up). University students ( $N = 54$ ) who imagined an interaction with an asylum seeker showed higher levels of empathy than did the control group. While measures of prejudice did not differ between experimental conditions, notably low levels of prejudice in this student sample from a north Queensland university were found. The low levels of prejudice found in the present sample were both gratifying and somewhat unexpected. The study needs to be replicated with a community sample comparison group included or one initially shown to hold more strongly prejudicial attitudes.

**Key words** Asylum seekers, dehumanisation, imagined contact, prejudice, refugees

## **Introduction**

Many countries are faced with refugees seeking escape from war or conflict. The ways in which such people are dealt with by receiving countries is a complex matter. The attitudes of citizens of the receiving countries towards refugees may be an influence on governmental policies and may in turn also be affected by government policy and rhetoric. The present study was prompted by awareness of some prejudicial attitudes towards refugees and evidence of some dehumanisation influences in Australian media and politics. Using some innovative dependent measures of attitude change, it aimed to use the social psychology technique of imagined contact with an outgroup in an attempt to reduce prejudice towards that group.

## **Dehumanisation and infrahumanisation**

Dehumanisation has been defined by Haslam and Loughnan (2014) simply as the act of denying another's 'humanness'. Dehumanisation of an outgroup may produce feelings of superiority by the ingroup over the outgroup (Haslam & Loughnan, 2014), reduce helping behaviours (Cuddy, Rock, & Norton, 2007), reduce forgiveness (Tam et al., 2007), increase discrimination (Pereira, Vala, & Leyens, 2009), and decrease feelings of guilt when any form of wrong doing occurs (Zebel, Zimmermann, Viki, & Doosje, 2008).

The term 'asylum seeker' is used to describe a person who has made a claim for refugee status that remains to be assessed (Refugee Council of Australia, 2012). A large portion of the Australian public dehumanises asylum seekers (Haslam & Holland, 2012) and this has contributed to the widespread negative and prejudicial attitudes towards them (Greenhalgh & Watt, 2015).

Unlike dehumanisation, which involves blatantly denying an outgroup their human attributes, infrahumanisation occurs when an ingroup simply attributes more humanness to themselves than to the outgroup. This promotes ingroup favouritism, while the outgroup is still considered to retain a degree of humanism. Dehumanisation occurs in a subtle form and can occur without any outgroup antagonism (Haslam & Loughnan, 2014). Infrahumanisation thus represents a type of subtle prejudice.

## **Contact with an outgroup**

There is evidence to suggest that intergroup contact is effective at reducing prejudice towards an outgroup. A meta-analysis conducted by Pettigrew and Tropp (2006) reviewed a total of 713 independent samples obtained from 515 studies and found the relationship between contact and prejudice to be significant but modest. In Australia, Turoy-Smith, Kane, and Pedersen (2013) surveyed 1000 houses across four Perth suburbs to explore prejudice towards Indigenous Australians and refugees. High levels of quantity of contact and quality of contact were associated with low prejudice towards refugees.

Mediating variables for intergroup contact reducing prejudice include decreased anxiety (Turoy-Smith et al., 2013), increased perceived outgroup variability (Paolini, Hewstone, Cairns, & Voci, 2004), increased trust of the outgroup (Tam, Hewstone, Kenworthy, & Cairns, 2009), increased self-disclosure and increased empathy (Turner, Hewstone, & Voci, 2007).

Infrahumanisation of an outgroup can also be reduced by intergroup contact. Brown, Eller, Leeds, and Stace (2007) found that public school students from a British school who experienced an increase in contact with private school students infrahumanised private school students less. Capozza, Trifiletti, Vezzali, and Favara (2013) found with a sample of northern Italians that high intergroup contact was associated with reduced infrahumanisation of immigrants and southern

Italians. Prejudice towards an outgroup can also be reduced simply from the knowledge that one's friends are friends with outgroup members (Wright, Aron, McLaughlin-Volpe, & Ropp, 1997) and can occur without the person ever having to meet an outgroup member.

While direct contact with outgroups may not always be practical, intergroup contact may be simulated with the use of mental imagery (Turner, Crisp, & Lambert, 2007). Frye and Lord (2009) found that by imagining a positive action towards different social groups, participants improved attitudes towards that group. Interestingly, the researchers found that participants subsequently mistook the imagined behaviours as having actually occurred. Falvo, Capozza, Hichy, and DiSipo (2014) found that northern Italians who imagined contact with an intellectually disabled individual infrahumanised people with intellectual disabilities less.

Imagining contact with merely one outgroup member can result in an increase in positive attitudes to the outgroup as a whole. This has been demonstrated with homosexuals (West, Husnu, & Lipps, 2015), international students (Vezzali, Crisp, Stathi, & Giovannini, 2015), disabled individuals (Cameron, Rutland, Turner, & Rosie Holman, 2011), ethnic groups (Husnu & Crisp, 2010a), immigrants (Vezzali, Capozza, Giovannini, & Stathi, 2012a), the elderly (Crisp & Husnu, 2011), obese individuals (Turner & West, 2012), asylum seekers (Turner, West, & Christie, 2013) and people diagnosed with mental disorders (Flewa, 2015).

Perhaps the most compelling evidence for imagined contact comes from a meta-analytic review by Miles and Crisp (2014), in which they analysed 71 studies ( $N = 5770$  participants). The results showed an effect size ( $d$ ) of 0.35 for imagined contact reducing intergroup bias (i.e., improving attitudes, emotions, behavioural intentions and actual behaviours).

Evidence for the effectiveness of imagined contact in changing attitudes is mixed. One Australian study using university students (Giacobbe, Stukas, & Farhall, 2013), found that both real and imagined contact had positive effects on attitudes towards people with schizophrenia. Another Australian study by Dermody, Jones, and Cumming (2013) failed to establish efficacy for imagined contact. University students who imagined contact with a homosexual male did not report any differences in scores on the Implicit Association Test (infers subconscious/implicit attitudes) or the Explicit Attitudes Towards Gay Men scale (measures conscious attitudes). The discrepancy between these two studies highlights a lack of knowledge about the conditions under which imagined contact may be effective.

Cognitive and affective mechanisms thought to underlie the efficacy of imagined contact include anxiety (West, Holmes, & Hewstone, 2011), trust (Turner et al., 2013), stereotypes (Cameron et al., 2011), empathy (Kuchenbrandt, Eyssel, & Seidel, 2013), self-disclosure (Vezzali et al., 2012a), perspective taking (Husnu & Crisp, 2015) and infrahumanisation (Falvo et al., 2014).

Batson et al. (1997) suggested that an increase in empathy towards an outgroup can result in an increase in positive attitudes. Perspective taking is considered an important prerequisite to empathy (Shih, Stotzer, & Gutiérrez, 2013) and research has demonstrated that imagined contact can increase perspective taking (Husnu & Crisp, 2015) and empathy (Kuchenbrandt et al., 2013).

### **The current study**

While intergroup contact has been established as an effective means of reducing prejudice towards an outgroup, the relatively small numbers of asylum seekers who reside in Australia mean that the chances of population interactions with asylum seekers are small. Imagined contact may therefore

offer a suitable alternative prejudice reduction technique. The imagined contact scenario developed for the current study targets empathy towards asylum seekers and it was expected that by eliciting empathy, participants would humanise asylum seekers more and prejudice would reduce.

The general hypothesis was that compared to the control condition, lower levels of prejudice would be observed immediately after imagined contact with an asylum seeker, and two weeks later. Specifically, it was predicted that compared to the control condition, participants who imagined contact with an asylum seeker would show: (1) more favourable attitudes towards asylum seekers on the Attitudes Towards Asylum Seeker Scale, (2) more favourable attitudes on the attitude thermometer, (3) higher scores on the empathy scale, (4) higher scores on the perspective taking scale, (5) more positive indirect positive attitudes (placing an asylum seeker's chair closer for an intended meeting), and (6) allocation of more resources to asylum seekers on the Mock Resource Questionnaire.

## Method

### Participants

A total of 54 James Cook University students ( $M_{age} = 26.22$ ,  $SD_{age} = 8.89$ ) commenced the experiment. An attrition rate of 11.11 % ( $n = 6$ ) left 48 participants at follow up. Demographics can be found in Table 1. Prior contact with asylum seekers was higher than expected with more than a third of participants reporting having met an asylum seeker who travelled to Australia by boat. A large majority of participants had at least one parent and one grandparent who was not of Australian ethnicity.

Table 1

*Demographic Characteristics of Participants (N = 54)*

Variable	<i>n</i>	%
Gender		
Male	17	31.5
Female	37	68.5
Degree		
Psychology	28	51.9
Health degree	18	33.3
Environmental degree	4	7.4
Other	4	7.4
Ethnicity		
Australian	32	59.3
European	5	9.3



Asian	3	5.6
Other	3	5.6
Caucasian	11	20.4
Met an asylum seeker	21	39.0
Parents		
Australian	13	24.1
One parent other	12	22.2
Two parents other	12	22.2
unsure	17	31.5
Grandparents		
Australian	8	14.8
One set other	12	22.2
Two sets other	18	33.3
Unsure	16	29.6

### **Design**

A randomised, independent groups design (imagined contact and control conditions) was used with repeated measures (post intervention and at two weeks follow up) to determine whether any observed changes persisted over time. The dependent variables consisted of multiple measures of prejudice (an attitude ‘thermometer’, the Attitudes Towards Asylum Seekers scale, measures of inhumanisation, empathy and perspective taking, and a measure of resource allocation).

### **Procedure**

Ethics approval was obtained from the university Human Ethics Committee. The experiment, which was described as a study of reactions to meeting strangers, was advertised on the university experiment participation website to recruit first year psychology students in return for course credit. Participants were also recruited by attending lectures in various disciplines and giving a short presentation about the experiment.

Participants were randomly allocated to either experimental condition using the Research Randomiser website (Urbaniak & Plous, 2015) and asked to listen to the experimental or control audio file while closing their eyes and imagining the scenario described. Participants then completed an assessment package using a desktop computer and were asked to then note down specific details about the imagined scenario. Research has suggested that writing the scenario down will further strengthen the imagined contact effect (Vezzali et al., 2015).

Participants were next told that the stranger they were about to meet was an asylum seeker who had travelled to Australia by boat. They were asked to follow the investigator into an adjacent conference room for the intended meeting. Upon entering the room the investigator sighed (to subtly indicate frustration that the furniture had not already been arranged as required) and while pointing to a stack of chairs along one side of the room, asked the participants to arrange two chairs for the meeting. The investigator left and waited in an adjacent corridor for one minute. Upon returning to the room the participant was told that the stranger had not arrived as planned and was directed out of the room.

Two weeks later participants were emailed an internet link to the second assessment package which they were asked to complete within 48 hours. They were subsequently sent a debrief statement outlining the true purpose of the study and explaining the deception involved.

### **Apparatus**

The imagined scenario for the control condition consisted of guided imagery describing a walk in the outdoors. This scenario was adapted from the standard control condition scenario which has been used extensively in the literature (Husnu & Crisp, 2015).

The imagined contact scenario used the following script. “Please close your eyes (*pause 1 second*). Picture the following as if you are watching yourself on T.V. (*pause 1 second*). You are feeling excited and accomplished as you have just completed your degree (*pause 5 seconds*). Now picture yourself walking around a careers expo looking at your options for the future (*pause 10 seconds*). You start to talk to a person who is interested in one of the stalls you are looking at (*pause 1 second*). You find the person easy to talk to and the conversation is positive and flows freely (*pause 5 seconds*). You tell the person that you have just finished your degree and what you studied (*pause 1 second*). They tell you that they have also completed the same degree (*pause 1 second*). You ask them which university they went to (*pause 1 second*). They reply that they attended a university in another country as they are not from Australia (*pause 1 second*). You ask them what brought them to Australia (*pause 1 second*). They explain that they had to flee their home country to escape persecution (*pause 1 second*). You empathise with them and say that their situation sounds terrible (*pause 1 second*). They reply, yes it was terrible, especially with the boat trip to Australia (*pause 10 seconds*). You can’t help but imagine how horrible the journey would have been (*pause 5 seconds*). They also tell you that their degree is not recognised in Australia, they are finding it hard to get work, and cannot afford to attend another university (*pause 1 second*). You can imagine the frustration that they must feel (*pause 5 seconds*). The conversation moves on to a lighter topic, you talk about your hobbies and interests (*pause 5 seconds*). Now picture yourself saying goodbye and walking away (*pause 5 seconds*). You feel a sense of gratitude as through no effort of your own you were born in a safe and stable country such as Australia (*pause 5 seconds*). You think back to the conversation you just had and surprisingly, you found this person fun and interesting to talk to and you had a really enjoyable and positive time (*pause 5 seconds*). Now please open your eyes.”

Capozza et al. (2013) suggested that it is easier to create empathy towards an outgroup that is similar to the ingroup, therefore, the contact scenario described the asylum seeker as holding the same degree as the participant, being interested in the same stall as the participant and looking for work like the participant. The contact scenario also contained some positive terms such as “fun and interesting to talk to” and “you had a really positive and enjoyable time”, as used in past imagined contact research; (Brambilla, Ravenna, & Hewstone, 2012; Turner & West, 2012) since

the presence of positivity increases the effectiveness of the contact scenario (Stathi & Crisp, 2008; West et al., 2011).

**Vividness.** A single item, nine step, bipolar scale from “*faint* (1)” to “*vivid* (9)” was used to assess the vividness of the imagined scenario. This was adapted from a previous imagined contact study (Husnu & Crisp, 2010b).

**Attitudes.** The Attitudes Towards Asylum Seekers Scale (ATAS) was developed by Pedersen et al. (2005) for the Australian context and was found to be highly reliable ( $a = .94$ ). The scale contains 18 items using a seven point Likert scale. Higher total scores indicate more negative attitudes. The ATAS has been used in other Australian studies (Anderson et al., 2015; Greenhalgh & Watt, 2015).

**Infrahumanisation.** The first infrahumanisation measure was adapted from a study by Vezzali, Capozza, Stathi, and Giovannini (2012b). Participants were asked how likely it was that asylum seekers who arrived by boat would feel each of the emotions presented. Three uniquely human emotions (pride, remorse and shame) and three non-uniquely human emotions (anger, excitement and pleasure) were presented. The second measure used the scores of uniquely and non-uniquely human attributions, rather than emotions, to operationalise infrahumanisation (Capozza et al., 2013). Participants were asked about the extent to which they agreed with six statements about asylum seekers who had arrived by boat. The statements characterised asylum seekers with a range of uniquely human attributes (reasoning, morality and intellectual ability) or non-uniquely human attribute (instinct, drive and impulsiveness). Both measures used a five point Likert scale (1 = *definitely not* to 5 = *definitely*). An emotion humanity bias index and an attribute humanity bias index were constructed by taking the average score of the uniquely human emotions/attributes from the average score of the non-uniquely human emotions/attributes.

**Empathy.** Empathy was measured by adapting a scale from Kuchenbrandt et al. (2013) which used five empathic words (affectionate, sympathetic, stirred, moved and warm-hearted) amongst eight emotion words (unpleasant, irritated, interested, joyful, enthusiastic, excited, guilty and frightened). Internal consistency is high  $a = .83$  (Kuchenbrandt et al., 2013). Participants were asked to how they felt when they reflected on the life of asylum seekers who had arrived by boat and they responded on a seven point Likert scale. An average score for the five empathetic words was used with higher scores indicating more empathy.

**Perspective taking.** A perspective taking measure (adapted from Batson et al., 1997) asked participants the extent to which they could see things from an asylum seeker’s point of view using a seven point Likert scale with higher scores indicating a greater perspective taking ability.

**Attitude thermometer.** Participants were asked how they felt in general towards asylum seekers who have arrived by boat and they responded on a 10-point bipolar scale from unfavourable to favourable.

**Resource allocation.** A Mock Resource Questionnaire was developed as an innovative measure of attitudes towards social groups in Australia. The social groups included were indigenous Australians, asylum seekers who arrived by boat, asylum seekers who arrived by plane, and immigrated Australians. Participants were asked to indicate the resource proportion (e.g., 0 %, 50 %, 100 %, 150 %, or 200 %) they thought each of the groups was entitled to for housing, unemployment, education, health, and mental health in turn compared with allocations to people who were born in Australia but not of indigenous decent.

**Prior contact.** Studies have conjectured that prior contact with an outgroup will reduce the efficacy of imagined contact due to already established strong attitudes (Lee & Cunningham, 2014). Participants were asked whether they had ever met or had been friends with asylum seekers who had arrived in Australia by boat or by other means.

**Indirect behavioural measure.** The ‘chair technique’ has been used previously as an indirect behavioural measure towards an outgroup (Norman et al., 2010; Turner & West, 2012). It consisted of measuring the distance between the two chairs that participants set up for an intended meeting. It is inferred that shorter chair distances imply more positive indirect attitudes. The unobtrusive nature of the chair technique protects somewhat against social desirability and demand effects.

## Results

Analyses confirmed that the two randomised experimental conditions were matched on the demographic properties of the participants and vividness of the imagined scenario. No analyses are reported for the infrahumanisation measures due to their reliabilities falling well below the recommended level of  $\alpha = .70$  (Field, 2013). Due to multiple violations of multicollinearity and singularity amongst the dependant variables, intended multivariate analysis of variance analyses were replaced with 2 group (imagined contact vs control condition) x 2 time mixed within-between analyses of variance (ANOVA).

In general, the hypotheses were not supported with only the empathy measure showing significant differences between groups. The imagined contact condition showed significantly greater levels of empathy towards asylum seekers than did the control condition,  $F(1, 46) = 4.74, p = .035, \eta_p^2 = .093$  (see Table 2).

Table 2  
*Dependent Variable Descriptives (N = 48)*

	Time One		Time Two	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
ATAS (scale 1–7)				
Control	2.73	1.17	2.85	1.24
Imagined contact	2.32	.88	2.50	.94
Attitude thermometer (scale 1-10)				
Control	6.54	2.23	6.62	2.16
Imagined contact	7.58	1.86	7.58	1.91
Empathy (scale 1–7)				
Control	4.54	1.10	4.53	.97
Imagined contact	5.00	.90	5.23	.98
Perspective taking (scale 1–7)				

Control	4.67	1.63	4.38	1.64
Imagined contact	5.71	1.30	4.92	1.53
Vividness (scale 1–9)				
Control	4.38	.49	3.58	1.06
Imagined contact	4.04	.91	3.67	1.07

An independent measures *t* test showed no significant difference in chair distance between the imagined contact condition ( $M = 698.52, SD = 319.80$ ) and control condition ( $M = 619.48, SD = 274.75$ ),  $t_{(52)} = -.97, p = .335$ , two tailed.

Chi-square tests showed no significant relationship between experimental conditions and the amount of resources (housing, unemployment, education, health and mental health) allocated to asylum seeker versus other groups. The majority of participants reported that all listed social groups should receive the same resources as a person who was born in Australia but who is not of indigenous decent.

Scores on the Attitudes Towards Asylum Seeker Scale were less favourable at follow up for both experimental conditions,  $F(1, 46) = 8.75, p = .005, \eta_p^2 = .16$ . Perspective taking scores were also lower at follow up  $F(1, 46) = 8.89, p = .005, \eta_p^2 = .16$ . Scores on the attitude thermometer did not differ between experimental conditions or across time. No other main or interaction effects were significant and are thus not reported (Field, 2013).

## Discussion

The experiment failed to establish the imagined contact hypothesis as an effective prejudice reduction intervention towards asylum seekers who travel to Australia by boat. Participants who imagined contact with an asylum seeker showed higher levels of empathy towards asylum seekers, however, no other significant differences were found between the experimental conditions on any other measures.

There may be a positive reason for the findings of no differences between groups. It is evident that prejudice towards asylum seekers was low in both experimental conditions as indicated by quite favourable scores on the Attitudes Towards Asylum Seeker Scale, high favourable attitudes on the attitude thermometer, high levels of empathy, and high levels of perspective taking. This may have limited the capacity of the experimental intervention to demonstrate decreases in prejudice measures.

In spite of the finding that prejudice levels were low in this group, both Attitudes Towards Asylum Seeker Scale scores and perspective taking scores were less favourable at time 2, conceivably as a result of less proximal demand characteristics following the passing of time since the experimental episode resulting in a more accurate reports.

The low general levels of measured prejudice is a welcome finding and suggests that prejudice towards refugee seekers may have been little affected by the negative portrayal of these people by media and the government. It is likely though that the results from this well-educated, predominately relatively young and female sample cannot be generalised and the relatively low

power of the study is also a significant limitation. The measures of inhumanisation demonstrated poor reliability, a finding which is inconsistent with past research (Capozza et al., 2013). In the current study participants were asked how likely it would be for an asylum seeker to feel pleasure. If participants were to interpret this question in the context of the boat journey (which is by most accounts very unpleasant) then they would have selected a low score. In contrast, if participants were to interpret the question in the context of asylum seekers in Australian society (where they have the opportunity for pleasure), they most likely would have selected a higher score. Previous studies have used the measure only in the latter context (i.e., for outgroups that are already established in society).

For the intended meeting with an asylum seeker, participants in both experimental conditions placed their chair the same (average) distance from an asylum seeker's chair. This finding is inconsistent with past research which found that imagined contact reduced the distance British undergraduate students placed themselves from an obese person and a Muslim (Turner & West, 2012) and it can only be speculated that this measure may have been insensitive in the present experiment due to generally low levels of respondent prejudice.

The Mock Resource Questionnaire showed no difference between experimental conditions on the allocation of resources to asylum seekers. The majority of participants allocated all comparison groups the same amount of resources as they did to Australian born, non-Indigenous Australians. This finding is further evidence of a relative lack of prejudice in the sample used.

The floor effect associated with low prejudice towards asylum seekers differs from other Australian studies. The present average score on the Attitudes Towards Asylum Seeker Scale of 2.60 is lower than the mean score of 4.66 found in a well-educated sample of the general population (Pedersen et al., 2005), lower than the mean score of 3.44 found in sample of 100 Australian university students (Anderson et al., 2015) and lower than the mean score of 3.13 found in a community-based Australian study (Greenhalgh & Watt, 2015).

Pre-existing low levels of prejudice among the participants may have limited the salience of the experimental intervention. It is possible too, that the experiment's title, 'Reactions to Meeting Strangers', could have led to self-selection bias as people who are interested in meeting a stranger may well be quite open-minded. The open-mindedness of the sample, compounded with the sample coming from degrees emphasising helping (e.g., psychology, dentistry, social work) and having relatives who are not of Australian ethnicity, may have contributed to low prejudice towards asylum seekers that might not be representative of the broader community.

## **Conclusions**

The present experiment sought to assess the effects of an attempt to modify prejudicial attitudes toward asylum seekers using an intervention based on the imagined contact hypothesis. Imagining contact with a refugee led to higher empathy levels in the experimental group though a variety of direct and indirect measures of prejudice generally failed to find differences between the experimental and control groups. The levels of prejudice found were notably low in both groups. At a theoretic level the finding that increased empathy by itself seems insufficient to reduce prejudicial attitudes deserves follow up. The low level of prejudice found in the present sample is gratifying and suggests that sample characteristics may protect somewhat from the effects of media and government misrepresentation around refugees. At a practical level, replication of the study with a broader general community sample (i.e., not just university students) or perhaps using a



sample of people already shown to hold prejudicial attitudes would be useful to further assess the usefulness of the innovative dependant variables used here.

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