Just as Human as Me: Exploring Social Distance as a Boundary Condition of Indirect Contact

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Introduction

- Individuals experiencing homelessness are regularly dehumanized – underestimated in the extent to which they possess human nature (e.g., warmth) and human uniqueness (e.g., cultured) traits[1]
- Dehumanization often has negative consequences such as increased hostility, violence and a reduction in moral considerations for members of the dehumanized group[2]
- Efforts to reduce dehumanization have identified that vicarious contact, the process of observing or learning about a direct interaction between an ingroup and outgroup member[3], can improve perceptions of outgroup members
- Vicarious contact has potentially profound implications for the dehumanization of outgroup members with whom individuals have little direct contact (e.g., individuals who are experiencing homelessness)
- In two studies, we investigated the impact of social distance (e.g., general closeness to another individual often defined by overlapping group membership, perceived similarity, physical distance and knowledge)[4] on the extent to which vicarious contact could reduce the dehumanization of individuals experiencing homelessness

> **Positive vicarious contact experienced via a socially close (vs. socially far) member would result in less dehumanization of individuals experiencing homelessness**

Study 1 Method & Results

Participants: One hundred and thirty-eight students at Seattle Pacific University (107 F, M_{age} = 19.35, SD = 1.98)

Materials and Procedure:

- Single factor (Social Distance: close vs far) between participants design
- Participants were randomly assigned to read a story about a positive encounter between an Eastern Michigan University student who hated their psychology class (far social distance) or a Seattle Pacific University student who loved their psychology class (close social distance) and an individual experiencing homelessness.
- After reading about the encounter, participants reported their perceived similarity to the author of the story and their perceptions of individuals experiencing homelessness on two key dimensions of dehumanization: Human Nature (6 questions, 100-point analogue scale) and Human Uniqueness (6 questions, 100-point analogue scale)[2]
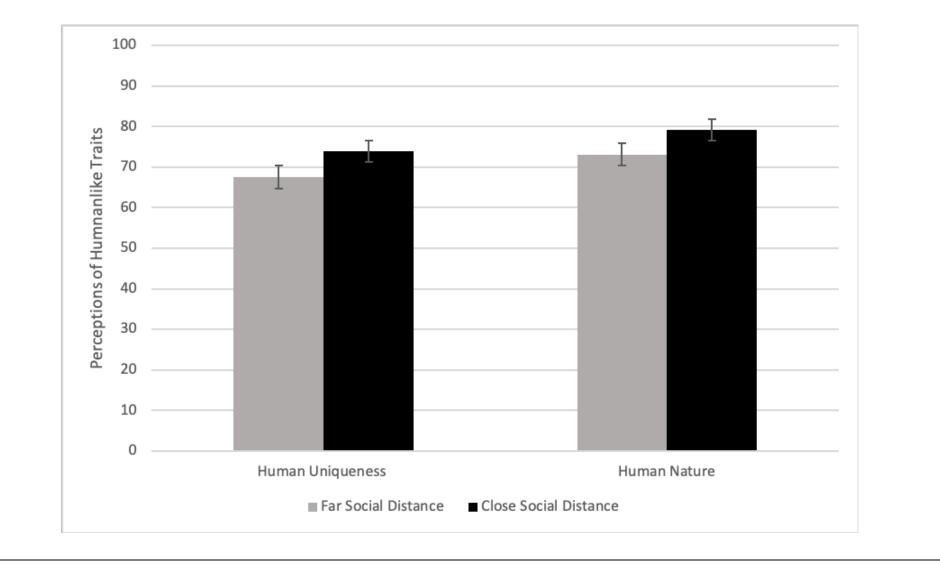
Hypothesis:

- Positive vicarious contact experienced via an individual close (vs. far) in social distance would result in less dehumanization of individuals experiencing homelessness

Results:

- Independent samples t-test confirmed the social distance manipulation significantly altered perceptions of similarity between participants and the author of the story in the close social distance condition (M = 63.63, SD = 24.81) compared to the far social distance condition (M = 20.31, SD = 21.37), $t(136)$ = 10.29, $p < .001$, d = 1.84
- An independent samples t-test revealed a significant difference between perceptions of Human Uniqueness for those in the close social distance condition (M = 73.95, SD = 12.96) than the far social distance condition (M = 67.44, SD = 12.22), $t(137)$ = 2.90, p = .004, d = .52.
- An independent samples t-test revealed a significant difference between perceptions of Human Nature for those in the close social distance condition (M = 79.18, SD = 12.25), than the far social distance condition (M = 73.12, SD = 10.56), $t(137)$ = 2.94, p = .004, d = .53.

Study 2 Method & Results

Participants: One hundred and sixty-four students at Seattle Pacific University, (117 F, M_{age} = 19.17, SD = 3.65)

Materials and Procedure:

- Single factor (Similarity: high vs. low) between participants design
- Participants were randomly assigned to one of two conditions and were asked to read a story about a positive encounter between a student who was either "like" (vs. "dislike") themselves and an individual experiencing homelessness.
- Similarity was manipulated using three key demographic variables (religion, state of origin, and political affiliation).
- After reading the story, participants were asked to rate their similarity to the author (100-point analogue scale) and reported their perceptions of individuals experiencing homelessness on two dimensions of dehumanization: Human Nature (6 questions, 100-point analogue scale) and Human Uniqueness (6 questions, 100-point analogue scale)[2]
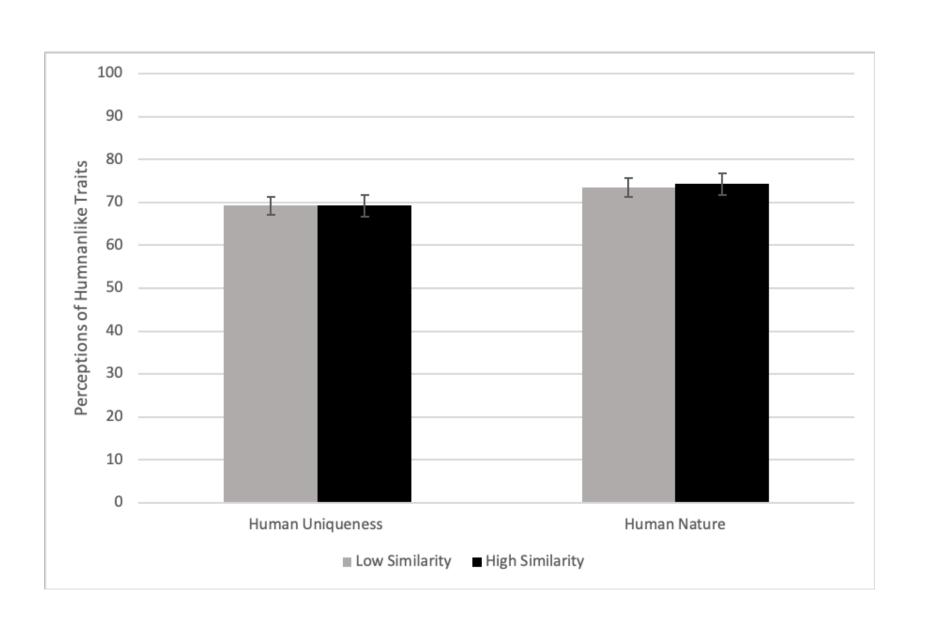
Hypothesis:

- Positive vicarious contact through an individual high (vs low) in similarity would result in less dehumanization of individuals experiencing homelessness

Results:

- An independent samples t-test confirmed that the similarity manipulation significantly impacted perceived similarity to the author of the story in the high similarity condition (M = 70.80, SD = 31.10) and the low similarity condition (M = 15.70, SD = 19.12), $t(162)$ = 13.71, $p < .001$, d = 2.15.
- An independent samples t-test revealed that Human Uniqueness scores were not significantly different for those in the high similarity condition (M = 69.20, SD = 12.24) than the low similarity condition (M = 69.17, SD = 13.41), $t(162)$ = .63, p = .53, d = .001
- An independent samples t-test revealed that Human Nature scores were not significantly different for those in the high similarity condition (M = 74.30, SD = 12.03), than the low similarity condition (M = 73.54, SD = 13.69), $t(162)$ = .51, p = .61, d = .06.

Discussion

- Study 1 indicated that vicarious contact reduced the dehumanization of individuals experiencing homeless on Human Uniqueness and Human Nature traits, in the close, relative to the far, social distance condition.
- Study 2 indicated that vicarious contact did not significantly reduce the dehumanization of individuals who are homeless on Human Uniqueness nor Human Nature traits, in the high, relative to the low, similarity condition.
- Similarity alone does not appear to significantly impact the efficacy of vicarious contact to reduce the dehumanization of individuals experiencing homelessness.
- Future work should consider whether other aspects of social distance such as physical distance, warmth, or likability might be responsible for the significant effects of social distance demonstrated in Study 1.

> **Some forms of social distance appear to impact the extent to which vicarious contact reduces the dehumanization of individuals experiencing homelessness.**

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2. Brown, R. & Paterson, J. (2016). Indirect contact and prejudice reduction: Limits and possibilities. *Current Opinion in Psychology, 11*, 20-24.
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