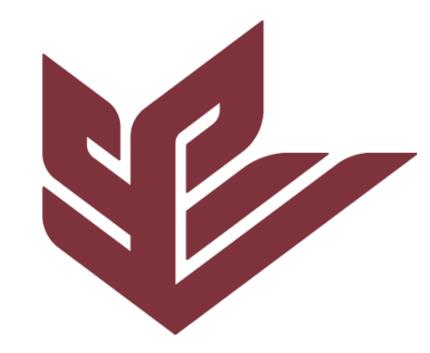# Exploring Warmth and Morality as Boundary Conditions of Vicarious Contact

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Introduction

- Individuals experiencing homelessness are regularly dehumanized through the underestimation of their human nature (e.g., emotional responsiveness, interpersonal warmth) and human uniqueness (e.g., civility, rationality) traits.[1]
- Individuals experiencing homelessness are judged more negatively than most social groups, being perceived as both cold and incompetent.[2]
- The contact hypothesis proposes that contact between members of different groups will result in improved out-group attitudes by shifting any ignorance from the in-group members to first-hand knowledge that disconfirms stereotypes and establishes more positive attitudes.[3]
- One form of contact is indirect, vicarious contact, which occurs when an individual observes another person that is considered an in-group member, interacting with an outgroup member.[4]
- We investigated the impact of an ingroup member's warmth and morality on the extent to which vicarious contact could reduce the dehumanization of individuals experiencing homelessness.

> An individual who judges the contact-having person as having high warmth and competence is likely to form a more positive perception of the interaction with the individual experiencing homelessness, therefore leading to a reduction in dehumanization.

Method

Participants: One hundred and sixty-three students at Seattle Pacific University (123 women, 37 men, 3 non-binary; M_{age} = 18.96, SD = 1.26).

Materials and Procedure:

- The study employed a 2 (morality: high vs. low) x 2 (warmth: high vs. low) between participants' design.
- Participants were randomly assigned to one of four different conditions which depicted various combinations of traits for the storyteller: a person high in warmth (i.e., sociable, funny) with a positive moral character (i.e., principled, responsible); low in warmth (i.e., unsociable, humorless) with positive moral character; high in warmth with negative moral character (i.e., unprincipled, irresponsible); or low in warmth with a negative moral character.
- After reading the combination of traits for the storyteller, participants reported their overall impression (very negative / very positive) of the storyteller and their perceived similarity (not very similar / very similar) to the storyteller using 100-point analogue scales.
- Participants then engaged in vicarious contact where they read about a positive encounter between the storyteller and an individual experiencing homelessness.
- After reading the story, participants were asked to briefly summarize the storyteller's interaction with the individual

experiencing homelessness, again using the same 100-point analogue scale with responses of "Very Negative" and "Very Positive".

- Dehumanization was measured using 12 items, 6 that assessed perception of Human Uniqueness Traits (e.g., logic, self-restraint) and 6 that assessed Human Nature Traits (e.g., warmth).
- Participants completed the dehumanization scale twice, once for themselves and once for individuals experiencing homelessness (order counterbalanced across participants), so that dehumanization could be calculated as the difference between perceptions of one's own human-like traits and perceptions of an individual experiencing homelessness' human-like traits.
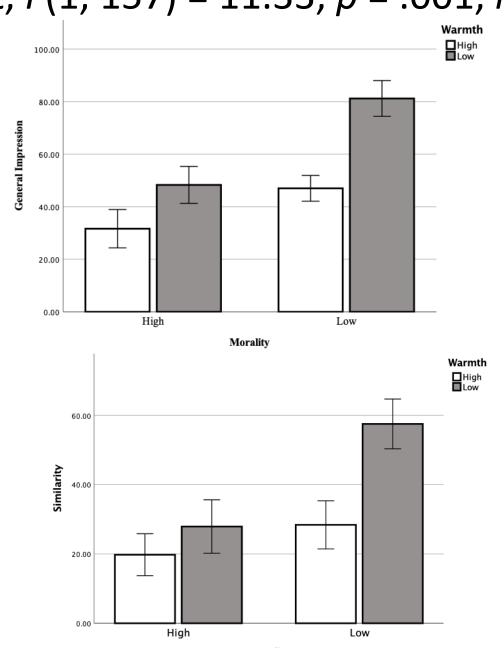
Hypothesis:

- H1: A storyteller's warmth and moral character will impact general impressions of the storyteller and the perceived similarity to the storyteller.
- H2: A storyteller's warmth and moral character will impact the efficacy of vicarious contact such that dehumanization will be the lowest when a positive interaction is communicated by a warm and moral person and dehumanization will be the highest when a positive interaction is communicated by a cold and immoral person.
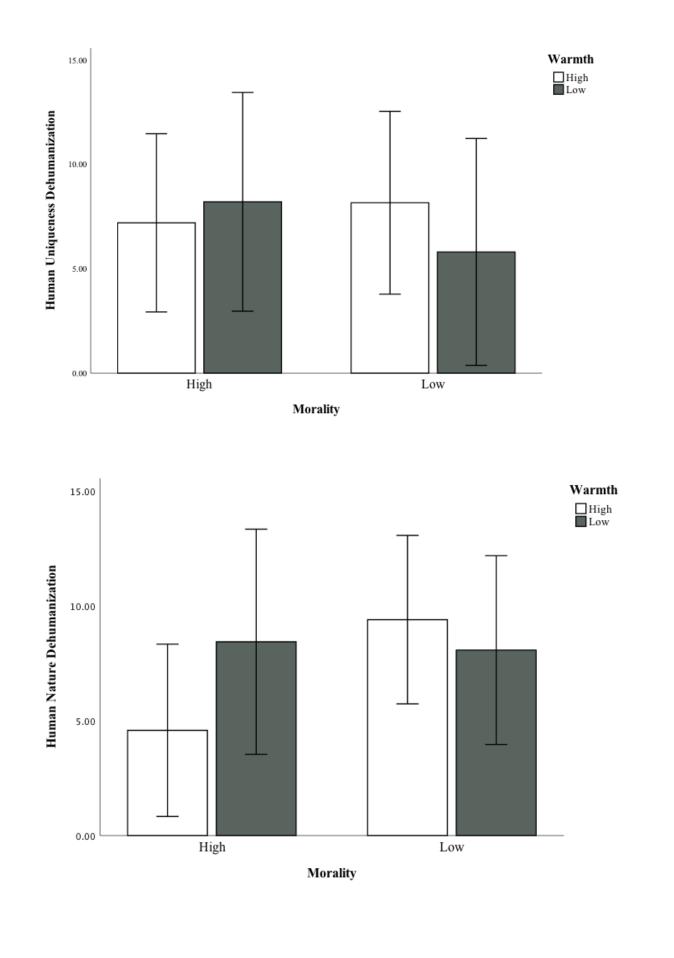
Results

Preliminary Analyses Results:

- General Impressions: A 2x2 ANOVA with morality (Low/High) and warmth (Low/High) as between-subjects factors revealed a main effect of warmth, $F(1, 157) = 73.42$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .32$ and a main effect of morality, $F(1, 157) = 56.44$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .26$ on general impressions of the storyteller. These main effects were qualified by a significant interaction effect, $F(1, 127) = 7.18$, $p = .008$, $\eta_p^2 = .04$.
- Similarity: A 2x2 ANOVA with morality (Low/High) and warmth (Low/High) as between-subjects factors revealed a main effect of morality, $F(1, 157) = 39.58$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .20$ and a main effect of warmth, $F(1, 157) = 29.80$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .16$ on perceived similarity with the storyteller. These main effects were qualified by a significant interaction effect, $F(1, 157) = 11.33$, $p = .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .07$.

Main Analyses Results:

- HU: A 2x2 ANOVA with morality (Low/High) and warmth (Low/High) as between-subjects factors revealed no main effects nor a significant interaction effect (F's < 0.49) on human uniqueness dehumanization scores.
- HN: A 2x2 ANOVA with morality (Low/High) and warmth (Low/High) as between-subjects factors revealed no main effects nor a significant interaction effect (F's < 1.64) on human nature dehumanization scores.

Discussion

- Pre-liminary analyses indicated that the morality and warmth of a storyteller influenced general impressions of the storyteller and the extent to which participants believed themselves to be similar to the storyteller.
- Main analyses indicated that the consequences of vicarious contact (reduced dehumanization) were not impacted by the warmth or morality of the storyteller.
- Warmth and morality do not appear to significantly impact the efficacy of vicarious contact to reduce the dehumanization of individuals experiencing homelessness, so long as the reported story is of a positive interaction.
- While it is possible that the current form of vicarious contact had no effect at all on the dehumanization of individuals experiencing homelessness, past work utilizing the same story has demonstrated enhanced perceptions of individuals experiencing homelessness' human nature and human uniqueness traits. As such, the current work provides some initial evidence to believe that vicarious contact is a robust form of intergroup contact that may be resilient to the negative characteristics of the storyteller.
- Future work should investigate whether other aspects of storyteller traits, such as gender, intelligence, or likability, influence the efficacy of vicarious contact to improve perceptions of dehumanized groups.

> **Vicarious contact appears to be robust to the character variations of a storyteller.**

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