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You Get Us, So You Like Us: Feeling Understood by an Outgroup Predicts More Positive Intergroup Relations via Perceived Positive Regard

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Intergroup felt understanding—the belief that outgroup members understand and accept ingroup perspectives—has been found to predict positive intergroup outcomes, but the mechanism through which it has its positive effects is unclear. Across eight studies, we tested the hypothesis that felt positive regard—the perception that outgroup members like and respect ingroup members—mediates the positive effects of felt understanding on outcomes like outgroup trust. Studies 1–6 (total $N = 1,366$) included cross-sectional and experimental designs and a range of intergroup settings such as Sunni–Shia relations in Lebanon, gender relations, and support for “Brexit” in the United Kingdom. Results of meta-analytic structural equation models across these studies provided evidence of the indirect effect of felt understanding via felt positive regard on outcomes including trust and positive relational emotions. Study 7 ($N = 307$) then tested the causal effect of felt positive regard through a direct manipulation. Findings confirmed that felt positive (vs. negative) regard did lead to more positive intergroup perceptions. Finally, Study 8 ($N = 410$) tested the indirect effect as a within-person change process using a year-long, two-wave study of the conflict in Chile between Indigenous Mapuche and Non-Indigenous Chileans: Change over time in felt understanding indirectly predicted change over time in trust via change in felt positive regard. We consider the theoretical implications of the findings for how intergroup relations may be improved and the possibilities presented by felt understanding for intervention development.

Keywords: felt understanding, intergroup relations, conflict, metaperceptions, felt positive regard

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The order of authors Sarosha Byrne and Calandra Tapp is alphabetical, reflecting their equal contribution to this article.

Andrew G. Livingstone played a lead role in conceptualization, data curation, formal analysis, investigation, methodology, project administration, supervision, visualization, and writing—original draft. Summer L. Bedford played a supporting role in conceptualization, data curation, investigation, methodology, and writing—review and editing. Aya Afyouni played a supporting role in conceptualization, investigation, methodology, and writing—review and editing. Ngoc Vu played a supporting role in conceptualization, investigation, methodology, and writing—review and editing. Ioanna Kapantai played a supporting role in conceptualization, data curation, investigation, methodology, supervision, and writing—review and editing. Damilola Makanju played a supporting role in conceptualization, data curation, investigation, methodology, supervision, and writing—review and editing. Maria Chayinska played a lead role in funding acquisition, investigation, methodology, and project administration, a supporting role in writing—original draft, and writing—

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The importance of understanding how trust and empathy can be fostered across group divides has been amplified by recent world events, including Russia's invasion of Ukraine, ongoing armed conflicts in the Middle East and Africa, and discord and polarization within liberal democracies in the Global North. Recent research has provided evidence for the positive and potentially powerful influence of intergroup *felt understanding*—the belief that outgroup members understand and accept ingroup perspectives—on outcomes such as trust and postconflict forgiveness. However, little is known so far about the process through which feeling understood in intergroup terms may have positive effects. Our aim in the present research was to address this shortfall by testing the mediating role of feeling positively regarded (liked and respected) by outgroup members: a form of metaperspective, which has previously been found to directly predict positive intergroup outcomes.

Below, we develop the theoretical rationale for this model by integrating evidence from intergroup relations research with theory and research on felt understanding and relationship improvement in the context of interpersonal relationships. We then report tests of the indirect effect of felt understanding via felt positive regard on outcomes such as intergroup trust and positive relational emotions across eight studies. These include meta-analytic tests across Studies 1–6, involving a combination of cross-sectional surveys and experiments in a range of settings including relations between Sunni and Shia communities in Lebanon, opposing views on “Brexit” in the United Kingdom, and attitudes toward refugees. Then, Study 7 tested the direct causal effect of felt positive regard through a direct manipulation. Finally, Study 8 tested the model in terms of a within-person change process in a 1-year longitudinal study of entrenched conflicts over land and cultural recognition between Indigenous and Non-Indigenous communities in the Araucanía region of Chile. Together, these studies provide a triangulated test of the mechanism underlying felt understanding's seldom-studied role as a driver of positive intergroup relations.

Defining Felt Understanding

We define felt understanding in intergroup terms as the perception that members of an outgroup understand and accept the perspectives of ingroup members, including “our” beliefs, values, experiences, intentions, and identity (Livingstone, 2023; Livingstone, Fernández Rodríguez, & Rothers, 2020). We thus feel understood when outgroup members “get” our perspectives and why we hold them and view these perspectives in a nonjudgmental manner. In this way, the accuracy of “their” perspectives on “our” perspectives is not enough in itself to feel understood, if they also denigrate or disrespect those views. This adapts the definition of felt understanding in close interpersonal relationships (Oishi et al., 2010; Reis et al., 2017) for intergroup contexts in which social identities and categories are salient.

Felt understanding is likely to have a distinct role in intergroup relations relative to other, well-established predictors because it requires third-order intentionality/a second-order theory of mind (Dennett, 1989; Liddle & Nettle, 2006; O'Grady et al., 2015)—it is a representation of what an outgroup thinks and feels *about what we think and feel*. In this sense, it is a meta–meta perspective (Gillespie & Cornish, 2010; Laing et al., 1966)—unlike most other established predictors in intergroup relations, it relates to our perspectives on “their” perspectives *on our perspectives*. This characteristic of felt

understanding is crucial to understanding its role in intergroup relations (and social relations more generally) for two reasons. First, it means that the experience of feeling understood involves the sort of higher order recursive perception that is the unique hallmark of human sociality (Corballis, 2014; Dennett, 1989; Sperber, 2000; Tomasello, 2008; Tomasello et al., 2005). Interacting in terms of this level of intentionality is an essential feature of language-based communication (Grice, 1957, 1969), for instance, and of complex culture and social organization (Corballis, 2014; Tomasello, 2008).

Second, the “meta–meta” aspect of felt understanding distinguishes it from a number of other concepts in intergroup relations research that involve metaperception (Frey & Tropp, 2006). These include negative meta-stereotypes (Lees & Cikara, 2020; Ruggeri et al., 2021; Vorauer et al., 1998, 2000), metaprejudice (Owuamalam et al., 2014; Putra, 2014), and metahumanization (Borinca, Tropp, & Ofosu, 2021; Kteily et al., 2016), each of which has been found to predict negative intergroup relationships, as we address in more detail below. Conversely, positive metaperceptions such as low metaprejudice and metahumanization predict more positive intergroup attitudes and perceptions (Borinca, Tropp, & Ofosu, 2021; Vezzali, 2017). Each of these constructs involves a meta perspective in which the objects of appraisal are outgroup members' beliefs and perceptions, including those “they” hold about “us.” In contrast, the meta–meta element of feeling (mis)understood involves our perspectives on their perspectives *on our perspectives*; in this case, it is our own inner world in the mind's eye of outgroup members that is the object. These characteristics of felt understanding together make it important both in terms of understanding social relations in general and distinctive in terms of its conceptual role when it comes to intergroup relations.

Felt Understanding as a Component of Positive Social Relationships

The positive effects of felt understanding in social relations are well established in the context of close, interpersonal relationships. The experience of feeling understood has been found to be associated with feelings of joy and relief from loneliness (Condon, 2008; Jonas-Simpson, 2001; Van Kaam, 1959), with greater life satisfaction and satisfaction in relationships (Cahn, 1990; Lun et al., 2008; Oishi, Akimoto, et al., 2013; Reis et al., 2000; Selcuk et al., 2016), and even with greater resilience to stressors such as physical pain (Oishi, Schiller, & Gross, 2013). Relatedly, the experience of having our perspective accurately taken by another also leads to more reconciliatory responses to wrongdoing such as bullying (e.g., when we feel that a bully has taken our perspective as a victim; Berndsen et al., 2018), and to feeling more positively, and acting more prosocially, toward others who have taken our perspective (Goldstein et al., 2014).

Felt Understanding in Intergroup Relations

Felt understanding has been less thoroughly studied in intergroup relations, especially in terms of its role as a predictor rather than as an outcome variable (e.g., Mallett et al., 2016; Shelton et al., 2014), but recent evidence has begun to show that its role is similarly positive. Cross-sectional evidence has shown that feeling misunderstood by an outgroup is strongly predictive of support for political separatism, such as voting for Brexit in the United

Kingdom in 2016 and support for national independence in Scotland and in the Basque region (Livingstone, Fernández Rodríguez, & Rothers, 2020). Conversely, feeling more understood by an outgroup has been found to strongly predict more positive intergroup outcomes such as trust and forgiveness following violent conflict (e.g., between Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland; Livingstone, Fernández Rodríguez, & Rothers, 2020) and between nations with long-standing geopolitical rivalry (Ioku & Eiichiro, 2021). Its predictive role also appears to be consistent even when adjusting for negative beliefs and metabeliefs about an outgroup and relational appraisals such as negative interdependence and identity threat (Ioku & Eiichiro, 2021; Livingstone, Fernández Rodríguez, & Rothers, 2020). These associations also echo evidence of positive effects of more specific forms of the perception that outgroups get our experiences, such as the perception that outgroup members recognize ingroup victimhood in the context of intergroup conflict (Hameiri & Nadler, 2017).

Evidence of a causal effect of felt understanding has also been established in studies that directly manipulate felt understanding, indicating that feeling understood (vs. misunderstood) by an outgroup led to more positive intergroup evaluations and action intentions across several different intergroup contexts (e.g., gender relations, and “Leave” and “Remain” voters in the context of Brexit in the United Kingdom; Livingstone, Windeatt, et al., 2020). A positive causal effect of feeling understood can also be inferred from studies that find positive effects of having one’s perspectives taken/recognized by outgroup members (e.g., Bruneau & Saxe, 2012; Vorauer & Quesnel, 2016) and from having important aspects of the ingroup’s self-image verified by outgroup members (Chen et al., 2004).

There is therefore growing evidence of the positive role of feeling understood in intergroup relations, in addition to more intimate, interpersonal relationships. Conceptually, the overview above suggests that felt understanding has such a distinctive and important role in intergroup relations because, distinctly amongst predictors in intergroup relations research, it taps into our fundamental concerns with how others understand and evaluate our own inner worlds, including the perspectives and experiences of fellow ingroup members as well as our own as group members. However, the question remains as to *how* felt understanding shapes intergroup outcomes, and our aim in the present research was to address this question, focusing on the mediating role of perceived/felt positive regard.

Perceived/Felt Positive Regard as a Mediator of the Effect of Feeling Understood

We tested a specific process whereby felt understanding affects *felt positive regard* (the extent to which the ingroup is believed to be held in positive regard by an outgroup), which in turn predicts intergroup outcomes such as (positive) outgroup evaluations, trust, and empathy. In the present research, we operationalize perceived or felt positive regard in terms of whether outgroup members regard ingroup members positively, including the distinct-but-overlapping concepts of feeling liked (Borinca, Tropp, & Oforu, 2021; Livingstone, Fernández Rodríguez, & Rothers, 2020; Livingstone, Windeatt, et al., 2020; Matera et al., 2015) and feeling respected (Ellemers et al., 2004; Simon et al., 2015; Simon & Grabow, 2014). Feeling positively regarded by outgroup members thus involves feeling that they like, respect, and generally have positive views of the ingroup. In this sense, it is cognate with the concept of metaprejudice (Gordijn, 2002;

Gordijn et al., 2017; Owuamalam et al., 2014; Putra, 2014; Putra & Wagner, 2017; see also Vorauer et al., 1998), insofar as metaprejudice involves perceptions of how positively or negatively outgroup members view ingroup members. Importantly, feeling liked or positively regarded by outgroup members (i.e., that metaprejudice is low) has been found in numerous studies to have a positive effect on intergroup outcomes such as trust and the inclination to act positively or negatively toward the outgroup in turn (Bergsieker et al., 2010; Borinca, Tropp, & Oforu, 2021; Ellemers et al., 2004; Livingstone, Fernández Rodríguez, & Rothers, 2020; Livingstone, Windeatt, et al., 2020; Putra, 2014; Simon et al., 2015; Vorauer et al., 1998).

The hypothesis that intergroup felt understanding shapes intergroup outcomes via felt positive regard is derived from diverse sources that have considered the role of feeling understood in interpersonal relations. Especially relevant is C. R. Rogers’ (1989, pp. 252–254) proposition that the process of improving relationships begins with communicative processes that facilitate the feeling of being understood by another (see also Itzchakov et al., 2020, 2022; Rosenberg, 2015; Seehausen et al., 2012). When interaction fosters an individual’s feeling of being understood, this satisfies a need for positive regard in that individual. Feeling positively regarded, they in turn experience the interaction as less threatening and become more open to accepting an other’s perspective. Conceptualized in this way, the link between felt understanding and intergroup outcomes can be characterized as a downward cascade that begins from the higher order perception involved in felt understanding (the meta–meta level, requiring third-order intentionality/second-order theory of mind). Feeling understood then shapes the lower order (but still meta-) perception involved in feeling liked or positively regarded, which in turn leads to positive appraisals, emotions, and action intentions toward the outgroup.

The connection between feeling understood and feeling positively regarded is also central to the concept of partner responsiveness in research on close interpersonal relationships (Reis et al., 2004; Reis & Patrick, 1996; Reis & Shaver, 1988). Partner responsiveness is experienced when we believe that a partner “attends to and reacts supportively to central, core defining features of the self,” underpinning the development of intimacy in a close relationship because partners come to “feel mutually responsive to each other’s important goals, needs, dispositions, and values” (Reis et al., 2004, p. 203; see also Murray et al., 2006). Arising through interaction and communication (Itzchakov et al., 2022; Reis et al., 2000), this interpersonal process resonates strongly with the more intergroup processes that are the focus of the present research, especially in implicating the meta–meta level of perception as crucial to our ability to have meaningful and positive social relationships. However, the concept of partner responsiveness has also tended to run together feeling understood (in terms of one’s experiences, values, etc.) and feeling valued more generally, while paying less attention to the possible sequence of these perceptions. In contrast, the research we report in this article focuses on one aspect of this experience (feeling positively regarded) as being the lower order process through which another aspect of this experience (feeling understood) has its positive effects, at least when it comes to social identities and relationships between groups.

The reasoning behind the proposed process is best thought of in the context of ongoing interaction and communication (direct and indirect) between groups. As a premise, a fundamental thing we infer from this (and indeed any) sort of social communication is the

extent to which we as individuals and groups are understood in terms of our perspectives, intentions, needs, and so forth (Itzchakov et al., 2022; Itzchakov & Kluger, 2017; Mallett et al., 2016; Reis et al., 2017; C. Rogers, 2011; Shelton et al., 2014). In terms of process, feeling understood in turn helps to satisfy a need for positive regard (C. Rogers, 2011; see Morelli et al., 2014, for a similar suggestion), as evidenced in research showing that feeling understood by a “good” listener helps to reduce concerns about negative evaluation (Itzchakov et al., 2022; Itzchakov & Kluger, 2017), and that we feel more cared for by a partner who understands us (Reis et al., 2004). To be clear, feeling understood or misunderstood is most likely not the *sole* driver of felt positive regard, which can also come more directly from our interactions with others, for instance, if they say they hate us or want to harm us, or refer to us in derogatory or dehumanizing terms (Kteily et al., 2016). Rather, it is simply that when we have information or interactions (as we often do) that shape our sense of being understood or not, it then shapes our perceptions of how “they” regard and evaluate us more generally.

Having come to feel understood, the second step of the process is that feeling positively regarded and free from negative evaluations by an outgroup in turn leads to more positive views of and orientations toward “them” in subsequent interactions, as much previous research suggests (Bergsieker et al., 2010; Ellemers et al., 2004; Livingstone, Windeatt, et al., 2020; Putra & Wagner, 2017; Simon et al., 2015). For instance, the extent to which we trust an outgroup will depend on their perceived views of and intentions toward us. Likewise, our feelings about the outgroup and the relationship in general reciprocate how they feel about us, with more negative orientations to the outgroup arising in response to perceptions that they feel similarly toward us (Borinca, Tropp, & Ofose, 2021; Kteily et al., 2016; Putra & Wagner, 2017).

Research Overview

The present studies represent a program designed to assess the hypothesized process through a triangulated approach. Specifically, the studies we report include “classic” tests of mediation using measures of felt understanding and felt positive regard in cross-sectional data; experimental studies in which the causal effect of felt understanding on felt positive regard is tested (Studies 1–6, reported together); a test that involves directly manipulating felt positive regard as the mediator (Study 7); and a longitudinal survey study that tests the *within-person* process: that is, whether *change* in felt understanding over time predicts *change* in felt liking over time and whether this latter change in turn predicts change in intergroup outcomes (Study 8). The experimental studies also provide convergent evidence by including different methods of manipulating intergroup felt understanding, including a pseudo-communication-based method in Study 6.

The studies also addressed various intergroup contexts, including attitudes toward refugees in the United Kingdom (Study 2), relations between Sunni and Shia Muslim communities in Lebanon (Study 1), the conflict between Mapuche and Non-Indigenous Chilean communities in Chile (Study 8), and relations between different political groupings (e.g., “Leave” and “Remain” voters in the context of the United Kingdom’s 2016 referendum on membership of the European Union; Study 6). Our approach was thus to assess the hypothesized process in a range of contexts that represent several different sorts of intergroup relationships. They include settings that

have been and continue to be characterized by tension and sometimes violent confrontation within a divided society (e.g., Studies 1 and 8), orientations toward a highly stigmatized group (refugees) in a wealthy Global North nation (the United Kingdom; Study 2), and political divides associated with major political and social change in the same nation (“Brexit”; Study 6). The studies also incorporate data from Global North and South settings (Henrich et al., 2010), including directly examining postcolonial relations between Indigenous communities and majority communities in Chile in Study 8 (González et al., 2022; Pehrson et al., 2011).

In each of these studies, we tested the overarching hypothesis that felt understanding indirectly predicts more positive intergroup outcomes via felt positive regard: Feeling more understood by an outgroup was expected to predict a greater sense of being positively regarded by the outgroup, which in turn was expected to predict more positive outcomes such as trust and positive relational emotions felt by ingroup members. Our approach to testing this hypothesis in Studies 1–6 was to meta-analytically synthesize the data to permit a single test of the model for each outcome variable (with individual study level results reported as well), given their shared prediction and similar research designs. These six studies are consequently presented together in the next section. This is followed by a study (Study 7) in which the mediator—felt positive regard—was directly manipulated in order to test its causal effect. Finally, Study 8 (a 12-month longitudinal study) provides a test of the model as a within-person change process. Combined with previous findings that feeling positively regarded (liked and respected) has a direct causal effect on intergroup outcomes, our approach represents a comprehensive, triangulated test that overcomes several increasingly recognized challenges in testing indirect effects (Bullock et al., 2010; Spencer et al., 2005). Participants gave informed consent prior to participation in all cases, and the research was approved by the ethics committee of the lead author’s department (Studies 1–7) or of the *anonymous* university (Study 8). We confirm that data collection for each study was completed before any statistical analyses were conducted.

Studies 1–6

Studies 1–6 are presented together given that the main analyses involved meta-analytic tests of the indirect effect of felt understanding via felt positive regard across these studies. Below, we report how we determined sample size, all data exclusions (if any), all manipulations, and all measures in Studies 1–6, which were not preregistered.

Study Inclusion and Contexts

Studies 1–6 are all of the unpublished studies we have conducted in which the between-participant indirect effect of felt understanding on trust and positive relational emotions via felt positive regard could be tested.

As detailed in Table 1, Studies 1–6 addressed a range of intergroup contexts. Study 1 addressed relations between Sunni and Shia Muslim communities in Lebanon: a postconflict society characterized by numerous religious (mostly Christian or Muslim) sects around which political parties and militia groups have been organized over decades. Partly in reflection of wider sectarian tensions between Sunni and Shia groups in the Middle East, Lebanon has a power-sharing arrangement for government whereby

Table 1
Summary of Study Characteristics for Studies 1–6

Study	Study type	N	Context	r detectable with 80% power	M _{age} (SD)	% female (male; other)	Data collection and recruitment method	Inclusion criteria
1	Survey	265	Sunni–Shia relations in Lebanon (both sampled; 157 Sunni, 108 Shia)	.170	32.10 (14.92)	51 (47; 0)	Pen and paper; face-to-face recruitment on an opportunity sampling basis in Beirut, Lebanon. No financial reward.	Adults who identify as Sunni or Shia
2	Survey	179	U.K. citizens' attitudes toward refugees	.206	35.57 (11.74)	70 (30; 0)	Online (Prolific Academic ^a). Participants were each paid £1 (\$1.40).	Adult U.K. citizens
3	Experiment	255	Student–lecturer relations at university (student = ingroup)	.173	19.56 (1.04)	67 (33; 0)	Pen and paper; face-to-face recruitment on an opportunity sampling basis on university campus and via other interpersonal contacts. No financial reward.	Current student of ingroup university
4	Experiment	291	Gender relations: Feminist women (ingroup) and men	.163	25.43 (12.67)	100 (0; 0)	Online; recruitment on an opportunity sampling basis via interpersonal contacts. No financial reward.	Self-identify as a woman and be in favor of feminism
5	Experiment	266	Black Lives Matter sympathizers (ingroup) and police	.170	20.09 (4.51)	63 (30; 3)	Online; recruitment on an opportunity sampling basis via interpersonal contacts. No financial reward.	Young adults
6	Experiment	110	Brexit “Remain” and “leave” supporters (both sampled)	.260	37.04 (11.71)	74 (26; 0)	Online (Prolific Academic). Participants were each paid £1 for completing Part 1, and £1.50 for completing Part 2 (£2.50/\$3.40 in total).	Must have voted in the 2016 European Union membership referendum in the United Kingdom.

^a Prolific Academic (<https://www.prolific.co>) is an online crowdsourcing platform through which researchers can advertise and recruit participants for studies in return for a monetary payment to each participant.

the speaker of parliament must be Shiite, while the prime minister must be Sunni (and the president a Maronite Christian). As such, the Sunni–Shia relationship is an important dimension of a society marked by a highly complex set of intergroup relationships.

Study 2 focused on British citizens' attitudes toward refugees in the United Kingdom at a time of heightened media coverage and hostility toward asylum seekers and refugees in the United Kingdom. Study 3 addressed relations between students and lecturers/professors at universities in the United Kingdom (focusing on students' perceptions of being understood by lecturers) and was conducted at a time of heightened awareness of well-being challenges faced by students and debate about appropriate levels of (academic and pastoral) support from lecturing staff toward students. Study 4 addressed gender relations in the United Kingdom in terms of support for feminism: Women who supported feminism were the ingroup, and men were the outgroup. As was the case in many countries at the time of this study, gender equality and women's rights were prominent in news and public discourse at the time shortly following the emergence of the #MeToo movement and awareness of more structural inequalities such as pay/earnings gaps between women and men. Study 5 then focused on young people in the United Kingdom who were sympathetic toward the Black Lives Matter movement (but most of whom did not identify as a person of color), with police being the outgroup. Study 6 focused on relations between “Leave” and “Remain” voters in the context of the 2016 referendum in the United Kingdom on its membership of the European Union. In the years since the referendum, the divide between “Leave” and “Remain” voters became one of the most important features of the political landscape in the United Kingdom, with “Leave” or “Remain” becoming the primary political identities ahead of more traditional political party identities and driving enduring polarization (Hobolt et al., 2021).

Participants

The analyzed sample sizes of Studies 1–6, which are included in the meta-analytic structural equation modeling (SEM) analyses, were 265, 179, 255, 291, 266, and 110, respectively, following the exclusions described below, giving a total *N* of 1,366. We confirm that for each study, data collection was completed before any statistical analyses were conducted. Sample characteristics are summarized in Table 1. In each case, sample size was maximized given the resources available, including participant payment budget (Studies 2 and 6) and time (Studies 1, and 3–5, for which data collection was completed by a set date in each case). We therefore conducted sensitivity power analyses on each sample to determine the smallest population effect that could be detected with 80% power ($\alpha = .05$, $df_{\text{num}} = 1$); these are summarized in Table 1, and ranged from $r = .26$ ($\eta_p^2 = .068$) in Study 6 to $r = .16$ ($\eta_p^2 = .027$) in Study 4.

Exclusions

Seven participants' data were excluded from the Study 1 sample due to not providing responses to any of the items on one or more of the scales. Three participants' data were excluded from Study 2 because they indicated that they were not British citizens. One participant's data were excluded from the Study 3 sample for the same reason. Seven participants' data were excluded from the Study 4 sample (ingroup = feminist women) because these participants

indicated on a check item that they disagreed with feminism. Likewise, 14 participants' data were removed from the Study 5 sample (Black Lives Matter [BLM] support) because they indicated that they disagreed with the BLM movement on a check item. Twenty-two participants' data were excluded from the Study 6 sample due to >50% missing values (1), taking less than 5 min to complete the study (6), expressing suspicion regarding the manipulation (3), not being of voting age at the time of the referendum (4), and/or reporting a non-U.K. nationality (8).

Design

Studies 1 and 2 had a cross-sectional, correlational design. Studies 3–6 had a two condition (felt understanding: understood vs. misunderstood) between-participants design. Four dependent variables were assessed in at least half (three) of the studies. Intergroup trust (i.e., trust toward the outgroup) and positive relational emotions were assessed in all six studies. In Studies 1 and 2, positive relational emotions were those relating to empathic concern (e.g., compassion) toward the outgroup, whereas in Studies 3–6, positive relational emotions were more future-focused emotions regarding the intergroup relationship (e.g., optimism; hope). Overall evaluation of the outgroup was assessed in Studies 2–5, and perception of the quality of the intergroup relationship was assessed in Studies 3–5.

Materials and Procedure

Each of Studies 1–6 followed the same basic procedure whereby after giving their informed consent, participants completed the questionnaire measures in their own time (Studies 1–6), if applicable after being asked to carefully read the manipulation materials which were presented at the start of the study (Studies 3–6). All participants were thanked and fully debriefed immediately after participating.

Stimuli

Studies 3–5. The manipulations in each of Studies 3–5 were operationalized by way of a fabricated online news article from a national media outlet. In each case, the stimulus article was identical across conditions apart from small wording changes that emphasized that the outgroup either understood or misunderstood the ingroup's perspectives. For example, in Study 3, the news article's headline read that the outgroup's understanding of the ingroup's perspectives was "excellent" (understood condition) or "very poor" (misunderstood condition). The closing quote in the understood condition read that "it does seem clear that most university staff really do 'get' prevailing beliefs and values among students on a range of issues, including their positive and negative experiences of studying at uni," while in the misunderstood condition it read, "it does seem clear that most university staff really do not 'get' prevailing beliefs and values among students on a range of issues, including their positive and negative experiences of studying at uni."

Study 6. The procedure of Study 6 involved manipulating felt understanding in a manner that would be more personally relevant to participants (cf. the more generally focused manipulation materials in the Studies 3–5) and which would provide a prototype for a communication-based procedure for increasing felt understanding among interacting members of different groups. In brief, the procedure involved (1) participants providing their own

perspectives and reasons for voting how they did in the 2016 referendum, (2) being told that these would be read by participants who have voted the other way, and (3) apparently receiving back those other participants' summary of and response to the perspectives and reasons participants had provided in step (1). In other words, from the participants' point of view, they shared their own perspectives initially and then received a reflected back summary of those perspectives from an outgroup member.

The first part of the study was advertised to "Leave" and "Remain" voters separately on Prolific Academic, so that only those Prolific members who voted "Leave" could take part in the "Leave" voter survey, and vice versa for "Remain" voters. Participants were then asked to write a summary of their perspectives, feelings, and motivations regarding the way in which they voted in the 2016 referendum (perspective giving), detailing the main reasons why they did so. At completion, they were reminded that they would be contacted to complete the second phase of the experiment and were then remunerated via Prolific.

Six days later, participants who completed the initial survey were contacted via their Prolific IDs to return to complete the second part of the study, at the start of which participants read the apparent response of an outgroup member to what the participant had shared in the first part. This response took the form of a fixed text reply, differing by condition only with respect to small wording changes indicating either understanding or misunderstanding of the participants' perspectives. For example, statements such as, "I see where you're coming from about [X]" (understood), or "I just don't get where you're coming from about [X]" (misunderstood). Similar to Bruneau and Saxe's (2012) method, these replies contained no opinions which might otherwise affect responses to outcome variables; they simply indicated understanding or misunderstanding of participants' perspectives.

We indicated prior to the presentation of the manipulation text that the "responder" had also read the perspectives of four other ingroup members. The intention was for the response to address the most commonly cited reasons for voting "Remain" or "Leave" so that it matched most, if not all of participants' own reasons. To do so, we identified a set of commonly cited issues from three sources: (a) academic research conducted in the wake of the 2016 referendum (Carl, 2017a, 2017b, 2018a, 2018b); (b) asking a small number of "Leave" and "Remain" voters to summarize the most important issues to them prior to the referendum; and (c) the comment sections of social media pages aligned with the official "Leave" and "Remain" campaigns. We compiled a set of the most likely issues to be raised from these sources (e.g., sovereignty, freedom of movement, the economy, and immigration) and then developed four "responses" (conveying understanding or misunderstanding separately for Leave and Remain voters).

Measures

Each study included the following scales. Cronbach's α values for each scale in each study are summarized more fully in Supplemental Table S1.¹ Unless otherwise stated, participants responded on

¹ Each study also included additional measures to those described here. In this article, we report analyses for all dependent variables that feature in at least half of the studies; that is, any dependent variable not analyzed below featured in only one or two of the six studies. All measures in each study are available in the materials deposited on the project Open Science Framework site, as are data pertaining to all of these measures.

7-point scales ranging from 1 or -3 (*completely disagree*) through 4 or 0 (*neither*) to 7 or 3 (*completely agree*).

In Study 1, the survey was designed in English, translated to Arabic, and then successfully back-translated into English in order to check the accuracy of the Arabic translation. However, many Lebanese citizens are bilingual, so participants were given the option to fill out the survey either in English or in Arabic based on preference. The survey was presented to the participants, depending on whether they were Lebanese Sunni or Shia Muslim. There were two versions of the survey, one intended for the Lebanese Shia Muslim participants and the other for the Lebanese Sunni Muslim participants. The participants were approached by the third author and four Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative certified psychology undergraduate students from the American University of Beirut. The participants were approached in three main locations: North Lebanon, Beirut and its suburbs, and South Lebanon. These three locations were chosen based on religious demographics. North Lebanon is mostly populated by Sunni Muslims, while South Lebanon is mostly populated by Shia Muslims. On the other hand, Beirut is mixed in its religious demographics.

Felt Understanding. Felt understanding was assessed using an 11-item scale in Studies 1 and 3, a 10-item scale in Study 2, an eight-item scale in Studies 4 and 5, and a seven-item scale in Study 6. The scales were based on previous research (Livingstone, Fernández Rodríguez, & Rothers, 2020); α s = .85–.93. Example items include “In general, (outgroup members) do not ‘get’ (ingroup members’) views” (reverse scored) and “In general, (outgroup members) have a good understanding of what (ingroup members) think.”

Felt Positive Regard. Felt positive regard was assessed using a six-item scale, α s = .84–.94, based on previous research (Livingstone, Fernández Rodríguez, & Rothers, 2020; Livingstone, Windeatt, et al., 2020). Example items include “In general, (outgroup members) don’t like (ingroup members)” (reverse scored) and “In general, (outgroup members) have positive views about (ingroup members).”

Trust. Trust in the outgroup was assessed using a four-item scale in Study 1, a six-item scale in Study 6, and a seven-item scale in Studies 2–5, α s = .67–.92. These scales were adapted from previous research such as Noor et al. (2008) and Livingstone, Fernández Rodríguez, and Rothers (2020). Example items include “(outgroup members) can be trusted” and “(outgroup members) rarely act in the best interests of (ingroup members)” (reverse scored).

Positive Relational Emotions. In Studies 1 and 2, we assessed empathic concern toward the outgroup using a three-item ($\alpha = .73$) and six-item ($\alpha = .92$) scale, respectively. Example items include “I can empathize with what the Sunni/Shia people have experienced” (Study 1) and how *sympathetic/compassionate/warm* participants felt toward refugees (Study 2).

In Studies 3–6, we assessed positive future-focused emotions (e.g., hope; optimism; reassurance; positivity) regarding the relationship between the ingroup and outgroup using five-item (Studies 4 and 5), six-item (Study 6), and 11-item (Study 3) scales, α s = .93–.95. In each case, participants responded on a scale ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*extremely*).

Outgroup Evaluation: Feelings Thermometer (Studies 2–5). Participants were asked to rate their general feelings toward the outgroup using a feelings thermometer measure, on a scale of 1–100 (Nelson, 2008). This was included because it offered a more direct evaluation of the outgroup, rather than a representation of the intergroup relationship, which was already assessed on the perception of intergroup relations scale described below.

Perception of Intergroup Relations (Studies 3–5). Perceptions of the ingroup’s relationship with the outgroup (Livingstone, Windeatt, et al., 2020) were measured on a scale (α s = .90–.92) composed of seven semantic differential items (e.g., negative/positive; cold/warm; tense/relaxed) measured from -3 (*negative anchor*) to 3 (*positive anchor*). These were preceded by the statement “The relationship between (outgroup) and (ingroup) is ...”

Results

The correlation matrices for the individual studies are reported in Supplemental Tables S2.1–S2.6.

Preliminary Analysis: Confirmatory Factor Analysis

While felt understanding and felt positive regard are conceptually distinct,² we wanted to test the assumption that they were empirically distinct as assessed in these studies. To do so, we conducted confirmatory factor analyses for each data set for Studies 1–6 to test between a model in which felt understanding and felt positive regard are represented as distinct-but-correlated factors indicated by scores on their respective scale items (Model 1) and a model in which all of these items are specified as loading on to a single factor (Model 2). We also tested a third model (Model 3) that had a two-factor structure, but which randomly allocated the felt understanding and felt positive regard items to load on to one of the two factors. In each case, one factor was indicated by six items (three from the felt understanding scale and three from the felt positive regard scale), and the second factor was indicated by the remaining felt understanding and felt positive regard items. The rationale for testing this “random” two-factor Model 3 was that potentially *any* two-factor solution may have a fit advantage over a one-factor solution because it can leverage the fact that the interitem correlations are unlikely to be uniform, even if there is no multifactor structure to them.

Fit indices and comparative statistics are reported in Supplemental Table S4. Model comparison involved assessing Akaike information criterion (Δ AIC) and $\Delta\chi^2$ and computing Akaike weights for each model for each sample (Wagenmakers & Farrell, 2004). Across all six data sets, comparison of Model 2 with Model 1 suggests that Model 1 is highly preferable, $\Delta\chi^2_1 \geq 164.22$, $ps < .001$, Δ AICs ≥ 161.22 . Comparison of Model 3 with Model 2 in turn suggests that the “random” two-factor specification in Model 3 had only little or no advantage over the one-factor Model 2, $\Delta\chi^2_1 = -0.02$ to -16.91 . Moreover, Akaike weights calculated across all three models for each data set indicated that the normalized probability that Model 1 is the preferred model was $>.9999$ in all six data sets; thus, the probability that any other model is preferable was extremely small.

Manipulation Checks

The results of manipulation check analyses for Studies 3–6 are summarized in Supplemental Table S3. These manipulation check analyses confirmed that in each study, felt understanding was significantly higher in the felt understanding condition than in the felt misunderstanding condition, F s ≥ 28.42 , $ps < .001$, η^2_p s $\geq .097$.

² In the Supplemental Materials, we further consider the conceptual distinction between felt understanding and felt positive regard in terms of whether they can be fully orthogonal/independent.

Main Analysis

In order to test the indirect effect of felt understanding on trust and positive relational emotions via felt positive regard, we conducted tests of meta-analytic structural equation models using the MetaSEM package in R (Cheung, 2015, 2021; Cheung & Chan, 2005). This technique permits meta-analytic tests of indirect/mediated effects across a number of studies or data sets. In the present case, we conducted two-stage meta-analytic structural equation models (Cheung, 2021; Cheung & Chan, 2005). This involves (a) pooling the original correlation matrices from each of the individual studies (weighted by sample size, as in a typical meta-analysis) and (b) testing the indirect effect model using the pooled correlation matrix (Cheung, 2022). Given the heterogeneity of methods (experiments and surveys; different contexts), we tested random effects models³ rather than fixed effects models in order to test the indirect effect of felt understanding via felt positive regard.

Trust

The analysis for trust is summarized in Panel A of Figure 1. It confirmed that the indirect effect of felt understanding on trust via felt positive regard was significant ($b = .20$, 95% CIs [.09, .37]): Feeling more understood by outgroup members predicted a greater sense of being positively regarded by outgroup members, which in turn predicted more trust in the outgroup. The remaining direct effect of felt understanding on trust was not significant.

Positive Relational Emotions

The analysis for positive relational emotions, summarized in Panel B of Figure 1, confirmed that the indirect effect of felt understanding on positive relational emotions via felt positive regard was significant ($b = .12$, 95% CIs [.05, .21]): Feeling more understood by outgroup members predicted a greater sense of being positively regarded by outgroup members, which in turn predicted more positive relational emotions toward the outgroup. The remaining direct effect of felt understanding was significant.

Outgroup Evaluation: Feelings Thermometer

The analysis for the feelings thermometer outcome, summarized in Panel C of Figure 1, confirmed that the indirect effect of felt understanding on overall feelings toward the outgroup via felt positive regard was significant ($b = .15$, 95% CIs [.03, .34]): Feeling more understood by outgroup members predicted a greater sense of being positively regarded by outgroup members, which, in turn, predicted more positive evaluation of the outgroup. The remaining direct effect of felt understanding on outgroup evaluation was not significant.

Perception of Intergroup Relationship

The analysis for the perceived quality of the intergroup relationship is summarized in Panel D of Figure 1. It confirmed that the indirect effect of felt understanding on the perceived quality of the intergroup relationship via felt positive regard was significant ($b = .08$, 95% CIs [.04, .12]): Feeling more understood by outgroup members predicted a greater sense of being positively regarded by outgroup members, which in turn predicted more positive perceptions of the intergroup

relationship. The remaining direct effect of felt understanding on perceptions of the intergroup relationship was not significant.

Individual Study Analyses

Tests of indirect effects in each of the individual studies are reported in Table 2. These tests confirmed that the indirect effect of felt understanding on trust via felt positive regard was significant in all studies except Study 5. The indirect effect of felt understanding on positive relational emotions via felt positive regard was also significant in all studies except Studies 5 and 6, although in the latter case the 95% CI did not contain zero. The indirect effect of felt understanding via felt positive regard was also significant for both outgroup evaluation (feelings thermometer) and perceived quality of the intergroup relationship in all studies, with the exception of Study 5.

Discussion

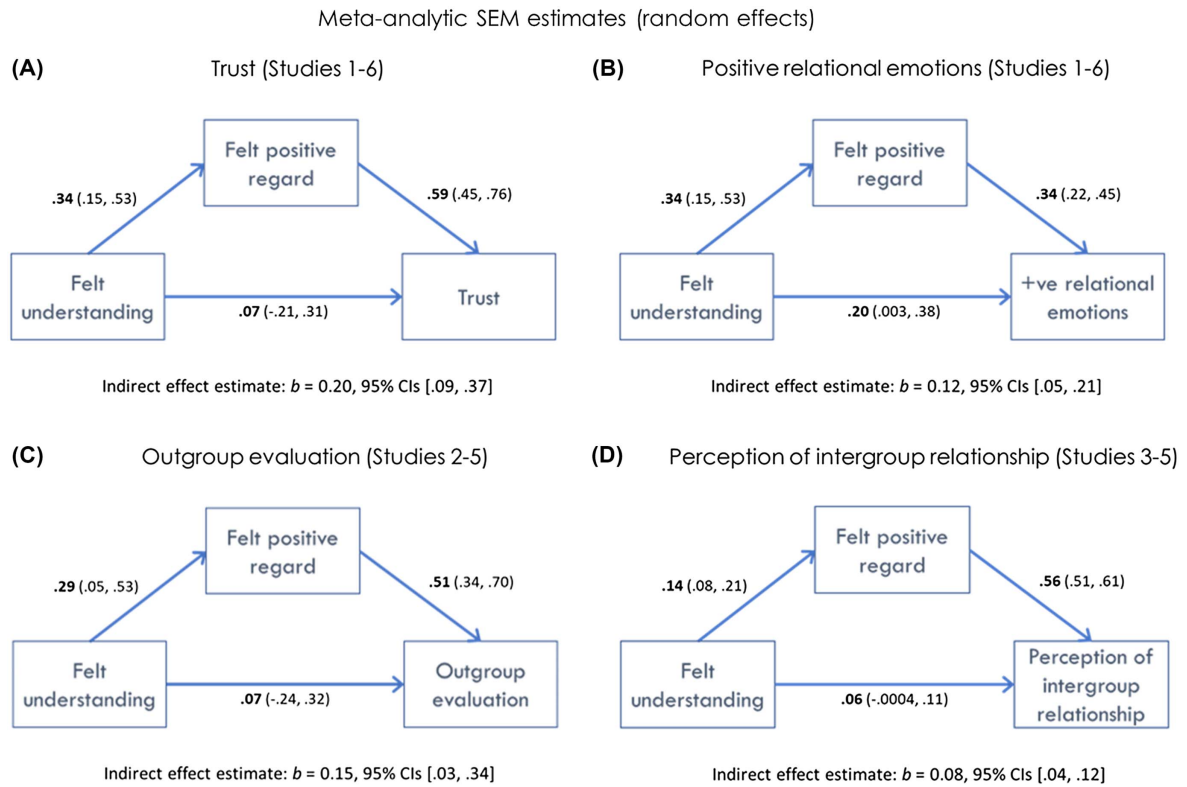
The analysis across Studies 1–6 provides support for the hypothesis that felt understanding—believing that an outgroup understands and accepts ingroup perspectives—leads to positive intergroup outcomes because it fosters a sense that the outgroup regards the ingroup positively. Meta-analytic structural equation models indicated indirect associations between felt understanding and greater trust, more positive relational emotions, a more positive evaluation of the outgroup, and more positive perceptions of the intergroup relationship via perceived positive regard.

The meta-analytic analysis strategy has a number of advantages, including that it produces estimates of the effects in question that are less susceptible to the estimation error that can affect even well-powered individual studies (Kenny & Judd, 2019). Moreover, the six studies analyzed here covered a range of different settings and intergroup relationships, including gender relations, religious identities, political identities, and identities relating to ongoing social movements. While we had no reason to suppose that the effects of felt understanding would in turn differ across these contexts and relationships, it remains possible that effects observed in a given context may reflect the particularities of that context as much as they reflect processes that would be evident in other contexts.

The inclusion of four studies in which felt understanding was directly manipulated also helps with the vexed process of inferring causation in mediation models (e.g., Bullock et al., 2010; Spencer et al., 2005; Stone-Romero & Rosopa, 2008). The results provide evidence of a causal effect of felt understanding on felt positive regard (the putative mediator), which has itself previously been found to causally affect the sorts of intergroup outcome measures we assess here, such as trust (Gordijn et al., 2017; Livingstone, Windeatt, et al., 2020; Putra, 2014; Putra & Wagner, 2017; Vorauer et al., 1998). Furthermore, the random effects meta-analytic SEM approach also goes some way to addressing some of the challenges posed when testing mediation hypotheses, such as the possibility that the effects of the predictor and/or the mediator may be heterogeneous across individuals and groups (Bullock et al., 2010). While not entirely guaranteed to be bias free, inferences drawn

³ As with other forms of meta-analysis, a random effects model assumes that there is no single “fixed” or true effect across the studies, and the estimate for each effect in the model represents a mean of a distribution of “true” effects that vary as a function of study features, as was the case in Studies 1–6.

Figure 1
Meta-Analytic SEM (Random Effects) Estimates Across Studies 1–6



Note. Meta-analytic SEM (random effects) estimates across Studies 1–6 for models of trust (Panel A), positive relational emotions (Panel B), outgroup evaluation (Panel C), and perception of the intergroup relationship (Panel D). Path estimates (in bold) are unstandardized and followed by 95% CIs in parentheses. SEM = structural equation modeling; CI = confidence interval. See the online article for the color version of this figure.

primarily from the meta-analytic estimates should make those inferences less susceptible to bias as a function of method (e.g., survey; different experimental manipulations) or of the nature of the groups and contexts sampled.

Study 7

Following the experimental “causal chain” approach to examining mediation (Preacher, 2015; Spencer et al., 2005), in Study 7, we in turn manipulated felt positive regard (two conditions: positive regard vs. negative regard) to test its effect on outcomes examined in Studies

1–6, including trust, positive relational emotions, and perceptions of the intergroup relationship. Consistent with prior work on positive effects of intergroup respect (Ellemers et al., 2004; Simon et al., 2015; Simon & Grabow, 2014), low levels of metaprejudice (Putra, 2014; Putra & Wagner, 2017; Vezzali, 2017), and felt liking (Bergsieker et al., 2010; Borinca, Tropp, & Oforu, 2021; Livingstone, Windeatt, et al., 2020), we expected outcomes to be more positive in the positive regard condition than the negative regard condition.

The study focused on the same context as Study 4 (women who support feminism and gender equality and men as an outgroup), and materials were adapted from this earlier study in order to enhance

Table 2
Indirect Effect Estimates for Each Outcome Variable in Each of Studies 1–6

Study	Trust			Positive relational emotions			Outgroup evaluation (feelings thermometer)			Perception of intergroup relationship		
	Estimate (CIs)	β	p	Estimate (CIs)	β	p	Estimate (CIs)	β	p	Estimate (CIs)	β	p
1 (Lebanon)	.30 [.22, .40]	.29	<.001	.30 [.17, .44]	.25	<.001	5.93 [3.85, 8.72]	.33	<.001			
2 (Refugees)	.43 [.29, .59]	.38	<.001	.37 [.21, .54]	.32	<.001	2.47 [0.78, 4.66]	.08	.013	.16 [.04, .33]	.08	.012
3 (Students)	.17 [.05, .32]	.09	.011	.18 [.05, .33]	.08	.010	2.25 [0.76, 4.41]	.05	.013	.18 [.06, .34]	.09	.009
4 (Feminism)	.16 [.05, .29]	.07	.010	.15 [.05, .30]	.05	.014	3.56 [-.29, 7.74]	.07	.082	.13 [-.01, .28]	.07	.074
5 (BLM)	.23 [-.04, .47]	.09	.079	.09 [-.01, .22]	.03	.105						
6 (Brexit)	.28 [.09, .51]	.14	.008	.17 [.04, .42]	.08	.058						

Note. CI = confidence interval; BLM = Black Lives Matter.

comparability. The design, hypothesis, methods, and analysis were preregistered at https://osf.io/bz6sw/?view_only=1930315cc99e4fcfb92bfbdb50c887217.

Participants and Design

An initial sample of 321 participants was obtained via Prolific Academic. As per the preregistered exclusion criteria, we then excluded 14 participants who disagreed that they supported feminism and movements for gender equality. No other participants met any of the other exclusion criteria. The final sample for analysis thus consisted of 307 participants, all of whom were from the United Kingdom and identified as women ($M_{\text{age}} = 40.34$, $SD = 13.62$). The primary determinant of sample size was the participant payment budget. Sensitivity power analysis indicated that this sample provided 80% power to detect an effect as small as $\eta_p^2 = .025$ (Cohen's $f = .16$) given the design ($\alpha = .05$, $df_{\text{num}} = 1$).

The study had a two condition (felt positive regard: high/positive vs. low/negative) between-participants design. The three dependent variables were trust toward the outgroup, positive relational emotions, and perception of the quality of the intergroup relationship.⁴

Materials and Procedure

Stimuli

As in Studies 3–5, the manipulation was operationalized by way of a fabricated online news article from a national media outlet. In each case, the stimulus article was identical across conditions apart from wording changes that emphasized that the outgroup (men) either positively regarded or negatively regarded women who supported feminism and gender equality. For example, the news article's headline reads that men's views of women's rights campaigners were "increasingly positive" (positive regard condition) or "increasingly negative" (negative regard condition). The main text varied in similar ways. For instance, the article in the positive regard condition stated that "A large majority—nearly 82%—of men agreed or strongly agreed that they liked and had positive views of women who supported feminism and women's rights," whereas the article in the negative regard condition stated that "A large majority—nearly 82%—of men agreed or strongly agreed that they disliked and had negative views of women who supported feminism and women's rights."

Manipulation Check: Felt Positive Regard. Felt positive regard was assessed using the same six-item scale used in Study 4 ($\alpha = .97$).

Felt Understanding. Felt understanding was assessed using the same eight-item scale used in Study 4 ($\alpha = .95$).

Trust, Positive Relational Emotions, and Perception of Intergroup Relations. The three dependent variables were assessed using similar seven-item (trust; $\alpha = .90$), five-item (positive relational emotions; $\alpha = .98$), and seven-item (perception of intergroup relations; $\alpha = .96$) scales to those used in Study 4.

Results

Manipulation Check

A one-way analysis of variance on the felt positive regard manipulation check revealed a strong, significant effect of the

manipulation in the intended direction, $F(1, 305) = 211.00$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .41$, with felt positive regard higher in the positive regard condition than in the negative regard condition ($M = -1.05$, $SD = 1.17$ vs. $M = 0.89$, $SD = 1.17$).⁵

A similar analysis of variance on the felt understanding scale also revealed a strong, significant effect of the positive regard manipulation, $F(1, 305) = 120.99$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .28$. Felt understanding was higher in the positive regard condition than in the negative regard condition ($M = -1.21$, $SD = 1.11$ vs. $M = 0.19$, $SD = 1.13$).

Given that the manipulation also appeared to affect felt understanding, we ran two further (nonregistered) analyses of covariance: one to test the effect of the manipulation on felt positive regard while adjusting for shared variance with felt understanding (by adding felt understanding as a covariate) and one to test the effect of the manipulation on felt understanding while adjusting for shared variance with felt positive regard (by adding felt positive regard as a covariate). The rationale for these analyses was to test whether the effect of the manipulation on felt understanding may simply be because the felt understanding measure was also picking up variance in felt positive regard, given their covariation. The first analysis of covariance indicated that the manipulation still had a strong, significant effect on felt positive regard after adding felt understanding as a covariate, $F(1, 304) = 64.43$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .18$. In contrast, the effect of the manipulation on felt understanding was nonsignificant after adding felt positive regard as a covariate, $F < 1$. This increased our confidence in the success of the manipulation by suggesting that its effect on felt understanding was fully accounted for by felt understanding's covariation with felt positive regard, whereas the intended effect of the manipulation on felt positive regard was not accounted for by felt understanding.

Main Analyses

The preregistered analysis strategy was to test the effect of the positive regard manipulation on the three dependent variables in a multivariate analysis of variance. This indicated a large and highly significant multivariate effect of the manipulation, Wilks' $\lambda = .278$, $F = 262.27$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .72$. This reflected highly significant effects of the manipulation on trust, $F(1, 305) = 58.63$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .16$, positive relational emotions, $F(1, 305) = 683.88$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .69$, and the perception of the intergroup relationship, $F(1, 305) = 151.88$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .33$. Participants in the positive regard condition reported greater trust ($M = -0.62$, $SD = 1.03$ vs. $M = 0.30$, $SD = 1.08$), more positive relational emotions ($M = 1.96$, $SD = 0.89$ vs. $M = 5.07$, $SD = 1.18$), and perceived the intergroup relationship more positively ($M = -0.91$, $SD = 1.00$ vs. $M = 0.48$, $SD = 0.96$) than did participants in the negative regard condition.⁶

⁴ One measure from the preceding studies—outgroup evaluation using the feelings thermometer—was not included in the study because of the ambiguity or multiple meanings of warmth or liking of the outgroup (men) in the context of gender relations.

⁵ As in Studies 1–6, we ran confirmatory factor analyses which again indicated that the felt understanding and felt positive regard measures are better represented as indicating these two separate constructs. The full results of these analyses are reported in Supplemental Table S4.

⁶ Pre-registered secondary analyses were also conducted, and are reported in Supplemental Table S6.1–S6.3.

Discussion

Consistent with previous findings on cognate constructs such as respect, metaprejudice, and felt liking (Ellemers et al., 2004; Gordijn et al., 2017; Livingstone, Wendeatt, et al., 2020; Putra, 2014; Putra & Wagner, 2017; Simon et al., 2015; Simon & Grabow, 2014; Vezzali, 2017), the present results support the prediction that feeling positively versus negatively regarded by an outgroup would lead to more positive outcomes such as trust in the outgroup, positive relational emotions, and the perceived quality of the intergroup relationship. In the context of the broader aims of the present research, the findings provide evidence that the link between felt positive regard and these outcomes is indeed causal and so provide another component to the evidence that felt positive regard is a mechanism through which intergroup felt understanding leads to more positive intergroup outcomes.

Some other aspects of the findings are also worthy of note. First, the positive regard manipulation also had an effect on felt understanding, in addition to its (stronger) impact on felt positive regard. Felt understanding in turn also predicted each of the intergroup outcomes. A plausible interpretation of this is that the relationship between feeling understood and feeling positively regarded may be bidirectional: Particularly in cases in which there is no specific information about the extent to which an ingroup is understood by an outgroup, group members may make inferences about this on the basis of their appraisal of how positively or negatively the outgroup view the ingroup overall. At the same time, though, effects of the manipulation on felt understanding became nonsignificant when adjusting for measured felt positive regard, which may indicate instead that the effects on felt understanding simply reflect its covariance with the former, such that the felt understanding scale was simply “picking up” variance in felt positive regard. In either case, the results provide a nonconclusive indication that the relationship between felt understanding and felt positive regard may also be reciprocal over time.

A second feature of the findings that is worth further comment is the size of the effects of the manipulation: All were large in Cohen’s (1988) terms and much larger than those typically observed in social psychology more generally. Speculatively, this may be due to a combination of factors, including the strength of the manipulation and the fact that the study took place at a time in the United Kingdom of acute concern and public discourse around male violence toward women (including high-profile rape and murder convictions of serving police officers; BBC News, 2021, 2023). In line with this, a cursory look at open-ended responses in the questionnaire indicates that the topic and content of the article were highly involving and emotive for many participants. Whatever the reasons for the size of effects, we would simply caution that wider population effects of such a method, especially across different contexts, are likely to be smaller than those observed in this study and more in line with the size of effects observed in previous studies (e.g., Ellemers et al., 2004; Livingstone, Wendeatt, et al., 2020; Simon et al., 2015).

There are some remaining limitations to the evidence from Studies 1–7, which we sought to address in Study 8. Chief among these is a limitation that is shared with all approaches to testing mediation and indirect effects using single timepoint manipulations and measures: that the hypothesized process is tested in terms of between-person variation in the outcome, mediator, and independent variable. Such

approaches have been critiqued as being less than optimal for testing hypotheses and theory-based models that actually postulate within-person change processes over time (Cole & Maxwell, 2003; Coman et al., 2013; Maxwell & Cole, 2007; O’Laughlin et al., 2018). In the present case, the hypothesized process summarized in Figure 1 suggests in more precise conceptual terms that when a person *comes to feel* more understood, this will predict a similar *change* in the extent to which that person feels that the outgroup regards the ingroup positively, which in turn predicts a *change* in the extent to which they trust the outgroup and feel positive relational emotions regarding the outgroup.

In common with most conceptual models across social psychology that suggest indirect or mediated effects, the implication here is that the hypothesized process is one of within-person change in different variables and the relationships between those different changes. In these terms, even the most stringent criteria for testing mediation and indirect effects may be less than optimal because they involve analysis of between-person variation to make inferences about what are actually conceptualized as within-person changes. Put in these terms, a further test of the hypothesized model in terms of associations between within-person change in the variables over time would be valuable to make inferences about the processes that the model actually suggests. This was our main aim in Study 8.

Study 8

Study 8 was conducted in the context of land and cultural recognition disputes between Indigenous Mapuche communities and Non-Indigenous Chileans in the Araucanía region of Chile. The analysis was of a year-long longitudinal data set with two measurement time points separated by 12 months, which enabled a dynamic mediation test (Coman et al., 2013; MacKinnon, 2008; Selig & Preacher, 2009) of the within-person indirect association over time between change in felt understanding and change in trust via change in felt positive regard. This involves representing change between time points in each of the variables as latent variables in a structural equation model (McArdle, 2009) and estimating the direct and indirect associations between these latent change variables (Coman et al., 2013; Selig & Preacher, 2009)—a procedure described in more detail below. We tested our model among both Non-Indigenous Chilean and Indigenous Mapuche participants.

Context

The so-called Mapuche conflict refers to the cultural, ethnic, and territorial struggle that involves a long-standing confrontation between these Indigenous people, the Chilean state, and large industrial companies owning the land that has historically belonged to Mapuche (e.g., Gerber et al., 2016; Nooitgedagt et al., 2021; Richards & Gardner, 2013). Throughout this conflict that dates back more than a century, the Mapuche (literally “people of the land”) have been dispossessed of a substantial amount of their ancestral territory and repressed by the Chilean state (e.g., Jara et al., 2018; Nooitgedagt et al., 2021). The Indigenous communities of Mapuche are thought to be ill-disposed against large landholders and the Chilean state, whom they accuse of denying or otherwise impeding Mapuche ownership rights to ancestral land (Jara et al., 2018). During

the past decade, there have been violent arson attacks that led to the deaths of civilians and severe property damage in the southern region of Araucanía. The state police and prosecutors investigate whether Mapuche groups such as the militant Coordinadora Arauco-Malleco are responsible for these misdeeds (e.g., Gerber et al., 2016).

Dynamic Mediation Analysis

To test our hypothesis, we adopted a dynamic mediation approach (Coman et al., 2013; MacKinnon, 2008; Selig & Preacher, 2009). Building upon latent change score modeling (Grimm et al., 2012; McArdle, 2009; McArdle & Hamagami, 2001) in a structural equation modeling framework, dynamic mediation involves testing a (simple, in this case) mediation model in terms of within-person change over time in a predictor, mediator, and outcome variable. Change over time in a variable such as felt understanding is represented as a latent variable, predicted by baseline between-person scores in felt understanding (plus an error term), and in turn predicting felt understanding scores at the later time point. Predictive paths can then be specified between latent change in different variables—for instance, a predictive path from change in felt understanding to change in felt positive regard.

There are several advantages to this approach to testing mediation. It involves examining indirect paths in terms of the within-person change processes implied by many or even most mediation hypotheses (Cole & Maxwell, 2003; Coman et al., 2013; Judd & Kenny, 1981); that is, changes predicting changes, either within the same time frame or across different time frames. This approach also involves estimating change while taking measurement error into account (Cronbach & Furby, 1970; Judd et al., 2001; Lord, 1956; though see Gollwitzer et al., 2014). Last, this dynamic mediation approach also involves estimates of paths between change over time in variables of interest, while also separately estimating associations between those change variables and between-person baseline variation in the measures of those variables. For example, in the models presented in Figure 2, paths (not indicated in the figure) were also specified between each of the Time 1 measures of the three variables to each of the three latent change factors.

Predictions

The main prediction for this study was that change over time in felt understanding would indirectly predict change in trust over time via change in perceived positive regard; that is, there would be a positive indirect path from change in felt understanding to change in trust via change in perceived positive regard. We did not have specific predictions regarding the associations between baseline levels of each variable and the latent change scores, but these are estimated as a matter of course in the model. Likewise, although we did not have specific predictions about cross-group differences in the strength of the structural paths between change variables, we tested these as a matter of course.

Method

Participants and Design

The study was part of a larger research project, and data were collected by Netquest, an online fieldwork company. Participants

were surveyed annually in 2020 (Time 1), and 2021 (Time 2). The baseline sample comprised of 693 adults, of whom 410 (71.2%) then completed the Time 2 survey. The analyses reported below only include the 410 participants who completed the questionnaire at both time points.⁷ At Time 1, 194 participants self-identified as Mapuche (56.2% female, $M_{\text{age}} = 39.51$, $SD_{\text{age}} = 12.33$) and 216 self-identified as Non-Indigenous (i.e., non-Mapuche) Chileans (52.3% females, $M_{\text{age}} = 42.63$, $SD_{\text{age}} = 12.57$). At Time 2, 147 participants self-identified as Mapuche and 263 self-identified as Non-Indigenous Chileans.⁸ A detailed summary of the sample is presented in Supplemental Table S7. The inclusion criteria included identifying as a Mapuche or Non-Indigenous Chilean, being 18 years or older, and living most of their life in Araucanía. The study was advertised as a research project seeking to understand attitudes toward intergroup relations in Chile.

Materials and Procedure

Felt Understanding. Seven items measured the perception that outgroup members understand ingroup perspectives about the conflict (e.g., the Mapuche participants were asked: “To what extent do Non-Indigenous Chileans consider the Mapuche perspective on land disputes?” and “To what extent are Non-Indigenous Chileans interested in understanding the Mapuche’s perspective on their cultural traditions?”), $\alpha_{\text{Mapuche}} = .95$, $\alpha_{\text{Non-Indigenous Chileans}} = .93$ at Time 1; $\alpha_{\text{Mapuche}} = .94$, $\alpha_{\text{Non-Indigenous Chileans}} = .94$ at Time 2.⁹

Felt Positive Regard. The same six-item scale used in Studies 1–7 assessed the extent to which respondents felt that their ingroup was positively regarded by the outgroup; $\alpha_{\text{Mapuche}} = .88$, $\alpha_{\text{Non-Indigenous Chileans}} = .85$ at Time 1; $\alpha_{\text{Mapuche}} = .87$, $\alpha_{\text{Non-Indigenous Chileans}} = .89$ at Time 2.

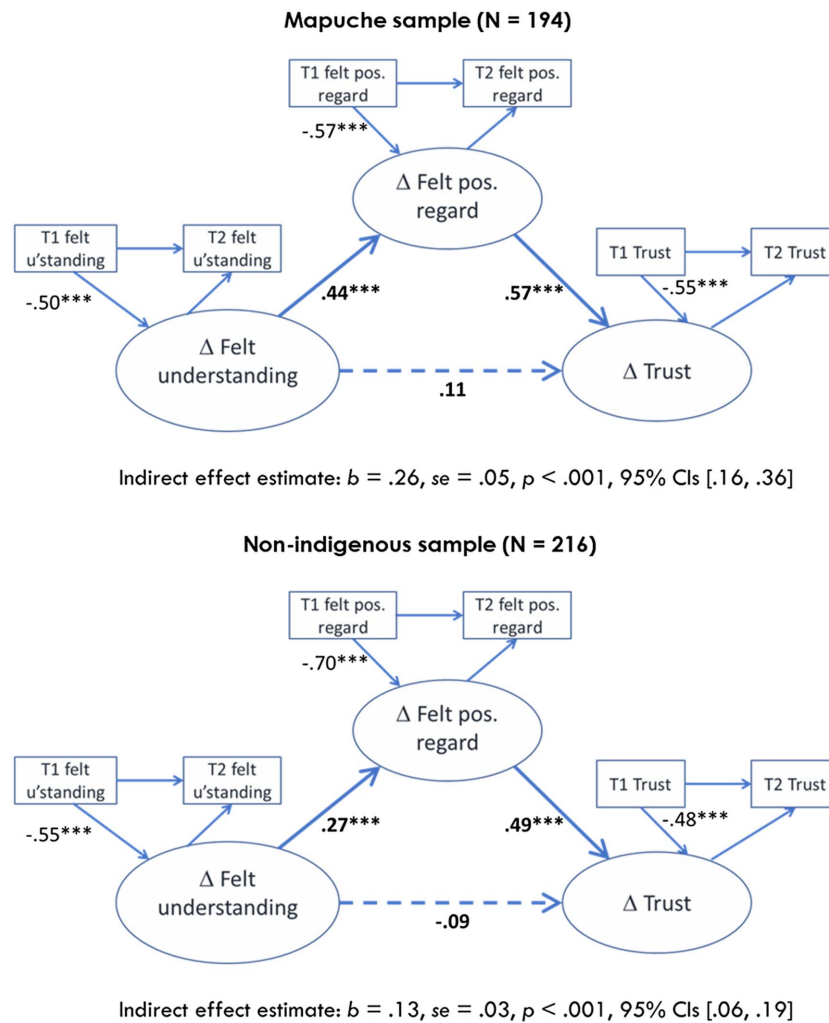
Trust. Three items adapted from those used in Studies 1–6 were used to the extent to which respondents trusted the outgroup, $\alpha_{\text{Mapuche}} = .68$, $\alpha_{\text{Non-Indigenous Chileans}} = .84$ at Time 1;

⁷ Analysis comparing those who completed both waves with those who completed only wave one ($N = 283$) indicated that there were no differences between them on any of the individual questionnaire items described below, $ps = .083-.956$, $\eta_p^2s \leq .005$. There was also no difference in the proportion of people who identified as Mapuche, $\chi^2 = 2.44$, $p = .118$. There was a small but significant difference in the age profile, with those who completed both waves having a slightly higher mean age (41.15 years vs. 37.20 years, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 \leq .025$). Likewise, there was a small but significant difference in the gender profile, with a relatively higher number of people who identified as women amongst those who completed both time points, $\chi^2 = 7.64$, $p = .006$.

⁸ These numbers indicate that some participants changed their self-identification from Mapuche to non-Mapuche (68 people) or from non-Mapuche to Mapuche (26 people) between Times 1 and 2. This is not an error, and reflects the fact that the “boundary” between Indigenous Mapuche and Non-Indigenous identities is blurry and/or movable for some individuals due to factors such as intermarriage and mixed heritage backgrounds, as well as contextual factors such as the immediate political climate. As a result, some individuals may reasonably claim Mapuche or non-Mapuche identity at different points in time. We consider this aspect of the sample in the main analyses.

⁹ The data available on Open Science Framework pertain to the variables reported in this article, given that the data come from a larger research project. The (unpublished) raw anonymized data and list of questions from the whole project are available upon request from the seventh author.

Figure 2
Dynamic Mediation Analyses for Trust (Study 8) for the Mapuche Sample (Upper Panel) and the Non-Indigenous Chilean Sample (Lower Panel), Based on Self-Identification at Time 1



Note. Path estimates are unstandardized coefficients, and paths without estimates were fixed as 1. The model also included other parameters which are not illustrated here for simplicity. These include “coupling” paths from baseline/T1 scores of each variable to each of the latent change variables. For instance, Δ felt understanding was predicted by T1 felt positive regard and T1 trust, as well as T1 felt understanding. Also modeled were covariances between each pair of T1 variables. Estimates in bold are the a, b, and c paths between the predictor, mediator, and outcome. T1 = Time 1; felt pos. = felt positive; CI = confidence interval; SE = standard error. See the online article for the color version of this figure.
 *** $p < .001$.

$\alpha_{\text{Mapuche}} = .82$, $\alpha_{\text{Non-Indigenous Chileans}} = .82$ at Time 2. The items were worded for both groups, respectively (e.g., the Mapuche participants were asked: “The majority of Non-Indigenous Chileans living in Araucanía are fair”).

Results

The main analysis¹⁰ tested a multigroup dynamic mediation model, the estimates for which are summarized in Figure 2. The

multigroup component involved testing the model in the Mapuche sample and the Non-Indigenous sample and then testing for cross-group equivalence in the components of the indirect effect and the direct effect across these two groups. The zero-order correlations between all variables are reported in Table 3.

¹⁰ We first conducted similar confirmatory factor analyses to those conducted in Studies 1–7. These again confirmed that Model 1 was strongly preferable. The full results are reported in Supplemental Table S4.

Table 3
Zero-Order Correlations for Study 8

Variable	FU T1	FU T2	FPR T1	FPR T2	Trust T1	Trust T2
FU T1	—	.509***	.574***	.091	-.040	-.050
FU T2	.589***	—	.454***	.277***	-.008	-.018
FPR T1	.647***	.444***	—	.243***	.100	.094
FPR T2	.36***	.520***	.444***	—	.329***	.481***
Trust T1	.299***	.171*	.264***	.210**	—	.550***
Trust T2	.183*	.271***	.130	.433***	.272***	—

Note. Values for the Mapuche sample are reported below the diagonal and the Non-Indigenous sample above the diagonal. FU = felt understanding; FPR = felt positive regard; T1 = Time 1; T2 = Time 2.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Mapuche Sample

Estimates for the Mapuche sample are summarized in the upper panel of Figure 2. The indirect path between change in felt understanding and change in trust via change in felt positive regard was highly significant: Change in felt understanding over time predicted change in felt positive regard during the same time period ($b = .44$, $SE = .06$, $p < .001$, 95% CIs [.33, .56]), which in turn predicted change in trust ($b = .57$, $SE = .10$, $p < .001$, 95% CIs [.38, .77]). The remaining direct path from change in felt understanding to change in trust was not significant, $b = .11$, $SE = .08$, $p = .202$, 95% CIs [-.05, .27].

The model also provided estimates of the association between change in each variable over time and between-person baseline variation in those variables. As summarized in the upper panel of Figure 2, change in each of the variables was significantly greater amongst those who scored lower on baseline measures—for instance, change in felt understanding was greater amongst those who were lower in felt understanding to begin with ($b = -.50$, $SE = .08$, $p < .001$, 95% CIs [-.66, -.37]).

Non-Indigenous Sample

Estimates for the Non-Indigenous Chilean sample are summarized in the lower panel of Figure 2. As in the Mapuche sample, the indirect path between change in felt understanding and change in trust via change in felt positive regard was significant: Change in felt understanding predicted change in felt positive regard during the same time period ($b = .27$, $SE = .06$, $p < .001$, 95% CIs [.13, .38]), which in turn predicted change in trust ($b = .49$, $SE = .06$, $p < .001$, 95% CIs [.36, .62]). The direct path from change in felt understanding to change in trust was not significant, $b = -.09$, $SE = .07$, $p = .188$, 95% CIs [-.23, .05].

The model also provides estimates of the association between change in each variable over time and between-person baseline variation in those variables. As summarized in the lower panel of Figure 2, and as with the Mapuche sample, change in each of the variables was significantly greater amongst those who scored lower on baseline measures—for instance, change in felt understanding was greater amongst those who were lower in felt understanding to begin with ($b = -.55$, $SE = .10$, $p < .001$, 95% CIs [-.75, -.35]).

Multigroup Analysis of Indirect Effect Component Paths

Finally, we tested the cross-group equivalence of the component paths of the indirect effect by constraining each one in turn to be

equal across the Mapuche and Non-Indigenous samples and testing the change in χ^2 (as an indicator of worsening fit) against the model in which the path was not constrained. These analyses test whether the paths differed in magnitude between the two groups and would indicate whether the hypothesized indirect path (or at least its component paths) was in turn contingent upon/moderated by the group in question. These analyses indicated that the path between change in felt understanding and change in felt positive regard did show a small difference in magnitude between the groups ($\Delta\chi^2 = 4.46$, $p = .035$), being slightly stronger in the Mapuche sample; however, this path was still highly significant in both samples. Likewise, the direct path between change in felt understanding and change in trust indicated a just-significant between-group difference ($\Delta\chi^2 = 4.05$, $p = .044$); however, this path was still nonsignificant in both samples.

The path between change in felt positive regard and change in trust ($\Delta\chi^2 = 0.70$, $p = .403$) did not differ significantly between the groups. Overall, the multigroup analysis suggests that the hypothesized paths did not differ substantively between the two samples.

Robustness Checks: Reanalysis Based on Time 2 Self-Identification

As noted above and in Footnote 9, one feature of the sample was that some participants changed their self-identification from Mapuche to non-Mapuche (68 people) or from non-Mapuche to Mapuche (26 people) between Times 1 and 2. While this reflects meaningful identity dynamics in this setting, we nevertheless wanted to verify whether the results reported above may have been contingent or limited to the specific self-identification split at Time 1. We therefore reran the dynamic mediation analyses twice more: once based on how participants self-identified at Time 2 (263 non-Mapuche; 147 Mapuche) rather than at Time 1 and again on a sample that only included participants who were consistent in their self-identification as Mapuche ($N = 126$) or non-Mapuche ($N = 195$) at both time points. Results of both analyses (summarized in Supplemental Figures S2 and S3) were very similar to those of the model based on Time 1 self-identification reported above and lead to the same inferences regarding the hypothesis.

Discussion

The results of Study 8 offer further support for the hypothesis that felt understanding has a positive impact on intergroup relations because it helps to foster a sense of perceived positive regard

(i.e., that we are perceived positively by outgroup members). In the context of ongoing and often violent land disputes between Indigenous Mapuche communities and Non-Indigenous Chileans, the data suggest that in both groups, change in felt understanding over the course of a year positively predicted change in perceived positive regard within the same time frame, which in turn positively predicted change in trust during that year.

These findings are highly consistent with those of the analysis of Studies 1–7 but with the specific contribution of having tested the hypothesized process in terms of within-person change over time using a dynamic mediation approach. This complements the more traditional mediation analyses in Studies 1–6, which, while having the advantage of including experimental tests of our main hypothesis, still tested that hypothesis in terms of between-person variation at a given time point. We consider the relative strengths and limitations of this combination of approaches further in the General Discussion section.

General Discussion

Our aim in the present research was to further examine whether and how intergroup felt understanding—the belief that an outgroup understands and accepts an ingroup’s perspectives—can positively impact intergroup relations. Evidence for the unique, positive effects of intergroup felt understanding is growing (Ioku & Eiichiro, 2021; Livingstone, Fernández Rodríguez, & Rothers, 2020; Livingstone, Windeatt, et al., 2020) but remains limited in terms of insight into the process(es) through which feeling understood has its positive effects. The main hypothesis we tested here was that feeling understood by an outgroup positively predicts outcomes such as intergroup trust and positive relational emotions such as optimism and hope by increasing our sense of feeling positively regarded by the outgroup—that is, feeling liked and respected. More precisely, feeling more understood by an outgroup was expected to lead to the perception that “they” regard “us” more positively, and this sense of positive regard was expected in turn to predict more positive intergroup outcomes.

Results across the eight studies as a whole are very consistent with this prediction. Studies 1–6 involved testing the indirect association between felt understanding and outcomes such as trust and positive relational emotions via felt positive regard. Results of meta-analytic structural equation models (Cheung, 2022; Cheung & Chan, 2005) in Studies 1–6 provided evidence for the indirect association between felt understanding, via felt positive regard, on outcomes such as outgroup trust, positive relational emotions, outgroup evaluation, and the perceived quality of the intergroup relationship. Moreover, these studies included data from a range of intergroup contexts (e.g., Sunni–Shia relations in Lebanon; “Leave” and “Remain” voters in the context of Brexit in the United Kingdom), a combination of cross-sectional and experimental designs, and different methods of manipulating felt understanding. Study 7 then provided evidence that the effect of felt positive regard on outcomes such as trust is causal.

Study 8 in turn tested this proposed process in terms of within-person change over the course of a year in the context of ongoing conflict between Mapuche Indigenous people and Non-Indigenous Chileans in Chile. Dynamic mediation analyses in this study indicated that change in felt understanding in this time period predicted change in felt positive regard, which in turn predicted outgroup trust in both groups. This complements the more traditional analysis of mediation in terms of between-person variation in key variables in Studies 1–6.

Theoretical Implications

These findings add to the growing body of evidence for the strong, positive, and unique effects of felt understanding in intergroup relations. Conceptually, felt understanding is highly distinct amongst predictors in intergroup relations research because it involves meta-meta perception (Gillespie & Cornish, 2010; Laing et al., 1966); that is, it reflects our perspectives on their perspectives about our perspectives. It thus involves at least third-order intentionality/second-order theory of mind and reflects our uniquely human concerns for how others understand and evaluate our beliefs, experiences, intentions, and identity (Dennett, 1989; Grice, 1969; Tomasello et al., 2005). The key contribution of the present findings is in shedding light on *how* felt understanding has its positive effects: through the lower order metaperception of feeling positively regarded by the outgroup.

The evidence for an indirect effect of felt understanding via felt positive regard in intergroup settings is also consistent with research and theory on very different types of social relationships. In particular, our findings are consistent with the process proposed by C. R. Rogers (1989) as underpinning the improvement of problematic relationships: When we feel understood by another, it satisfies a need for positive regard, and feeling positively regarded in turn opens us up to more positive relations with that other, including a desire to empathize with them in turn (see also Van Kaam, 1959). The findings we reported in this article suggest that these insights are also eminently applicable to intergroup settings, where perceptions and interactions occur through the lens of salient social identities, rather than as close interpersonal relationships (cf. Reis et al., 2004; Reis & Shaver, 1988).

The present findings also offer further evidence for the importance of metaperceptions as proximal predictors of intergroup outcomes: Feeling positively regarded by an outgroup consistently predicted positive outcomes such as greater trust and more positive outgroup evaluations. This echoes many other findings that metaperceptions such as metaprejudice, metastereotypes, and metadehumanization affect intergroup perceptions and action (Frey & Tropp, 2006; Gordijn et al., 2017; Kteily et al., 2016; Lees & Cikara, 2020; Owuamalam et al., 2014; Putra & Wagner, 2017; Ruggeri et al., 2021; Vorauer et al., 1998; Vorauer & Quesnel, 2016). However, a more novel implication of the present findings is that metaperceptions such as feeling positively regarded (liked; respected) are in turn rooted (at least partly) in even higher order meta-meta perceptions that involve perceiving how our own perspectives and experiences are seen in the mind’s eye of outgroup members: We come to feel that they do or do not like and respect us because they show that they do or do not understand us.

Limitations and Future Research

Turning to limitations and possible future research directions, there would be value in further examining the directionality of the links between felt understanding and felt positive regard. While it is clear from the present evidence that there is a causal effect of felt understanding on feeling positively regarded, a reciprocal causal effect of feeling positively regarded on feeling understood is also conceivable, as suggested by the finding in Study 7 that the felt positive regard manipulation also affected felt understanding. For instance, it may be reasoned that the higher order meta-meta perception involved in felt understanding requires lower order

metaperception as a prerequisite: In order for me to believe that we are understood by them, I must be able to perceive that they think about us *per se*. Feeling understood, so the argument might go, first requires feeling perceived and whatever valence that carries (feeling positively or negatively regarded).

Against this, we would suggest that while feeling understood logically requires a lower order perception of outgroup members having perceptions of us *per se*, this does not in itself suggest that the latter *causes* the former in a meaningful sense: In the same way, metaperceptions of an outgroup presuppose perceptions of that outgroup in a more general sense, without suggesting that metaperceptions are caused by lower order perceptions of that outgroup. This is in line with the broad body of work on metaperception in social psychology, which suggests that relatively “higher order” metaperceptions like metaprejudice or metadehumanization in turn predict lower order reciprocal responses like prejudice or dehumanization toward the outgroup, rather than the other way around.

From an empirical standpoint, the pattern of associations in the studies we reported here are also broadly inconsistent with an alternative specification that sees feeling positively regarded as the main predictor and feeling understood as the mediator: In most of the analyses, the remaining association between felt understanding and the outcome variables was nonsignificant, which would suggest in turn that an indirect path from feeling positively regarded to intergroup outcome variables via feeling understood (where this was logically possible in design terms) would also be nonsignificant (see, for instance, Figures 1 and 2). Moreover, the effect of the felt positive regard manipulation on felt understanding in Study 7 became nonsignificant when adjusting for measured felt positive regard, which could also indicate that the effect on felt understanding was simply an artifact of its covariation with felt positive regard. While the data here do not provide definitive answers, they are on balance more consistent with the position that feeling understood is sufficient to improve intergroup outcomes via feeling positively regarded; but, feeling positively regarded may not be sufficient to improve intergroup outcomes via feeling understood.

More Complex Indirect Path Specifications

While the present studies provide a triangulated approach to testing mediation (including “classic” tests of mediation in cross-sectional data and experimental studies, a test that involves directly manipulating the mediator, and a test of the model as a within-person change process), there remains residual uncertainty regarding the relationships we examined, including possible “third variable” influences in some of the studies.

In addition to further replication of the findings, another fruitful area for future research would therefore be to examine alternative or more complex indirect effects of felt understanding, other than that through perceived positive regard. While perceived positive regard has for good theoretical reasons been the focus of the present research, we cannot and do not want to rule out the potential role of other mediating factors. Some candidates for more complex specifications come from Goldstein et al. (2014), who found that empathy and self-other overlap mediate the effect of perceived perspective taking on liking and prosocial intentions. The present model is potentially quite consistent with empathy as an intervening variable, given that empathic concern was itself an outcome variable in Studies 1 and 2 here. It is conceivable that feeling positively

regarded is itself the proximal predictor that links feeling understood to empathy: Feeling understood opens one up to empathize with “them” because it fosters a sense of being positively regarded: They understand us and so see us positively, which in turn allows me/us to safely empathize with them, with onward positive effects on perceptions of and behavior toward the outgroup.

Self-other overlap or cognate processes such as a sense of shared group membership/social identity (e.g., through a superordinate categorization) are also possibilities as additional mediators of the positive effects of felt understanding. While the dynamics we have examined here are more relevant to relations between large-scale social groups rather than interacting individuals in small groups, the roots of felt understanding in interaction and communication suggest that forms of intergroup communication that might foster felt understanding (and perceived positive regard as a result) may in turn also foster a sense of an inclusive, superordinate identity (Postmes, Haslam, & Swaab, 2005; Postmes, Spears, et al., 2005) incorporating the ingroup and outgroup (without necessarily superseding them), with onward positive consequences for intergroup outcomes (González & Brown, 2003, 2006).

How Felt Understanding May Be Developed

Another limitation of the present findings is that while they shed light on how felt understanding has its positive effects in intergroup relations, they say less about how felt understanding may actually be fostered.

Approaches to developing felt understanding in organizational contexts (Fisher, 1993), peace building efforts (Rosenberg, 2015) and in close interpersonal relationships (Itzhakov et al., 2022; Reis & Shaver, 1988) emphasize that the feeling of being understood is rooted in the dynamics of communication and high-quality listening: We come to feel understood by others when we share perspectives with them and then receive back information/signals that communicate that they understood our perspectives and why we hold them (Fisher, 1993; Itzhakov et al., 2020, 2022; C. R. Rogers, 1965). One approach would therefore be to build in reflecting back steps into intergroup communication and dialogue (and “contact” more generally)—that is, to ensure that group members are not only sharing their own group’s perspectives but explicitly sharing back their understanding of what they heard from outgroup members regarding their perspectives too. In this sense, the method of manipulating felt understanding employed in Study 6 in this article offers a crude prototype for how such structured communication may work (see also Bruneau & Saxe, 2012): Group members are first asked to share perspectives that are important to them (the reasons behind their Brexit vote in this case) and then hear back from outgroup members who have heard those perspectives in a manner that communicates that they were understood.

Considering *what* can be communicated in such a procedure also links this approach to other theory and research on intergroup reconciliation. For instance, reflecting back the expressed concerns and needs of an outgroup may help to satisfy the differing emotional needs of victims (who may predominantly have a need for agency/power) and of perpetrators (who may predominantly have a need for a restored moral image) of intergroup violence—an important step toward promoting reconciliation, according to the needs-based model of reconciliation (Shnabel & Nadler, 2008). Similarly, reflecting back outgroup members’ expressions of suffering and

victimhood serves to explicitly communicate recognition of those feelings, which in turn has been found to promote reconciliation (Hameiri & Nadler, 2017). There are also connections to the literature on the effectiveness of intergroup apologies (Borinca, Falomir-Pichastor, et al., 2021; Hornsey & Wohl, 2013; Nunney & Manstead, 2021). Speculatively, the perceived quality of an intergroup apology may be in part due to whether the apology communicates nonjudgmental, nondefensive understanding of the concerns, needs, and experiences of the target; that is, in how well it fosters the sense of being understood by the apology giver.

Conclusion

The present findings provide converging evidence for the role of perceived positive regard—feeling liked and respected by outgroup members—as a mediator of the positive effects of felt understanding in intergroup relations. The results align to suggest that felt understanding—believing that outgroup members understand and accept ingroup perspectives—predicts outcomes such as trust, optimism, and positive outgroup evaluations by fostering a sense that the outgroup in turn regard “us” positively. The findings thus extend emerging evidence for the role of felt understanding in intergroup relations, suggesting that the unique impact of the higher order meta–meta perspective involved in felt understanding is at least in part due to its downward impact on the metaperspective involved in feeling positively regarded: When they “get” us, they like us, and when they like us, we trust them more and view them more positively (among other positive outcomes). We hope that the findings in turn spur further research into how relations between groups are shaped by the uniquely human concern with how others understand and evaluate “our” perspectives on the world.

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