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Intragroup communication in intergroup conflict

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CHAPTER ONE

General Introduction:
The Role of Intragroup Communication in Intergroup Conflict.

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Although most people agree that intergroup conflict can have devastating consequences for the involved people and their environments, there is no consensus yet about what are the best ways to prevent escalation and foster intergroup conflict de-escalation. The aim of this dissertation is to contribute to the development of effective strategies to intervene in intergroup conflict by reducing negative intergroup perceptions, as part of a multidisciplinary research program on the theme of conflict and security (De Dreu, 2014; Evenblij, 2014). What processes and dynamics play a role in the escalation and de-escalation of conflict between groups? More specifically, why does intergroup conflict seem to flourish especially when groups do *not* interact? And how do some people come to have rigid (negative) views of others with whom they have never met? In this dissertation, I will argue that *communication within groups* in conflict is part and parcel of the escalation and de-escalation of intergroup conflict.¹

Conflict between groups with divergent views and values seems inextricably related with human social life. Intergroup conflict exists at various scales. At a macro level, intergroup conflict may involve world-wide military conflicts between nations, major inter-nation stand-offs such as the cold war, or large-scale efforts of nations against perceived threats posed by outsiders such as the ‘war on terrorism.’ At a meso level, intergroup conflict may emerge within a country. For instance in The Netherlands, non-western immigrants – and in particular Moroccan-Dutch people – are stigmatized and discriminated against by native-Dutch people as anti-social criminals (see pilot study in Chapter 2; Dotsch, Wigboldus, & Van Knippenberg, 2011; Gordijn, Koomen, & Stapel, 2001; Van Prooijen & Coffeng, 2013). A micro-level intergroup conflict may exist within a city, neighborhood, or street. Typically, intergroup conflict is characterized by negative intergroup perceptions, such as stereotypes depicting Moroccan-Dutch people as criminals or students as noisy

¹ In the general introduction and discussion chapters, I use the personal pronoun “I” but the research and ideas reported in the current dissertation have been developed in cooperation with my co-authors – as also indicated by the use of “we” in the empirical chapters.

litterers. In fact, if it is difficult or impossible to leave a social group, group members may embrace and romanticize negative perceptions of their own group in order to upgrade perceptions of the ingroup (e.g., Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Turner, 1975) – thereby escalating intergroup conflict (e.g., Kamans, Gordijn, Oldenhuis, & Otten, 2009). The core idea of the current dissertation is that intergroup perceptions are formed and transformed in small-scale conversations within social groups. This implies that intragroup communication lies at the heart of intergroup conflict (de-)escalation – and this is where we should intervene to improve intergroup relations.

The reason why intergroup conflict is so strongly influenced by conversations that occur within groups is that people tend to talk much more *about* “them” than *with* “them” (McPherson, Smith-Lovin, & Cook, 2001). Within the safe confines of their inner circle, members of families, groups of friends and groups at work are free to discuss their perceptions of an outgroup. The core assumption in this dissertation is that in such conversations, it is possible to escalate the perceptions of conflict, or to de-escalate conflict. One important factor in this is how “they” are discussed.

I can illustrate this with an example. Imagine a conversation on a family party of Henk and Ingrid. All guests are seated in a neat circle of chairs in the living room. When looking through the window after exchanging some complaints about the weather, they notice two Moroccan-Dutch boys walking on the street. Ingrid points to one of them and entertains her guests with an anecdote: “That boy lives at number 64, right across the street. Last week when I was leaning outside my bedroom window to smoke a cigarette, I saw a police car taking him away.” “Yes,” Henk adds, “Moroccan-Dutch people are 22 times more often suspected of property crimes involving violence and no other group relapses as frequently.”² While Ingrid’s initial comment referred to a unique individual, Henk associated the entire social category of Moroccan-Dutch people in abstract, generalizing terms with crime. In most normal settings where a particular group is discussed in this way, communicators seek to establish some form of consensus.

In the current dissertation, I examined the question of how such daily-life communications, that are often primarily intended to amuse rather than influence or persuade others (Condor, 2006), can serve to escalate or de-escalate intergroup

² Literal quote from a PVV member of Dutch Parliament in a political Political debate at 5 April 2013, retrieved from <http://www.tweedekamer.nl/kamerstukken/detail?pid=2013D14320&did=2013D14320>

conflict. Our ultimate objective, in this, was to contribute to the development of interventions that might potentially de-escalate conflict. Imagine that you are one of Henk and Ingrid's party guests, and you would like to convince everyone that Moroccan-Dutch people are not by definition criminal. Would it strengthen your statement to tell an anecdote about a Moroccan-Dutch individual that does not confirm existing negative stereotypes? Or should you refer to general statistics about the entire social category that disconfirm this negative image? These are pertinent questions given that such intergroup perceptions – which develop through communication – set the stage for actual behavior. Therefore, I argue that a thorough understanding of communication in the context of intergroup conflict is essential for designing effective conflict interventions.

One additional reason for focusing on communication *within* groups is that insofar as the current literature on intergroup conflict and interventions has examined communication at all, it has examined almost exclusively the communication and interaction *between* groups in conflict. For instance, Allport's (1954) seminal work on *the nature of prejudice* has inspired several theories elaborating on the processes by which intergroup contact reduces prejudice. Whether focusing on the beneficial influences of de-categorization, salient categorization, or re-categorization, meta-analyses have demonstrated that positive intergroup contact typically reduces intergroup prejudice (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006, 2008). However, intergroup communication is less influential than intragroup communication, mainly because perceptions – and in particular social perceptions of ourselves and others – are formed and transformed in interaction with those we trust (e.g., Echterhoff, Higgins, & Groll, 2005; Haslam, McGarty, & Turner, 1996; Postmes, 2003). Moreover, high-quality intergroup communication is rare even in situations that at first sight seem integrated (e.g., Dixon, Tredoux, Durrheim, Finchilescu, & Clack, 2008). Even though intergroup friendships can improve intergroup relations, in practice pre-existing ingroup bias and intergroup anxiety hinder the subsequent development of intergroup friendships (Levin, Van Laar, & Sidanius, 2003). In other words, ironically the individuals whose prejudiced attitudes might be most positively affected by intergroup contact tend to be the ones least likely to engage in high-quality intergroup interactions. Moreover, there seems to be no direct relation between factors facilitating intergroup communication, such as a society's proportion of immigrants, and intergroup conflict (cf. Postmes et al., 2014).

Together, this implies that other elements such as *intragroup* dynamics may play a pivotal role in intergroup conflict. My contention is that attention for intragroup processes can enrich our understanding of intergroup conflict by moving

beyond the intra-individual and intergroup factors traditionally studied in intergroup conflict research. The current dissertation hence explores several aspects of within-group dialogue in the context of intergroup conflict, with the ultimate goal to design and test intragroup communication-based interventions to de-escalate intergroup conflict.

This introduction will provide the theoretical background of the empirical research reported in the next chapters. I will begin answering a rather broad question: Why should communication in general influence individuals' perceptions and cognition? I will explore some main findings and theories that explain processes by which communication impacts on cognition. The second question I ask is: How does communication impact cognition? I will review research investigating what people talk about (i.e., communication *content*) as well as how they talk (i.e., *form* of communication). Specifically, this latter part addresses linguistic abstraction effects. Next, in addition to these rather static views of communicators as senders or receivers of information, what are the influences of *dynamic* intragroup interactions on individuals' perceptions and action intentions? To address this question, I will discuss previous findings investigating how small-scale conversations with fellow ingroup members influence individuals' perceptions and cognition. Finally, I will complete this theoretical background with a brief conclusion on the knowledge regarding influences of intragroup communication in intergroup conflict that has accumulated in these dispersed domains. All in all, I will argue that existing research implies that communication settings, in particular within social groups, seem a promising venue for interventions to de-escalate intergroup conflict.

Influences of Communication on Individuals' Cognition

Our focus on the role of communication in intergroup conflict is supported by numerous findings showing that communication shapes individuals' perceptions. Since the early days of social psychology, several now classical papers have showed the susceptibility of individuals' perceptions to (accidental) social influence (e.g., classical papers on conformity in line length perception, Asch, 1956; on informational and normative influence, Deutsch & Gerard, 1955; on informal social communication, Festinger, 1950; on norm formation regarding autokinesis perceptions, Sherif & Cantril, 1946; and on group composition and social influence, Wilder, 1977). Indeed, several strands of research empirically support the notion that

social factors such as intragroup communication play a key role in the emergence of cognition, emotions, and behavior – outcomes that tend to converge in groups (for reviews, see Thompson & Fine, 1999; Yzerbyt, Dumont, Mathieu, Gordijn, & Wigboldus, 2006). In some cases perceptions may converge within groups because people feel that they should agree with others. For instance, perceptions of an apparently unambiguous physical reality (e.g., line lengths, Asch, 1956) should be identical. Convergence seems similarly inevitable if observers themselves are unsure of what they perceive (e.g., subjective social reality, Festinger, 1950, or illusional perceptions, Sherif & Cantril, 1946) or have a high need for cognitive closure (Kruglanski, Pierro, Mannetti, & De Grada, 2006). Moreover, group members even tend to effortlessly consensualize their views without any obvious pressure to do so (Tindale, Meisenhelder, Dykema-Engblade, & Hogg, 2001). Taken together, a broad body of research points to a more or less natural tendency for group members to converge in their cognitions, emotions (e.g., Smith, Seger, & Mackie, 2007), and behavior. In our view, this implies that negative intergroup perceptions fuelling intergroup conflict are formed and transformed mainly within groups.

How do people construct ideas about “us” and “them”? In forming an impression of their own ingroup, people may sometimes take their own personal attributes as “anchors” for how they see others (e.g., Otten, 2003; Van Veelen, Otten, & Hansen, 2013). But in many cases they will also listen to others in order to socially construct an idea of “us” that is somehow shared or consensual (e.g., Haslam, Oakes, Reynolds, & Turner, 1999; Haslam et al., 1998). Moreover, the self is clearly less useful as a blueprint for the construction of ideas about “them” – although contrasting may occur to distinguish (conflicting) outgroups from one’s ingroup – making it all the more likely that other sources of information will be consulted.

In the current dissertation, I emphasize the critical role of communication processes in this process of the formation and transformation of collectively held attitudes. Indeed, different domains of psychological science explain the social influence phenomena described above by reference to a range of processes that occur in intragroup communication. For instance in the domain of cognitive psychology, the situated cognition perspective holds that individuals’ perceptions and cognition emerge from interaction with their (social) environment (Norman, 1993; for reviews, see Levine, Resnick, & Higgins, 1993; Semin & Smith, 2013). One implication of this view is that individuals’ views and opinions develop in some form of dialogue with others. The key role of communication in the formation and

transformation of individuals' perceptions and cognition is more pronounced in several theories in the domain of social psychology that can be loosely categorized under the headings of shared reality (e.g., Echterhoff, Higgins, & Levine, 2009; Hardin & Higgins, 1996) and social identity theorizing (e.g., Postmes, Haslam, & Swaab, 2005; Reicher & Hopkins, 1996). Research along these lines reveals that our ideas and understanding of the world are informed by "horizontal" peer communication, in addition to "vertical" information transmission from the more to the less knowledgeable (Vygotsky, 1978). We talk with our peers not only to fulfil our epistemic needs (cf. Kruglanski et al., 2006) but we also turn to the social groups we affiliate with to guide our emotions and consequent behavior (e.g., Yzerbyt et al., 2006).

Groups that we affiliate with can influence individuals' thinking in two ways (Postmes, Spears, Lee, & Novak, 2005). First, top-down, deductive influence occurs when group members move towards the cognitions and behaviors that are considered normative and prototypical of the group. The second process, of bottom-up, inductive social influence occurs when individual group members build these group norms from their intragroup, interpersonal interactions and individual contributions. Of course, these processes can co-occur and influence each other. Communicating in a "right" or "wrong" way can in turn influence our acceptance in groups that we affiliate with (Assilaméhou & Testé, 2013; Douglas & Sutton, 2006). Communication provides a means by which group identification shapes how individuals should think, feel, and act in their daily lives. Using the terms of the interactive model of social identity formation, "communication provides the means of establishing how abstract characteristics (...) can be translated into a concrete situational norm that applies to actions within a specific context" (Postmes et al., 2005, p. 19). Communication with others thus enables us to (trans)form and validate cognition, emotions, and behavior. In other words, if we aim to design an intervention that alters conflicting groups' perceptions of each other, we should alter their communication about each other.

For the experiments reported in the current dissertation, I chose to focus on verbal, language-based rather than non-verbal communication. Although non-verbal communication and observation of others' behaviors can provide social information such as group norms (Cialdini, Reno, & Kallgren, 1990), people commonly rely on language-mediated communication especially for complex information (Kashima, Fiedler, & Freytag, 2008). In the current dissertation, I aimed to test language as an active *tool* to de-escalate in intergroup conflict rather than using it as a passive and

presumably objective measure of individuals' perceptions (cf. Sutton, 2010). Our approach thereby builds on a recently observed trend in the domain of language and social psychology, in which researchers aim to address the ways in which language *influences* cognition (Collins & Clément, 2012). Findings from this domain are discussed in the next sections.

How Communication Influences Cognition: The Role of Communication Content

Having established that intragroup communication is central to the formation of ideas about outgroups, a natural question is *how* talking about outgroups shapes cognitions about problematic intergroup relations. I will describe some key findings regarding linguistic influences on cognition in the following two subsections, focusing on results that can help us design an effective, communication-based intervention to reduce intergroup conflict. This first section will focus in particular on the likely influence of communication *content*, and the next section considers the *form*.³

What people talk about influences what they come to believe. Few would contest that some native-Dutch people say that Moroccan-Dutch people are criminals *because* they hold negative intergroup perceptions. Yet the reverse can also be true; Saying that Moroccan-Dutch people are criminals can *cause* a speaker to form more negative intergroup perceptions. Therefore, intergroup conflict interventions that facilitate intragroup refutation of negative outgroup stereotypes should effectively improve intergroup perceptions rather than merely changing overt communication about a conflicting outgroup. It is important to focus such interventions on communication content, because people tend to focus their conversations on certain information at the expense of other information (e.g., Kashima, 2000; Klein, Tindale, & Brauer, 2008; Schaller, Conway, & Tanchuk, 2002). That is, individuals typically discuss stereotype-consistent aspects more than stereotype-inconsistent aspects (Kashima, 2000; Lyons & Kashima, 2001, 2003;

³ Although we acknowledge that communication content and form are not necessarily orthogonal factors, we deem this dichotomy useful for structuring our current literature overview because existing research has typically approached communication influences from either one of these perspectives (cf. Geschke, Sassenberg, Ruhrmann, & Sommer, 2010).

Ruscher, Cralley, & O'Farrell, 2005; for exceptions see Carnaghi & Yzerbyt, 2007; McIntyre, Lyons, Clark, & Kashima, 2004; Ruscher, Santuzzi, & Hammer, 2003). This happens mainly because stereotype-consistent information is more socially connective than stereotype-inconsistent information (Clark & Kashima, 2007).

The selectiveness of communication can profoundly influence cognitions such as those underlying intergroup conflict because it acts as a double-edged sword. That is, it shapes not only what receivers of communication think but also what senders of communication think. Indeed, spontaneous intragroup communication – which tends to be stereotype-consistent – may contribute to the maintenance of destructive stereotypes (e.g., Kashima, 2000; Lyons & Kashima, 2003). The content of communication may influence communicators' own perceptions and cognitions concerning the communication topic, mainly because people generally come to believe the things they say (Festinger & Carlsmith, 1959; Higgins & Rholes, 1979; Sedikides, 1990) or merely plan to say (i.e., anticipated communication; Pennington & Schlenker, 1999).

However, the phenomenon that people come to believe the things they say themselves is contingent on others' responses to them. People come to believe what they say especially when the audience validates the communicated information. For instance, describing a social target's ambiguous behaviors in negative terms to fit with an audience's negative view only biases communicators' memory for the target if the audience recognizes the target from this description – that is, if the communicated negative impression of the target is socially *validated* (Echterhoff et al., 2005; Hausmann, Levine, & Higgins, 2008). Additionally, social validation of individuals' (negative) impressions can emerge from intragroup consensualization of intergroup perceptions (Smith & Postmes, 2011). Taken together, these studies indicate that communication can strengthen or weaken individuals' perceptions of other people and outgroups, depending on whether or not it validates expressed views. In sum, prior research implies that interventions should encourage group members not only to discuss beneficial intergroup perceptions, but also to socially validate these by providing recognition and consensus

How Communication Influences Cognition: The Role of Communication Form

An effective intergroup conflict intervention targeting intragroup communication should improve intergroup perceptions not only by intervening in *what* group members talk about, but also in *how* they talk.⁴ As the quotes by Henk and Ingrid cited earlier in this chapter illustrate, communication can be concrete (e.g., recalling an anecdote about the Moroccan-Dutch boy who lives across the street) or abstract (e.g., referring to facts and figures concerning the entire social category). In the current dissertation, I deem this abstraction level of intragroup communication a crucial ingredient in an intergroup conflict intervention for two main reasons. First, abstraction level seems an important factor in whether or not stereotype-inconsistent communication results in improvement of negative intergroup perceptions. And second, as I will explain in more detail below, prior research suggests that group members seem able to control the abstraction level of their conversations about an outgroup (e.g., Douglas & Sutton, 2003). That is, it is both effective and feasible to target abstraction level of intragroup communication in an intergroup conflict intervention.

The importance of abstraction level can be gleaned from past research on linguistic abstraction. The distinction between concrete and abstract language has been elaborated in the linguistic category model (Semin & Fiedler, 1988, 1991). According to this model, language can be categorized in four stages ranging from concrete terms describing actual behavior (e.g., “The student picks up a beer can from the street.”) to more abstract statements implying stable characteristics (e.g., “The student is tidy”). Rather a lot of research has investigated the consequences of such abstract or concrete statements for intergroup perceptions (e.g., Assilaméhou, Lepastourel, & Testé, 2013; Maass, 1999; Pratto, Hegarty, & Korchmaros, 2008; Wigboldus, Semin, & Spears, 2000).

Should an intervention stimulate abstract or concrete intragroup communication about a target outgroup to realize intergroup conflict de-escalation? The existing literature offers somewhat mixed perspectives regarding which level of abstraction is most suited to changing intergroup cognitions. On the one hand, abstract (relative to concrete) linguistic descriptions are generally interpreted as more

⁴ This is a merely pragmatic dichotomy (cf. footnote 3).

dispositional of the target and less situation-specific (Werkman, Wigboldus, & Semin, 1999; Wigboldus et al., 2000; cf. Liberman & Trope, 2008; for a more nuanced relation between attributions and abstraction see Arcuri, Maass, & Portelli, 1993), more normative (Pratto et al., 2008), and more generalizable to the target's entire social group (Assilaméhou et al., 2013). In an intergroup conflict context characterized by negative stereotypes, it seems crucial to intervene in the abstraction level of communication because biased language use may bolster negative outgroup perceptions. That is, unexpected information that is stereotype-inconsistent (e.g., I met a student who is very tidy) is typically discussed more concretely – thereby presenting it as more rare – than expected, stereotype-consistent information such as littering students (i.e., a *linguistic expectancy bias*, Maass, 1999; Wigboldus, Semin, & Spears, 2006; see also Wenneker & Wigboldus, 2008; Karasawa & Suga, 2008; Maass, Milesi, Zabbini, & Stahlberg, 1995; Maass, Salvi, Arcuri, & Semin, 1989). This linguistic bias may allow people to maintain their beliefs, at least when they are confronted with information that is moderately (rather than extremely) inconsistent with their initial beliefs (Karpinski & Von Hippel, 1996). At first sight this evidence – that concrete (versus abstract) language suggests that an observation is atypical and not generalizable – seems to imply that concrete communication about stereotype-inconsistent individuals does not produce stereotype change. Instead, according to this literature at least, one should provide abstract disproof of the negative outgroup stereotype in order to improve intergroup perceptions.

But for different reasons, it can also be argued that communication is particularly likely to be impactful when it is concrete. Some research has indicated that concrete, detailed information is more vivid than abstract information and as a consequence may be perceived as more real (Hansen & Wänke, 2010). This leads to the opposite prediction and I will further investigate this apparent inconsistency in Chapter 4. However, before we draw conclusions regarding whether we should instruct group members to collectively disconfirm stereotypes via abstract or concrete communication, we should first consider whether targets of such an intervention would be capable of following these instructions in the first place.

Are communicators able to strategically use linguistic abstraction? Although biased language use may happen at least partially outside people's conscious awareness (e.g., Franco & Maass, 1996; Schnake & Ruscher, 1998; Von Hippel, Sekaquaptewa, & Vargas, 1997) and may be hard to suppress in daily-life conversations (Douglas, Sutton, & Wilkin, 2008), other evidence suggests that the answer is yes. Linguistic abstraction biases only emerge in messages with a

communicative function (Semin, Gil de Montes, & Valencia, 2003) and are moderated by motivational factors such as identity threat (Maass, Ceccarelli, & Rudin, 1996) and group norms regarding discrimination (Franco & Maass, 1999). These findings suggest that communicators can strategically deploy different linguistic abstraction levels to convey or conceal their attitudes regarding other people and groups (for overviews see Maass, 1999; Douglas, Sutton, & McGarty, 2008). Indeed, despite their trouble suppressing it, people are able to strategically *recruit* linguistic abstraction bias if they intend to influence their audience (Douglas & Sutton, 2003). Thus, it seems both effective and feasible to target abstraction level of intragroup communication to de-escalate intergroup conflict.

Despite the apparent consequences for intervening in intragroup dialogue about an outgroup, the research I have reported thus far has typically investigated communication in the form of stories and single sentences rather than actual *dynamic* intragroup conversations. To obtain a more complete picture of the applicability of an intergroup conflict intervention targeting interactive intragroup communication, I will now turn to research on actual intragroup interactions. The current dissertation sets out to intervene in actual communication within small groups. Hence, it is pivotal to know what previous research has revealed regarding influences of such dynamic intragroup communication settings on individuals' perceptions.

Communication within Small Groups

In my view, for designing an effective intergroup conflict intervention it is essential to consider the influence of dynamic conversations in small groups of ingroup members on (de-)escalation of intergroup conflict. A large part of social life consists of interactions in small clusters of self-similar people (McPherson, Smith-Lovin, & Cook, 2001). People not only tend to spend their time with like-minded people but they are also heavily influenced in turn by the views and opinions of those with whom they spend their time. Small-scale conversations with ingroup members can therefore influence individual group members' thoughts and consequent behavior, whether for good or for bad. Existing literature on the effects of communication within small groups reveals the potential of intragroup communication to contribute to positive social change or to yield detrimental consequences for intergroup relations. Importantly for the current purpose, previous

findings imply that *not* intervening in intragroup communication may ultimately create the preconditions for intergroup conflict escalation.

As noted, the overarching aim of the experiments presented in the current dissertation is to contribute to the development of effective intergroup conflict interventions. Specifically, I aimed to find ways to use intragroup communication to improve negative intergroup perceptions. I am thus interested in the potential for intragroup dynamics to create positive social effects for individuals as well as their social environments. Previous small-group research bears witness of this potential. Intragroup interactions can have beneficial consequences for individual group members, for instance by creating a sense of belonging (Jans, Postmes, & Van der Zee, 2012). In addition, communication within small groups can also yield positive effects on a larger scale for one's own group, a disadvantaged outgroup, or even society at large. Several studies reveal that intragroup communication can be highly effective in bolstering individuals' commitment to positive social change. By talking with each other, people may become aware of shared suffering – thereby building a politicized identity that promotes collective action for social change (Simon & Klandermans, 2001). Moreover, consensualization within small groups increases engagement in collective action against unfair treatment of the ingroup (Stott & Drury, 2004).

But even if group members lack a politicized identity or are not members of the disadvantaged group, intragroup communication may strengthen collective action, for instance because people develop strong identification with others who share their opinions (*i.e.*, *opinion-based* groups; Bliuc, McGarty, Reynolds, & Muntele, 2007). McGarty, Bliuc, Thomas, and Bongiorno (2009) have suggested that communication within opinion-based groups can thus be used to bring about positive social change. Indeed, intragroup interaction in opinion-based groups has been shown to boost action against stigmatization of people with mental disorders (Gee, Khalaf, & McGarty, 2007) and support for a United Nations campaign that aims to provide clean water and sanitation for developing countries, especially for small groups that were primed with a moral outrage norm (Thomas & McGarty, 2009). Thus, communication within small groups seems a powerful tool in the (trans)formation of individuals' cognition and consequent behavior. This indirectly corroborates our conviction that changing intragroup communication about an outgroup may ultimately also be used to resolve intergroup conflict.

Yet for designing an intragroup communication-based intervention that advances beneficial effects one should also be aware of potential adverse effects.

Notwithstanding the rather positive picture of the influences of small-group conversations on group members' perceptions, intentions, and actions painted by the research described above, other research shows the flip side of the coin. For example, discussions with fellow ingroup members may also reveal lack of a consensual understanding of a collective "we" and expose discord about the existence of any unjust group-based suffering. Our previous research revealed that intragroup discord hinders acceptance of attempts at cooperation between conflicting groups – thereby thwarting intergroup conflict de-escalation (Greijdanus, Postmes, Gordijn, & Van Zomeren, 2015). Moreover, focus group research among Moroccan-Dutch adolescents in The Netherlands indicates that such dissensual intragroup communication may obstruct collective action intentions (Van Doorn, Prins, & Welschen, 2013). Obviously, a lack of positive social change can have detrimental influences for a community.

Even worse consequences for communities may follow when intragroup interactions boost commitment to *hostile* courses of action (Thomas, Smith, McGarty, & Postmes, 2010). For instance, intragroup interaction (as compared to individual decision making) can foster formation of norms that justify hostile treatment of an outgroup, which in turn results in more hostile behavior towards that outgroup (Smith & Postmes, 2009, demonstrated a phenomenon like this in an experimental game context). This result dovetails with the finding that intergroup interactions tend to be more competitive than interindividual interactions – especially when group members make group decisions and communicate freely (Wildschut, Pinter, Vevea, Insko, & Schopler, 2003). Moreover, in a real-world context, consensual intragroup communication about a negative immigrant stereotype validates this stereotype and creates a group norm that supports discrimination, which ultimately increases individual group members' intentions to discriminate against immigrants (Smith & Postmes, 2011). This is in line with other findings that intragroup communication can increase stereotypic perception of the ingroup as well as the outgroup (Haslam, Turner, Oakes, McGarty, & Reynolds, 1997). Although discussing outgroup stereotypes can yield positive outcomes such as support for collective action to cause social change (Stott & Drury, 2004), stereotypes and intergroup discrimination often tend to mutually reinforce each other (for an overview, see Dovidio, Hewstone, Glick, & Esses, 2010).

Conclusion

Relatively little research has focused on the combination of processes within small groups and their consequences on (problematic) relations between groups (Dovidio, 2013). A recent literature review revealed a corresponding dichotomy: Research on intergroup conflict research has grown steadily over the last decades, whereas over the same period research on actual interactions within small groups has declined dramatically (Wittenbaum & Moreland, 2008). The authors conclude that “without work examining human interaction in small groups, much of the ‘social’ has been lost from social psychology” (p. 198). It thus seems timely to combine these two research topics in one single approach. I believe that in most situations intragroup and intergroup processes are interrelated in the sense that they often co-occur, interact, and mutually influence each other. For instance, *intergroup* negotiation may be conceived of as *intragroup* communication to the extent that it generates shared cognition (Swaab, Postmes, Neijens, Kiers, & Dumay, 2002). Thus, stating that intragroup and intergroup processes are mere opposites violates the phenomenology of everyday life. For this reason, I intend to address the apparent divide between intra- and intergroup processes that exists in scientific research (cf. Dovidio, 2013). Specifically, our current aim is to highlight the underrepresented role of intragroup communication in escalation and de-escalation of intergroup conflict.

In the previous subsections, I have provided a non-exhaustive overview of the broad literature on topics (implicitly) related to the impact of intragroup communication in intergroup conflict. I have reported several findings that I believe to have practical implications for intergroup conflict interventions. I will briefly recapitulate the key conclusions and implications. First, communication, especially within groups, influences individual group members’ private perceptions – an effect that has been found after mere preparation for communication. And relatedly, language actively influences cognition rather than being an objective measure to gauge perceptions. That is, the relation between saying and believing is bidirectional: What we say tends to convey our beliefs, but what we say also *influences* our beliefs. The implication for intergroup conflict interventions I deduced from these conclusions is that we should intervene in verbal communication *within* conflicting groups.

Second, the influence of intragroup communication on cognition depends both on the topics that group members discuss with each other and on whether or

not their conversation provides social validation of these issues. Moreover, intragroup discord (i.e., lack of social validation) undermines intergroup cooperation and collective action intentions to address intergroup inequality – thereby hindering the emergence of intergroup conflict de-escalation. This implies that an intervention aimed at de-escalating intergroup conflict should encourage consensual intragroup communication that disconfirms negative intergroup perceptions.

Third, other strands of research reveal that abstraction level of communication plays a key role in whether or not communicated pieces of information affect individuals' perceptions. Although communicators are able to strategically recruit abstraction biases in their language (i.e., an intervention instructing group members to talk abstractly or concretely about an outgroup is feasible) it is thus far unclear whether abstract or concrete communication would yield the highest impact. While some researchers argue that concrete communication is most effective because its vivid details make it seem more real, others contend that abstract communication is more influential because it enables generalization of conclusions to an entire social category. Hence, in the current dissertation I explored competing hypotheses regarding the optimal abstraction level of intragroup communication-based interventions in intergroup conflict.

Fourth and lastly, whereas the former studies have typically operationalized communication as (written) sentences or stories, research on actual *dynamic* intragroup interactions indicates that it can yield constructive as well as destructive consequences for intergroup relations. For instance, small-group interactions may facilitate stereotyping – thereby increasing support for social change (i.e., a positive effect) or discrimination (i.e., a negative consequence). I took from these findings that a proper intragroup communication intervention should be sufficient to yield significant changes in individual group members' intergroup perceptions and, hence, ultimately promote de-escalation of intergroup conflict. This renders staging intergroup contact between conflicting groups – which is quite effortful and potentially risky – unnecessary as a prerequisite for conflict de-escalation. Thus, I conclude from existing literature that a proper intervention aimed to reduce intergroup conflict should deal with – or rather, make use of – the power of intragroup communication.

The Current Dissertation

In line with the preceding theoretical background, the aim of the current dissertation is to 1) investigate the thus far underrepresented role of intragroup processes in escalation and de-escalation of intergroup conflict – in order to 2) develop and test an intragroup communication-based intervention to de-escalate intergroup conflict. The first two empirical chapters serve as an empirical base that highlights influences of intragroup communication in intergroup conflict. The aim of the last empirical chapter is to translate this rather fundamental knowledge into a practical application by developing and testing actual interventions that target intragroup communication to de-escalate intergroup conflict.

In several studies divided over three empirical chapters, I explore various intergroup conflicts, ranging from mild (e.g., between students and non-students in Groningen) to more intense and hostile (e.g., between immigrants and native Dutch in The Netherlands). I thereby intend to shed some light on the relevance of intragroup communication as a both feasible and effective site for intergroup conflict interventions. Specifically, I highlight the influences of the content and form of intragroup processes on intergroup cognitions that ultimately define intergroup relations. Regarding the content of intragroup processes, this dissertation demonstrates that the broader intergroup context and the reasons behind intragroup discussions about an outgroup influence what kind of information group members share with each other. Moreover, the content of intragroup communication in turn affects intergroup perceptions. Concerning the form of intragroup processes, this dissertation reveals that group members' cognitive processing of outgroup-related information takes on a different form (i.e., becomes more abstract) once they anticipate intragroup communication about this information. And finally, it aims to show how we should shape the content and form of intragroup discussions about an outgroup to realize a promising intergroup conflict intervention. Thus, the current dissertation investigates communication content (stereotype-consistent or stereotype-inconsistent) and communication form (concrete or abstract) and applies the findings as building blocks for an intervention that de-escalates intergroup conflict through dynamic intragroup interactions.

In light of this objective, the empirical chapters draw upon several loosely related strands of research (e.g., combining a situated cognition perspective and social identity approach with concepts from construal level theorizing) to formulate

and test hypotheses regarding group members' conversations, ways of thinking, and consequent intergroup perceptions. Taken together, the current findings highlight the key role of intragroup processes in intergroup relations, and more in particular the significance of intergroup conflict interventions that directly target intragroup communication.

Outline of empirical chapters.

Chapter 2: Steeling ourselves. The literature reviewed in the current chapter revealed that intragroup communication plays an important role in the (trans)formation of intergroup perceptions. Moreover, intergroup conflict research has predominantly focused either on staging intergroup contact or on small-scale, dynamic intragroup interactions. Yet little is known about the combination of these processes. Presumably, individuals will prepare for an organized encounter with a conflicting outgroup by conferring with their ingroup members. Does it matter whether group members engage in intragroup interaction rather than thinking things through on their own? Does anticipating of face-to-face contact with an antagonistic outgroup result in other intragroup communication than conversations between ingroup members who do not anticipate intergroup contact? And how do these potential differences in intragroup communication affect individual group members' intergroup perceptions? In Chapter 2 I intend to address these questions by investigating the effects of intragroup communication (vs. individual thought) and anticipated face-to-face intergroup contact (vs. no anticipated face-to-face intergroup contact) in members of a stigmatized group. This investigation concerns a relatively mild, local intergroup conflict, in which students are stereotyped by the non-student inhabitants of Groningen (*stadjers*) as intelligent and sociable, yet noisy litterers.

This chapter demonstrates the influence of the broader social situation on the content of intragroup conversations. Specifically, it reveals that small groups of group members who anticipate face-to-face contact with a conflicting outgroup tell more personal anecdotes about hostile intergroup contact than small groups that do not anticipate such intergroup contact. Relatedly, small-scale intragroup conversations in the context of imminent confrontation with a conflicting outgroup evoke intergroup anxiety-related discomfort. Furthermore, individuals steel themselves against anticipated intergroup contact by boosting their ingroup identification and engaging in social creativity (i.e., romanticizing meta-stereotypes)

but also by perceiving their ingroup as thinking more negatively of the outgroup. These steeling effects only occur if stigmatized group members anticipate face-to-face intergroup contact and have the opportunity to talk about this with each other. Together, these results support the idea that steeling is a defensive reaction to prepare for an anxiety-arousing intergroup confrontation. The implication is that the intragroup consequences of steeling are to increase ingroup solidarity and social creativity, whilst the intergroup consequences of this hardened stance may be an obstacle to conflict de-escalation. Moreover, if intergroup contact anticipation can elicit defensive steeling an intervention based on *intragroup* contact may be a way to circumvent this obstacle to conflict de-escalation.

One of the main conclusions I draw from Chapter 2 is that group members show divergent reactions to identical intergroup situations, depending on whether or not they engage in intragroup conversation. What underlying processes could have caused this effect on individuals' intergroup perceptions and cognitions? In the following empirical chapter I zoom in on one aspect of cognition that may differ between group members who do or do not talk with each other (i.e., abstraction level) and relate this to stereotyping, which is an important facet of many intergroup conflicts.

Chapter 3: When abstraction does not increase stereotyping. In Chapter 3 I address the question whether (anticipated) intragroup communication alters the perspective of individuals on intergroup relations. What are the cognitive consequences of preparing for intragroup communication about an outgroup? And how do these cognitive changes in turn affect the impact of stereotype-consistent and -inconsistent pieces of information on private intergroup perceptions? I reasoned that when people prepare communication with ingroup members, they prepare to share specific information (which may be stereotype-inconsistent) against the background of shared (abstract) knowledge. This implies that preparing for intragroup communication may enable abstract processing of information even of stereotype-inconsistent information, which is typically processed concretely. In line with this theorizing, I hypothesized and found that anticipated intragroup communication creates the conditions for stereotype-inconsistent information to be processed abstractly. A second aim of Chapter 3 was to examine and nuance the relation between abstract cognition and stereotyping. Generally researchers assume that there is a positive association between these two concepts. That is, people who think at an abstract level should stereotype others more than people who think at a

more concrete level. However, Chapter 3 reveals that abstract construal level increases stereotyping only if the construed information is stereotype-consistent. Thus, in this chapter I conclude that preparing for communication may be a key to stereotype change because it enables, through abstract construal, generalization of stereotype-inconsistency.

Regarding intragroup communication interventions in intergroup conflict, the findings of Chapter 3 raise the question of whether and how differences in abstraction level can be manipulated in intragroup communication to contribute to de-escalation of intergroup conflict. Additionally, can we combine the forces of communication form (Chapter 3) and communication content (Chapter 2) to de-escalate intergroup conflict? These questions illustrate the issues that I address in the subsequent empirical chapter.

Chapter 4: Improving intergroup perceptions. The final empirical chapter addresses the underlying question behind all experiments reported in the current dissertation. What are the influences of intragroup communication in escalation and de-escalation of intergroup conflict? More specifically, in this chapter I intend to apply the accumulated knowledge in practice; how can we put the findings regarding intragroup communication content and form into practice to reduce intergroup conflict? In Chapter 4 I therefore examine how the outcomes and conclusions of the preceding empirical chapters can be applied in interventions that target intragroup communication in order to de-escalate intergroup conflict. To recapitulate, Chapter 2 demonstrated that the content of intragroup communication can have detrimental consequences for individuals' intergroup perceptions – especially if group members anticipate an intergroup confrontation. Chapter 3 highlighted the role of abstraction level and revealed that abstract cognition does not inevitably increase outgroup stereotyping. These findings have several practical implications for designing intergroup conflict interventions. First, because staging an intergroup encounter may lead to defensive steeling reactions it may be more beneficial and feasible to target naturally occurring *intragroup* communications. And second, in designing an effective intervention, one should target the content of intragroup conversations as well as the abstraction level because both seem important factors in shaping group members' cognitions and perceptions that ultimately contribute to (de-)escalation of intergroup conflict.

Taking these notions into account, in Chapter 4 I describe a series of experiments in which I designed and tested an intergroup conflict intervention to improve intergroup perceptions through intragroup discussions in real groups. I provide converging evidence from three different intergroup conflict contexts, with natural intragroup interactions or using confederates, empirically demonstrating that abstract intragroup refutation of negative outgroup stereotypes is the most successful intervention to improve intergroup perceptions.