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## Intragroup communication in intergroup conflict

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# **CHAPTER FIVE**

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



## Chapter Five

### General Discussion: The Role of Intragroup Communication in Intergroup Conflict.

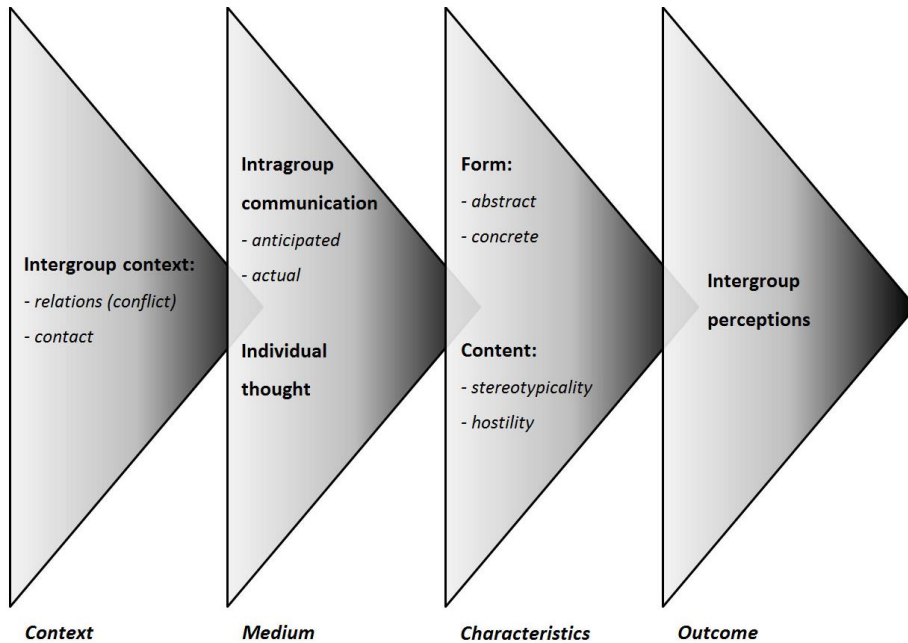
In this dissertation, I researched the potential of both the *content* and *form* of intragroup communication to reduce intergroup conflict escalation and de-escalation. As part of a multidisciplinary research program on the theme of conflict and security (De Dreu, 2014; Evenblij, 2014), I aimed to contribute to the development of effective intervention strategies in intergroup conflict. The research reported in the current dissertation addresses this issue by specifically exploring the role of intragroup communication in intergroup conflict. I decided to focus on intragroup communication because it has been shown to shape individuals' cognition and intergroup perceptions – which can ultimately flip the balance between intergroup conflict escalation and de-escalation. Yet to date investigations on intragroup processes and on intergroup conflict have been conducted in relatively disjoint literatures (Dovidio, 2013). Our investigation into intragroup processes thus extends the existing intergroup conflict literature that has been characterized by a main focus on intergroup processes (e.g., influences of contact between conflicting groups) and intrapersonal processes (e.g., stereotypes as pictures in the individual's head).

Specifically, I focused on answering the question how intergroup perceptions can be influenced by *anticipated* as well as *actual* intragroup communication. I focused on interactive conversations between fellow group members engaged in real-life intergroup conflict. The current dissertation highlighted the significance of the social embeddedness of communication and cognition by revealing that the *content* of intragroup conversations about a conflicting outgroup depends on the intergroup setting in which the conversation is embedded (i.e., with or without an impending intergroup confrontation). Likewise, the *form* of individuals' cognition (i.e., abstract or concrete) about outgroup members is affected by whether or not they anticipate to discuss this outgroup information with their fellow group members. Although these investigations are basic and fundamental, I have also tested the practical implications of these findings for intergroup conflict. The experiments reported here revealed that intergroup conflict can be de-escalated by an intervention targeting both content and form of intragroup communication about a conflicting outgroup. Before I detail the theoretical and practical implications of this

dissertation and discuss potential limitations, I briefly summarize the main findings from the experiments presented in the empirical chapters.

### Summary of Findings

The general aim of the current dissertation was to shed light on the role of intragroup communication in escalation and de-escalation of intergroup conflict, as an empirical base to ultimately design an intragroup approach to intervene in intergroup conflict. Each of the empirical chapters has approached this issue from a different angle. In the first empirical chapter (Chapter 2) I investigated how intragroup communication in small interactive groups affects stigmatized group members' intergroup perceptions. I specifically focused on how anticipating intergroup contact shapes the content of communication, and how communication content in turn influences individual group members' thinking. In the second empirical chapter (Chapter 3) I focused on its not content-related influences by exploring how mere *preparation for* intragroup communication about stereotype-relevant outgroup information influences the way group members think. Thereby, I investigated effects on the form in addition to the content of cognition. And lastly, in the third empirical chapter (Chapter 4) I sought to apply the concepts of content and form to communication in designing a practical, intragroup communication-based intervention to de-escalate intergroup conflict. Thus, each of the preceding empirical chapters considered an aspect of intragroup communication that is consequential for intergroup perceptions and, hence, the relations between conflicting groups (see Figure 5.1).



**Figure 5.1.** Aspects related to intragroup communication in intergroup conflict that have been considered in the empirical chapters of the current dissertation.

Each empirical chapter has addressed some aspects depicted in Figure 5.1. While all studies focused on a general context of intergroup conflict, Chapter 2 additionally investigated influences of anticipating contact with an antagonistic outgroup. In the preceding chapters I have explored the role of actual intragroup communication (Chapters 2, 4) and anticipated intragroup communication (Chapter 3) as well as individual thought (Chapter 2). I thereby focused on influences of the form (Chapters 3, 4) as well as the content (Chapters 2, 4) of these processes on individual group members' intergroup perceptions. Taken together, the current findings highlight the significance of intragroup processes for intergroup relations, and more in particular they reveal two facets of communication (i.e., content and form) that may be used in intergroup conflict interventions.

## Chapter 2: Steeling ourselves.

In Chapter 2 I have presented two experiments on intragroup communication in intergroup conflict. The intergroup conflict investigated there revolved around the non-student inhabitants of Groningen stigmatizing students in the city as (although sociable and intelligent) generally annoying, unwelcome noisy litterers (also see Figure 2.1). Experiment 2.1 revealed that students who anticipate a face-to-face confrontation with non-students steel themselves against anticipated hostility. Specifically, they boost their ingroup identification, romanticize meta-stereotypes, and perceive students in general as holding more negative views about non-student inhabitants. Such ‘steeling’ emerged only if students anticipated face-to-face intergroup contact and engaged in small group discussions with other students rather than individual thought. Steeling seemed to occur because individuals in groups who anticipate intergroup contact talk more about incidents in which outgroup members displayed hostile reactions towards the ingroup than individuals in groups who do not anticipate a face-to-face intergroup confrontation.

Moreover, Experiment 2.2 indicated that audio recordings of small-group conversations between students preparing for intergroup contact with non-students instilled more discomfort in an unrelated student sample than audio recordings of small-group conversations of students who did not anticipate direct intergroup contact. This suggests that anticipating intragroup communication does not only affect what group members talk about, but this intragroup communication content in turn shapes individuals’ feelings and perceptions. This implies that an intergroup conflict intervention forcing intergroup contact may backfire once group members talk about this within their own groups – i.e., in the natural surroundings in which most daily-life communication takes place. Taken together, the key message of Chapter 2 is that people show divergent reactions to identical intergroup situations, depending on whether or not they engaged in intragroup communication.

## Chapter 3: When abstraction does not increase stereotyping.

Although the content of actual interactive intragroup communication may influence individual group members’ cognition (Chapter 2), the *anticipation* of intragroup communication may be sufficient to alter perceptions (cf. Zajonc, 1960). In Chapter 3 I explored one possible process by which anticipated intragroup

communication may impact on individuals' cognition. Two experiments supported the notion that preparation for intragroup communication can facilitate abstract thinking – even of information that is typically processed concretely (i.e., unexpected, stereotype-inconsistent information). This finding is of theoretical as well as practical interest, because stereotype-inconsistent information will more likely influence existing views if it is interpreted in a generalizing manner – which is not typically done. That is, abstract construal of stereotype-inconsistent information may result in stereotype change. Thus intragroup communication may be a setting in which people open their minds to change pre-existing shared realities.

In line with our hypotheses, both experiments showed that anticipated intragroup communication creates the conditions for stereotype-inconsistent information to be processed abstractly. More specifically, participants read fake newspaper articles about some members of a target outgroup who behaved in line with their stereotypes (employees having boring office meetings in Experiment 3.1; Moroccan-Dutch adolescents forming a kick boxers group in Experiment 3.2) or not in line with stereotypes (employees having a night out in Experiment 3.1; Moroccan-Dutch adolescents forming an artists collective in Experiment 3.2). They formed an individual impression of this article or expected to talk about it with ingroup members on an online forum. Results of both experiments showed that stereotype-consistent information is processed abstractly regardless of whether or not one expects to talk about this. That is, this kind of information about an outgroup does not draw perceivers' attention to specific details and, hence, they can maintain a relatively abstract and general mode of thinking. Yet stereotype-inconsistent information does direct attention to the details of a specific incident. Such unexpected information requires a more meticulous explanation: Why did these unique individuals behave stereotype-inconsistently in this particular situation? This shift to more concrete processing of stereotype-inconsistent information can, however, be countered by anticipated communication.

In Chapter 3 I have elaborated our view that communication calls for a certain level of abstraction because it is based on a common ground. Communication partners first need to establish a general framework of shared knowledge before they can dive into the details of a particular situation together. Therefore, anticipating communication forces people to maintain a relatively abstract way of thinking even when they are confronted with stereotype inconsistency. This hypothesis was supported in two different intergroup contexts, with central (i.e., in the core of a storyline) as well as peripheral presentation of stereotype-inconsistent



information about outgroup members. Moreover, Experiment 3.2 showed that abstract thinking increases stereotyping only if the construed information is stereotype-consistent. This finding nuances the common assumption that abstraction equals stereotyping. Abstract thinking can indeed cause us to see and treat others in terms of their social group membership rather than as idiosyncratic individuals. This would imply that we should think concretely about outgroup members in order to de-escalate intergroup conflict (cf. Brewer & Miller, 1984). However, our results indicate that only abstract thinking about stereotype-consistent information increases stereotype application – whereas abstract thinking about stereotype-inconsistent information does not. In other words, seeing a kick boxer as Moroccan-Dutch rather than as a unique individual increases native Dutch people’s negative stereotypical views of this group, but perceiving an artist as Moroccan-Dutch rather than as a unique individual is unrelated to native Dutch people’s use of stereotypes. This shows that characteristics that are unrelated to the stereotype can break the link between abstract thinking and application stereotype. This effect occurred even though people can be both artistic and aggressive – in other words, the stereotype-inconsistent trait used in Experiment 3.2 was not counter-stereotypical. One implication of this finding may be that seeing a peaceful person (i.e., *counter-stereotypical*, anti-aggressive) as Moroccan-Dutch rather than as a unique individual may *reduce* negative stereotypes. Thus, preparing for intragroup communication may be a key to stereotype change because it can facilitate abstract, generalizing interpretation of stereotype-inconsistent outgroup information. Because I aimed to develop an intergroup conflict intervention that can be implemented in *actual* intragroup conversations, these findings raised the question of whether and how differences in abstraction level can be manipulated in intragroup conversations to improve intergroup perceptions. This is one of the issues that I addressed in Chapter 4.

#### **Chapter 4: Improving intergroup perceptions.**

The aim of Chapter 4 was to design an intervention that combines the forces of abstraction level (Chapter 3) and intragroup communication content (Chapter 2) to de-escalate intergroup conflict via discussions in real groups. In this empirical chapter I reported three experiments concerning the practical implications of Chapters 2 and 3 for intergroup conflict interventions. That is, Chapter 2 showed

that interventions targeting *intergroup* contact may backfire because such contact is typically anticipated within groups. The content of small-group discussions in anticipation of intergroup contact can have negative consequences for intergroup perceptions and relations. An intervention should therefore create a safe environment – at least initially – of intragroup conversations about an outgroup that will not be physically present. That is, small groups of ingroup members should talk about how “we” see “them” rather than about how “we” see “you” – and of course the emphasis of these discussions should be on positive aspects. Adding to this content-based approach to intragroup communication, Chapter 3 investigated the form of individuals’ thinking about outgroup members and revealed that abstract cognition does not inevitably increase outgroup stereotyping. For an intervention, this implies that abstract thinking about an outgroup is not necessarily a problem in intergroup conflict. In fact, changing abstract group-level cognitions such as negative outgroup stereotypes requires abstract group-level counterevidence (Paik, MacDougall, Fabrigar, Peach, & Jellous, 2009). A concrete positive example, such as an elaborate description of a vibrant granny who shares Facebook posts all day, paints a vivid mental picture that feels quite real to the audience (cf. Hansen & Wänke, 2010). Nevertheless, this may be seen as an exception rather than bring about significant change in their stereotypes about elderly people in general. However, stereotype change may occur if the conversation instead focuses on abstract, group-level counter-stereotypical evidence – for instance that more than half of the elderly population in The Netherlands uses a tablet. Therefore, in Chapter 4 I investigated abstraction level (cf. Chapter 3) and intragroup communication content (cf. Chapter 2) as tools to de-escalate intergroup conflict via discussions in real groups.

In Experiment 4.1, which focused on a mild intergroup conflict, small groups of adolescents were instructed to confirm or disconfirm negative stereotypes about elderly people (i.e., target outgroup) by talking about individual outgroup members (vivid, concrete communication) or by talking about the entire social category (generalizing, abstract communication) in natural settings. I investigated a more severe intergroup conflict in Experiment 4.2, in which participants followed the same instructions regarding stereotypes about the target outgroup Moroccan-Dutch adolescents in small groups with a confederate (i.e., semi-natural intragroup discussions). Comparing several competing hypotheses, both Experiments 4.1 and 4.2 provided most support for the hypothesis that abstract intragroup refutation of negative outgroup stereotypes is the most successful intervention to improve intergroup perceptions. Moreover, in Experiment 4.3, I compared the effects of

abstract and concrete disconfirmation on intergroup perceptions to a neutral control condition (disconfirmation of the negative view of illegal downloading of music and films). This experiment investigated the impact of intragroup conversations (without confederate) about stereotypes concerning non-native Dutch adolescents. Again, abstract disconfirmation of negative outgroup stereotypes improved intergroup perceptions more than concrete disconfirmation. Thus, the experiments presented in the final empirical chapter not only established that intragroup communication can be targeted to improve intergroup perceptions, but also provided insight into ways in which intragroup communication form and content can be modelled to de-escalate intergroup conflict. Indeed, as I will outline in more detail below, I conclude that group members should be encouraged to collectively discuss outgroup characteristics that disprove negative intergroup perceptions. That is, based on these findings I advance an intergroup conflict intervention that is based on abstract intragroup disconfirmation of negative outgroup stereotypes.

### Theoretical Implications and Future Research

The studies in the current dissertation deal with dynamics in small interactive groups as well as responses of isolated individuals to computer tasks. In my view, the fields of social psychology and social cognition are not merely ‘social’ because we investigate cognitions, emotions, and behaviors *about* other social entities (e.g., stereotypes, attitudes, attributions) but also because human cognitions, emotions, and behaviors are formed and transformed together *with* others. I agree with Wittenbaum and Moreland (2008, p. 198) that “without work examining human interaction in small groups, much of the ‘social’ has been lost from social psychology.” And with the studies reported in the preceding empirical chapters I hope to contribute to reversing the recent sharp decline of research on small group interactions observed by Wittenbaum and Moreland (2008). Taken together, the main contribution of the empirical chapters is twofold. First, they highlight the thus far underrepresented role of intragroup processes in escalation and de-escalation of intergroup conflict. And second, they resulted in the development of an intragroup communication-based intervention to de-escalate intergroup conflict. Before turning to the practical implications, I will first discuss the main theoretical implications.

## **Theoretical implications for shared reality.**

The experiments reported in the current dissertation have implications for the concept of shared reality within groups (e.g., Echterhoff, Higgins, & Levine, 2009; Hardin & Higgins, 1996). As I have shown in the general introduction chapter, ample evidence supports the notion that group members tend to think, feel, and act similarly (e.g., Smith, Seger, & Mackie, 2007; Thompson & Fine, 1999; Tindale, Meisenhelder, Dykema-Engblade, & Hogg, 2001; Yzerbyt, Dumont, Mathieu, Gordijn, & Wigboldus, 2006). One may argue that individuals within the same social group share views – as well as consequent feelings and behaviors – mainly because they have had similar experiences with a target group (or person or other social entity). For instance, non-student inhabitants of Groningen may view students as noisy litterers (see Chapter 2) because they all have frowned upon students' loud music and carelessly scattered bicycles and beer cans. This illustrates that shared cognition, emotion, and behavior may be a consequence of group members' exposure to the same “stimulus.”

However, this cannot be the entire story. Many intergroup perceptions pertain to groups with which individuals have had little or no contact. In fact, one of the premises of contact theory is that negative stereotypes and prejudice prevail when intergroup contact is limited (e.g., Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006, 2008). Moreover, these shared views do not do justice to the heterogeneous nature of groups – individuals rarely are an exact embodiment of their group's stereotype. In other words, personal impression formation processes in similar social contexts cannot fully explain the sheer sharedness that exists among group members' cognitions, emotions, and behaviors (cf. Lyons, Clark, Kashima, & Kurz, 2008). The implication is that people's ideas about outgroups and intergroup relations are, to a large extent, constructed socially: They are shared realities whose relationship with actual events may be modest. The current dissertation provides evidence for another process involved in the formation and transformation of group members' views about others: Intragroup communication can profoundly affect the way in which individuals perceive the (social) world. I have shown that actual intragroup conversations as well as merely anticipated dialogue within groups impact how people think. And the influence of such communications on individuals' perceptions of reality depends, in turn, on the larger intergroup context. That is, conversations about a conflicting outgroup we are about to meet differ in content and consequences from mere dialogue among “us” about “them.” More importantly for

the current purpose, this powerful intragroup communication process can be shaped to improve intergroup perceptions (i.e., foster the development of constructive rather than destructive shared views). Thus, I conclude that intragroup communication can be an important factor in the rise and demise of tensions between social groups.

### **Theoretical implications for social influence.**

One other theoretical concept that I feel should be touched upon in discussing communication research is informational versus normative social influence. Deutsch and Gerard (1955, p. 629) defined normative influence as “an influence to conform with the positive expectations of another” and informational influence as “an influence to accept information obtained from another as evidence about reality.” Normative influence seems an unlikely explanation of the current findings, because most dependent variables in the current dissertation were measured with anonymous questionnaires. At first blush, informational influence may seem a more obvious candidate. Group members may change their perceptions after intragroup communication because they accept the information others contributed to the conversation as novel and true. However, there are several problems with a purely informational influence-based account of the current data. For instance, informational influence cannot explain why in Chapter 2 participants’ intergroup perceptions change only after intragroup discussions that served to prepare for an intergroup encounter. Nor can informational influence explain why mere *anticipation* of intragroup communication in Chapter 3 alters the way individuals think. And finally, informational influence cannot explain why participants are influenced more by abstract than by concrete stereotype (dis)confirmation as I found in Chapter 4. These findings thus confirm that the distinction between normative and informational social influence is not sufficient to explain attitude polarization-like phenomena in which communication leads to accentuation of intergroup differences, at least in some communication settings (see also Turner, 1991; Wetherell, 1987). All in all, the results presented in the empirical chapters paint a nuanced picture of individuals’ cognition as emerging in a dynamic interplay between intragroup and intergroup factors.

## **Theoretical implications for mass media research.**

Of course, people's social perceptions are influenced by small-scale conversations as well as mass communication. Mass communication such as in the media has not been covered explicitly in the current dissertation. However, Chapter 3 revealed that the impact of newspaper articles on individuals' abstract thinking depends on whether or not they expect to talk about the content with others. Indeed, this is not an isolated finding: It has long been known that the influence of mass media is mediated by people's willingness to integrate mass communication into interpersonal (arguably, usually intragroup) communication (e.g., Lazarsfeld, Berelson, & Gaudet, 1968). For instance, anti-alcohol television campaigns lower students' intentions to engage in binge drinking to the extent that they cause students to have more negative conversations about alcohol (Hendriks, De Bruijn, & Van den Putte, 2012). Research on intergroup conflict (rather than health) interventions yields tentative yet similar conclusions regarding the mediating role of small-scale conversations. That is, listening to and subsequently talking about a radio soap opera on reducing intergroup conflict improves listeners' intergroup norms and behaviors (Paluck, 2009). The mediating role of intragroup communication in mass media influences on intergroup conflict de-escalation seems restricted to *spontaneous* rather than explicitly prompted conversations (Paluck, 2010). Intragroup communication may catalyze intergroup conflict escalation or de-escalation because it provides social validation and disseminates the effects of mass communication and intergroup communication through social networks (cf. extended intergroup contact; Wright, Aron, McLaughlin-Volpe, & Ropp, 1997). Chapter 3 adds to this existing literature by showing that mere preparation for intragroup communication alters the abstraction level of individuals' thinking. Specifically, anticipated communication enabled abstract construal of outgroup information in newspaper articles. Thus, although other forms of communication and sources of information can certainly influence individuals' cognition and behavior, (anticipated) intragroup communication plays an important role in the overall impact of information through other channels on perceptions.

## **Theoretical implications for the intragroup versus intergroup dichotomy.**

Chapter 2 reveals that intragroup interactions can color individuals' perceptions of themselves and others, and that this process is also socially situated. Intergroup dynamics such as anticipated intergroup contact can impact intragroup communication, which in turn (re)defines intergroup relations. In other words, the impact of intragroup processes on group members' cognition depends on the larger intergroup context in which the intragroup communication is embedded, and vice versa. Thus, in our view the question whether group-based outcomes such as prejudice and discrimination are shaped by either intragroup or intergroup dynamics (e.g., Gaertner & Schopler, 1998) is based on an arbitrary distinction. Processes within and between groups cannot be neatly separated in the messy reality of daily life. I therefore advocate an overarching approach to group research, bridging intragroup processes and intergroup relations (which is so far surprisingly rare; cf. Dovidio, 2013).

## **Theoretical implications for abstract thinking and stereotyping.**

Chapters 3 and 4 also extend previous research on the relation between abstract thinking and stereotype application. This relation has been presented as rather clear-cut in the literature. For instance, abstract thinking increases stereotyping, because it makes people see others as group exemplars rather than unique individuals (McCrea, Wieber, & Myers, 2012). In other words, abstraction is problematic for those who seek harmonious intergroup relations. However, the current research shows that this relation is less straightforward than previously assumed. Chapter 3 indicated that abstract construal of stereotype-consistent information is related to increased stereotype application, whereas abstract construal of stereotype-inconsistent information is not. Moreover, Chapter 4 revealed that only abstract communication about stereotype-inconsistency is beneficial for intergroup perceptions. Thus, abstract thinking may also be a *solution* for de-escalating conflictual intergroup relations.

## **Future research.**

Following Chapters 3 and 4, future research may investigate the exact conditions under which abstract thinking (de-)escalates intergroup conflict. One hypothesis that can be easily tested is that the categorization baseline (e.g., initially categorizing someone as a social psychology PhD candidate, as a female scientist, or as a researcher) and stereotype-consistency interactively influence prejudice. The level at which we categorize others may moderate the influence of abstraction level on prejudice and discrimination – causing an inverse U-shaped relation between abstraction level and prejudice. That is, abstraction decreases stereotyping if it shifts perception of others as outgroup members to others as part of an overarching common ingroup. By contrast, abstraction increases stereotyping to the extent that it shifts perception of others as individuals to others as outgroup members. For this purpose, one can conceive of social categorization as residing at three levels – from concrete to abstract: Merely unique individuals, ingroup versus outgroup members, and fellow members of an overarching common ingroup. If the categorization baseline is ingroup versus outgroup members, abstraction results in social categorization of others as fellow ingroup members at the overarching level and, hence, prejudice reduction (Gaertner, Dovidio, Anastasio, Bachman, & Rust, 1993). For instance, if native Dutch people think more abstractly about Moroccan-Dutch immigrants they may realize that they are all fellow Dutch citizens – thereby reducing prejudice and discrimination. However, if the baseline is the individual level, abstraction leads to group-level categorization of others as either ingroup or outgroup members. That is, if I think more abstractly about my driving instructor Mohammed I may perceive him as “a Moroccan-Dutch immigrant” instead. Chapters 3 and 4 imply that this latter more abstract re-categorization should increase prejudice of participants who are presented with stereotype-consistent information (arguably the default situation). However, this effect should disappear or reverse if participants are presented with stereotype-inconsistent information. Thus, the effects of abstract thinking presumably depend on what exactly one abstracts from.

The current dissertation mainly focused on group members’ intergroup perceptions. There are of course additional issues that are relevant in intragroup communication about intergroup conflict that have not been addressed in the experiments reported in the empirical chapters. For instance, it would be of theoretical interest to investigate the role of emotion in intragroup communication.



Emotions are a worthwhile topic for future research on intragroup influences in escalation and de-escalation of intergroup conflict for several reasons. Emotions tend to develop and converge within groups (e.g., Smith, Seger, & Mackie, 2007; Yzerbyt, Dumont, Mathieu, Gordijn, & Wigboldus, 2006) and are important predictors of behaviors that contribute to (de-)escalation of intergroup conflict. For instance, intergroup behaviors and relations are affected by intrapersonal experiences of emotions (e.g., intergroup anxiety; Stephan & Stephan, 1985) as well as intergroup communication conveying specific emotions from one group to another (e.g., De Vos, Van Zomeren, Gordijn, & Postmes, 2013). In a similar vein, future research may investigate several ways in which emotion plays a role in intragroup communication and intergroup conflict.

First, the emotions that one experiences during intragroup communication may moderate the impact of a conversation on perceptions (i.e., persuasive strength of intragroup communication). Positive emotions such as happiness generally lead people to be more easily influenced by what others say, whereas negative emotions such as sadness tend to encourage more thorough processing of arguments and attempts at persuasion (e.g., Bless, Bohner, Schwarz, & Strack, 1990; Worth & Mackie, 1987; for a more nuanced overview, see Petty & Briñol, 2015). Second, people's opinions may be influenced more easily by conversations that trigger stronger emotions. Regarding intergroup conflict (de-)escalation, how does intragroup dialogue involving personal anecdotes about hostile encounters with outgroup members (cf. Chapter 2) compare to collective laughter about a common enemy? And what are the different ways in which such threat versus ridicule can affect intergroup conflict? Presumably, making fun of a conflicting outgroup may take the edge off the conflict compared to sharing threatening stories. Indeed, one way of coping with a conflicting outgroup is to laugh away any suggestion of threat (Janis, 1971). However, jokes about outgroups may also relate to destructive reactions such as ingroup favoritism and discrimination (Thomas & Esses, 2004; Abrams & Bippus, 2014). This effect may be moderated by power, to the extent that humor and jokes reduce the power divide. That is, making fun of a high-power outgroup might de-escalate intergroup conflict if it makes them seem less superior, whereas joking would render a low-power outgroup more inferior and hence escalate conflict. Previous findings that especially women (i.e., the low-status group) rate jokes about the opposite gender as funnier and more typical (Abrams & Bippus, 2011) and that suggest that it may be a worthwhile to pursue these issues in future research.

A third subtopic related to the role of emotions in intragroup communication about intergroup conflict is that specific emotions likely play a role in social validation. For example, the impact of personal anecdotes about intergroup hostility such as described in Chapter 2 presumably depends on subsequent emotional reactions. Emotions such as satisfaction (towards the communicator) and fear or anger (towards the outgroup) after portrayal of an outgroup as hostile may validate this perception, whereas emotions such as surprise may lead communicators to feel that the expressed views are not justified. Indeed, happiness and anger rather than sadness and surprise can increase the extent to which people feel that their thoughts are correct (i.e., *cognitive validation*; e.g., Petty & Briñol, 2015). Moreover, expressions of anger (towards ingroup members) may facilitate intragroup consensualisation and, consequently, social validation if it encourages dissenting ingroup members to yield. Thus, it seems worthwhile to scrutinize the many facets of emotion effects in future research on intragroup communication in intergroup conflict.

## Practical Implications

In line with our aim to contribute to the multidisciplinary development of intergroup conflict interventions (De Dreu, 2014; Evenblij, 2014), the research reported in the current dissertation has several practical implications. Chapters 2 and 3 concerned theory-driven investigations into the role of intragroup communication in intergroup conflict, and insights from these studies were applied in Chapter 4, in which I designed and tested an intervention to reduce intergroup conflict via intragroup communication. The current findings provide useful suggestions for practitioners who seek to de-escalate conflict between groups, and may be applied to improve mutual perceptions in local conflicts (such as the students and stadgers in Groningen) as well as national conflict (such as between native and immigrant citizens). Our intervention was originally designed as an attempt to structure intragroup communication from the outside by instructing small groups to communicate in certain ways. In addition, however, the findings may hopefully stimulate anyone to become aware every now and then of how “we” tend to talk about “them” and of how this may buttress our pre-existing perceptions or open our minds for fresh insights.

First of all, Chapter 2 indicated that the larger intergroup context influences what group members discuss and – hence – think. Specifically, practitioners intending to intervene in intergroup conflict should prevent depiction of an outgroup as hostile, because this may result in defensive steeling. One way of achieving this is to focus on positive, stereotype-inconsistent (rather than threatening, stereotype-consistent) pieces of information. Moreover, Chapter 3 showed that such information that is inconsistent with existing stereotypes may be processed concretely (i.e., interpreted as inconsequential exceptions) by default. Moreover, Chapter 4 revealed that group members are able to discuss stereotype-inconsistent information at an abstract level – resulting in improved intergroup perceptions. Thus, together the findings offer a clear instruction: An intervention to reduce intergroup conflict should encourage group members to talk about general group characteristics that disprove prevailing negative stereotypes (such as the view of native Dutch people that non-western immigrants – and in particular Moroccan-Dutch people – are anti-social criminals; pilot study in Chapter 2; Dotsch et al., 2011; Gordijn et al., 2001; Van Prooijen & Coffeng, 2013). For instance, they could talk about how hospitable and warm non-western immigrants and Moroccan-Dutch people are.

Although I did not test this, I believe that the intervention developed in this dissertation can be applied at any moment during intragroup communication when interference is necessary to prevent intergroup conflict escalation. If communication partners start stereotyping or if they incriminate the outgroup using more concrete examples and anecdotes, this should be met with abstract positive counterarguments. This advice can be applied in several settings as it is useful for improving perceptions and relations between diverse groups. For instance, politicians may benefit by adapting their argumentation strategy in political debates about immigration and other intergroup conflicts. It can also be applied to repair relations between rival groups in neighborhoods (such as between the students and stadgers in Groningen), in schools, or in sports. And additionally, the intervention may improve cooperation between conflicting work teams, for instance after a problematic organizational merger.

Specifically, the intervention should lead to an awareness of the impact of abstract talk about outgroup stereotypes. Findings on the 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) illustrate exactly how the proposed intervention can

help. It conveys awareness of communication content (counter stereotype-confirming with stereotype-disconfirming evidence) in the absence of attention for communication form – leading to a crucial imbalance. We generally talk in abstract terms about stereotype-consistent information and in concrete terms about stereotype-inconsistent information. Unfortunately, this non-conscious tendency biases the power of communication towards perpetuation of negative outgroup stereotypes rather than improvement of intergroup perceptions.

That is, by talking abstractly about negative stereotypes (e.g., “Moroccan-Dutch adolescents are anti-social and lazy”) we stress their presumed applicability to the entire outgroup, whereas the concrete language we automatically use to describe stereotype-inconsistent instances (e.g., “Mohammed Raji Elilah is a hard-working, competent, and warm driving instructor”) accentuates their rarity. In our view, abstract perceptions such as stereotypes cannot be changed with merely concrete counterevidence: “Moroccan-Dutch people are *not* anti-social, because Mohammed is social.” Instead, abstract stereotype-disconfirmation should improve intergroup perceptions: “Moroccan-Dutch people are *not* anti-social, because Moroccan-Dutch people are social.” Thus, the proposed intervention should counter the fundamental bias towards stereotype-maintaining conversations by making communicators aware of the form of their language use and instructing them to discuss in abstract, generalizing terms why negative outgroup stereotypes are false.

When applying the current findings to practice, one should ask the question what the intended consequence of the intervention is. The main aim of the intervention presented in this dissertation is to improve intergroup perceptions in order to ultimately encourage group members to settle the intergroup conflict rather than avoiding or discriminating their outgroup. Care should be taken to focus the intervention explicitly on improving perceptions of the conflicting outgroup instead of (also) reducing perceptions of intergroup conflict or inequality. That is, more positive perceptions of a conflicting outgroup should not go hand in hand with trivializing the problem (cf. Becker, Wright, Lubensky, & Zhou, 2013; Dixon, Durrheim, & Tredoux, 2005; Dixon, Levine, Reicher, & Durrheim, 2012; Saguy, Tausch, Dovidio, & Pratto, 2009; Wright & Lubensky, 2009; Dovidio, Gaertner, & Saguy, 2009; for an overview, see Saguy & Kteily, 2014). However, these perspectives have mainly focused on the perceptions held by the disadvantaged group. In Chapter 4, we saw that members of the advantaged group also engaged in less outgroup othering after the intervention. Insofar this tendency echoes a reduction in the salience of intergroup boundaries (rather than, for instance, denial of inequality) the

proposed intervention should both improve intergroup perceptions and reduce ingroup favoritism. Thus, our hope is that abstract intragroup refutation of negative outgroup stereotypes ultimately de-escalates intergroup conflict by encouraging conflicting groups to face and solve their issues together.

However, any intervention that is based on listing arguments against negative outgroup stereotypes should be implemented with caution. That is, group members who have a hard time coming up with outgroup characteristics that disprove a negative stereotype may develop more negative rather than improved intergroup perceptions (Schwarz, Bless, Strack, Klumpp, Rittenauer-Schatka, & Simons, 1991) – at least to the extent that they perceive this difficulty as bad (Briñol, Petty, & Tormala, 2006). Indeed, a failure to satisfactorily counter-argue negative intergroup perceptions may not only fail to produce constructive perceptions but even strengthen pre-existing destructive perceptions (cf. Rucker & Petty, 2004). The intervention tested in the current dissertation (Chapter 4) was designed to circumvent such potential backlash. Specifically, participants were provided with some examples of positive outgroup characteristics and task difficulty was limited by requiring them to only list their top three of positive outgroup characteristics. Practitioners who mean to apply this intervention should of course take care to tailor all instructions to the conflict at hand. Moreover, these interventions will only work to the extent that people are willing to discuss the outgroup in their intragroup conversations. One of our intended studies was obstructed by the discovery that, after the issue of immigration and integration has been discussed for more than a decade in the Netherlands, people may have become wary of engaging in yet another discussion on the topic. Thus, once relations are entrenched, it may be difficult to change them. These practical concerns should be taken into account when implementing the intervention as developed and tested in this dissertation. Nonetheless, the current intragroup communication-based intervention did yield promising results. Across different intergroup conflicts contexts, abstract intragroup disconfirmation of negative outgroup stereotypes improved intergroup perceptions.

## Conclusion

Employing a range of approaches, the experiments reported in the current dissertation investigated the role of intragroup communication in intergroup conflict. One of the main virtues of this dissertation is that the current manipulations of

abstraction level and stereotype-consistency concerned actual dynamic intragroup interactions – whereas former studies on communication influences have typically operationalized communication as (written) sentences or stories. Together, the experiments in this dissertation offer novel theoretical and practical implications by highlighting the role of intragroup communication in intergroup conflict. Based on the current findings, I propose to account for the scarcity of high-quality intergroup contact by targeting intragroup communication to intervene in intergroup conflict. The preceding empirical chapters unveil communication content and form as essential ingredients of intragroup communication that, with the right recipe, can reduce intergroup conflict. Intragroup conversations that revolve around positive, stereotype-inconsistent outgroup characteristics have beneficial consequences for intergroup perceptions. Thus, an intragroup communication-based intervention should instruct conflicting groups to list positive collective features of each other in order to de-escalate intergroup conflict.

