Promoting Support for Public Health Policies
Through Mediated Contact: Can Narrator Perspective
and Self-Disclosure Curb In-Group Favoritism?

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An online 2 × 2 factorial experiment (N = 203) examined the effect of parasocial contact on support for public health policies in the context of opioid addiction. We hypothesize that because of an intergroup dynamic, individuals are less likely to engage with an out-group character than an in-group character featured in a news magazine article. Results support the in-group favoritism hypothesis. The study examines two narrative devices for overcoming this tendency: the narrator's perspective and amount of insight into the character's inner world through character self-disclosure. We find support for the narrator perspective but not for the self-disclosure effect. Finally, the study compares the effects of different types of character involvement with the in-group and the out-group character on support for social policies. The results indicate that readers identify with an in-group character to assist the out-group rather than empathizing with the out-group directly.

Keywords: parasocial contact, character identification, parasocial relationships, opioid addiction, public health policies

According to the intergroup contact theory, direct experience with members of other, lower-status social groups can improve intergroup relationships, reduce social uncertainty, and counteract prejudice (Allport, 1954). Moreover, intergroup contact is hypothesized to foster support for social policies that benefit the marginalized group. For instance, research has found that White individuals who have interacted with Black individuals and cisgender people who have met a transgender person report more favorable attitudes toward compensatory and preferential policies benefiting these groups (Brockman & Kalla, 2016; Dixon et al., 2010). In a similar vein, among non-Muslim Americans, reliance on information from personal contact with Muslims decreases support for military action in Muslim countries and civil restrictions on Muslim Americans (Saleem,

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Yang, & Ramasubramanian, 2016). In the context of health as well, direct contact with a person with AIDS or a mental/intellectual disability reduces support for segregating policies that discriminate against individuals with these conditions (Gerbet, Sumser, & Maguire, 1991; Lau & Cheung, 1999).

Clearly, intergroup contact has the potential to promote support for prosocial policies, but to be effective, the intergroup experience must meet several criteria. Most notably, the contact should be positive, involve a prototypical out-group member, and allow the parties to work toward a common goal (e.g., Pettigrew, 1998; Seate, Joyce, Harwood, & Arroyo, 2015). However, individuals' firsthand experiences with out-group members often do not meet these criteria. Thus, the potential for using media as an avenue for vicarious intergroup contact is paramount since media-based contact can be scripted to maximize its effectiveness.

Research supports the notion that mediated contact leads to benefits similar to those of direct contact. In fact, mediated contact is often more effective than other forms of intergroup relationship interventions (Murrar & Brauer, 2018). Mediated contact has been found to promote support for social policies in a number of contexts. For example, exposure to television shows featuring LGBT characters and involvement with them lead to more favorable attitudes toward pro-LGBT policies among cisgender heterosexual viewers (Bond & Compton, 2015; Gillig & Murphy, 2016; Schiappa, Gregg, & Hewes, 2005). Similarly, exposure to media coverage of a celebrity committing suicide after struggling with depression fostered media users' demand for increased public mental health resources (Hoffner & Cohen, 2018).

The mechanism underlying this effect is articulated by the parasocial contact theory (Schiappa et al., 2005), which maintains that individuals form positive intergroup relationships with a media character and then generalize this experience to the character's out-group as a whole. However, compelling media consumers to relate to an out-group character might be challenging because of in-group favoritism dispositions harbored by the audience. In other words, the same intergroup dynamic that intergroup contact seeks to improve can act as a barrier, rendering media users less likely to engage in a positive (even if vicarious) relationship with out-group characters.

The current study seeks to better understand how in-group favoritism bias can be overridden to produce effective mediated contact that promotes support for social policies that advance the stigmatized group. Specifically, two theoretical mechanisms for eliciting positive intergroup contact are considered: the narrator's perspective and extent of self-disclosure. These mechanisms are explored in the context of support for policies aiding individuals suffering from opioid addiction.

Identification and Parasocial Relationships as Mechanisms of Mediated Contact

Involvement with media characters is theorized to act as a vehicle for attitudinal change and persuasion by entertainment narratives (Moyer-Gusé, 2008). Two forms of involvement with characters—identification and parasocial relationships—are particularly relevant for intergroup contact effects (Park, 2012). First, in the process of identification, individuals temporarily suspend their self-concept and take on the perspective of the character (Cohen, 2001). As media users vicariously experience the narrative from the character's point of view, they come to adopt the character's goals (Zhou, Shapiro, & Wansink, 2017),

adjust their self-perception (Klimmt, Hefner, Vorderer, Roth, & Blake, 2010), and ultimately shift their own attitudes to be consistent with those of the character (e.g., Moyer-Gusé & Nabi, 2010).

Second, media users can engage in parasocial relationships (PSRs) that entail an imaginary, one-sided sense of relationship between the audience member and a media personality (Horton & Wohl, 1956). PSRs exhibit many of the same characteristics typical of direct interpersonal relationships in the nonmediated context (e.g., Eyal & Dailey, 2012). Like any social relationships, PSRs can be negative or positive (Hartmann, Stuke, & Daschmann, 2008) to the point of resembling a friendship (Tukachinsky, 2011). In turn, similarly to how relationships operate in interpersonal persuasion contexts, PSRs reduce media users' propensity to counterargue with the message, making them more susceptible to being persuaded (e.g., Moyer-Gusé & Nabi, 2010; Tukachinsky & Sangalang, 2016).

Although identification and PSRs can be instrumental in enabling media users to understand the plights of other marginalized groups, becoming involved with out-group characters can prove challenging. Social identity theory (Tajfel, Turner, Austin, & Worchel, 1979) posits that group membership constitutes an important component of one's identity. To maintain a positive regard for one's in-group, individuals often engage in self-enhancing comparisons with out-groups, disparaging those outside their group. When encountering a media portrayal of a positive out-group exemplar that challenges this self-enhancement mechanism, individuals may be motivated to discount it to maintain their sense of superiority (for a review, see Mastro & Tukachinsky, 2011). In other words, media consumers may be predisposed to avoid parasocially relating to out-group members. Likewise, the ability of media consumers to step into the shoes of an out-group member and identify with her or him may be compromised. A previous meta-analysis revealed that, overall, research participants find it harder to identify with characters from a background different from their own (Tukachinsky, 2014). Consequently, Park (2012) concluded that it is unlikely for parasocial contact to operate through direct identification with an out-group character. It is, therefore, hypothesized that intergroup dynamics hinder intergroup PSRs and that belonging to different groups renders it more difficult to be involved with an out-group character:

H1:   *Readers of a news article will report stronger (a) identification and (b) parasocial relationships with an in-group character than with an out-group character featured in the article.*

Facilitating Identification and Parasocial Relationships With an Out-Group Character

Although dissimilarity may make it harder for audience members to identify with an out-group, background similarity is not a prerequisite for identification (Cohen, Weimann-Saks, & Mazor-Tregerman, 2018). One of the unique strengths of narrative is its ability to expand a reader's self-concept and allow individuals to explore alternative identities as they vicariously experience others' perspectives that may be otherwise inaccessible to them (Slater, Johnson, Cohen, Comello, & Ewoldsen, 2014). However, to do this, the narrative must compel the audience to overcome the in-group favoritism bias. Various narrative devices have been examined for their potential to elicit character identification. The current study examines how two such factors that are known to facilitate mental simulation of narratives: the perspective of the narrator (i.e., who is telling the story) and the narrator's point of view (i.e., providing insight into the inner world of characters) (Hartung, Burke, Hagoort, & Willems, 2016).

First, narrator perspective is manipulated through the use of personal pronouns that signal the identity of the character narrating the story so that readers experience the story through the eyes of that character (Oatley, 1999). Empirical research has found that, indeed, manipulating point of view can shift readers' perspective such that they more readily adopt the narrating character's stance (De Graaf, Hoeken, Sanders, & Beentjes, 2012).

Second, the richness of the depiction of the character's inner world is critical for understanding that character's perspective. Rounded characters produce more identification than flat characters (Mak & Willems, 2018). Bortolussi and Dixon (2003) refer to sharing the character's understanding of the narrative world as character transparency. Descriptions of a character's mental state facilitate the audience's mentalizing, imitating the character's mental processes and experiences (Mak & Willems, 2018). Thus, inclusion of self-disclosures of a character's inner states (e.g., thoughts and feelings) conveys the distinct psychological status of the character in a story, enabling the audience to enter the character's inner world (Zhou & Niederdeppe, 2017).

Similarly, parasocial relationships evolve and grow through interactions with media figures (Klimmt, Hartmann, & Schramm, 2006). Although little research has empirically tested PSRs' evolution as a dynamic process, Tukachinsky and Stever (2018) theorized that, like interpersonal relationships, PSRs advance through relational stages. They maintain that PSRs can gradually progress through stages. They may remain indefinitely on any stage, or they can move through multiple stages even within the same encounter, depending on the quality of the interaction experienced by the media user. Both a first-person account (which simulates the experience of having a conversation with the media figure by talking directly to the reader) and the amount of the character's self-disclosure can serve as parasocial cues that facilitate PSR development (Tukachinsky & Stever, 2018).

It is hypothesized that narrative devices of narrator point of view and the richness of the character's inner world will enhance identification and PSR with the out-group character:

H2:   *Readers of a news article will report stronger (a) identification and (b) parasocial relationships with an out-group character featured in the article when the story is narrated from the out-group character's perspective than when it is narrated from an in-group character's perspective.*

H3:   *The effect in H2 will be moderated by self-disclosure, such that the effect of the narrator's point of view will be stronger when the character engages in more self-disclosure.*

In-Group-Character Involvement and Mediated Contact

There are generally two approaches to conceptualizing and examining mediated contact (Park, 2012). First, following the original intergroup contact hypothesis (which strictly considers direct interpersonal interaction between in- and out-group individuals), some researchers have examined the effect of in-group media users relating to out-group characters (e.g., Schiappa et al., 2005). Conversely, following the extended contact approach, which considers the effects of observed intergroup interactions, other media scholars have examined the effect of in-group media users' exposure to media depictions of in-

group characters interacting with out-group characters (e.g., Joyce & Harwood, 2014). Character identification and parasocial relationships have been hypothesized to underlie both the direct and the extended mediated contact processes.

Specifically, Park (2012) proposed three models of mediated contact effects. First, individuals can engage in positive PSRs with out-group characters but not directly identify with them (model A). Alternatively, media consumers might identify (model B) or form PSRs (model C) with an in-group character who interacts with an out-group character. In turn, identification or a PSR with the in-group character constitutes a channel through which audience members make contact with an out-group character. The in-group character models positive intergroup relationships, subsequently influencing attitudes toward and perceptions of the out-group and its attributes outside the mediated context.

This notion presents an alternative approach to mediated contact by using in-group characters as a bridge between the audience and an out-group character. Onscreen depictions of an in-group character who models a positive and cooperative relationship with an out-group member enables media consumers to vicariously engage with the out-group through their connection with the in-group character. Thus, while the classic parasocial contact hypothesis (e.g., Schiappa et al., 2005) stresses the importance of PSRs and identification with the out-group character, Park's extended mediated contact models B and C assume that it is engagement with the in-group character rather than the out-group character that promotes the desirable intergroup effects.

Scant research has considered the effect of in-group character relationship on intergroup relationships. In a correlational study, Ortiz and Harwood (2007) examined the effect of in-group character identification on attitudes toward an out-group in the context of racial and sexual minorities. They found that identification with the in-group character was associated with more favorable out-group attitudes in the case of the heterosexual-gay intergroup contact, but not in White-Black contact. However, it is possible that the ambivalent quality of the intergroup interactions between White and Black characters in the TV show specific to that study led to the discrepant results. More recent studies that manipulate exposure to narratives specifically crafted to promote positive relationships with Muslims reveal theory-consistent results. Specifically, identification with an in-group character engaged in a positive relationship with an out-group character predicts greater liking of the out-group character (Moyer-Gusé, Dale, & Ortiz, 2018). Importantly, identification with the in-group character amplifies the effect of the valence of the intergroup interaction featured in the narrative. Thus, negative mediated intergroup interactions can exacerbate media users' prejudice to the extent that they identify with the in-group character (Joyce & Harwood, 2014).

Collectively, these studies suggest that it is critical to consider not only representations of the out-group but also the depiction of the in-group characters and examine their joint role in facilitating mediated contact. However, previous studies on in-group character identification did not control for media users' involvement with the out-group characters. Thus, to our knowledge, there has been no direct comparison or test of Park's models, and it remains largely unknown whether engagement with the in-group character truly drives the documented effects or whether engagement with the out-group character could be a better, more proximal predictor of media exposure outcomes. Put differently, while identification with the in-group character was found to be a predictor of the mediated contact effect (e.g., Ortiz & Harwood, 2007), it is

possible that in-group character identification is merely a proxy for engagement with the media content overall (as identification with one protagonist is likely to be correlated with identification with the other characters). It is not inconceivable that the relationship between out-group identification and out-group attitudes is a spurious one, with in-group character identification truly driving these effects.

The current study offers a novel approach to investigating the possible mechanism of the mediated contact effect. First, we offer a unique comparison of the effect of directly relating to the out-group character with the effect of relating to the in-group character in predicting support for out-group-centered social policies. Second, the study adds clarity to the understanding of the specific type of involvement that underlies this effect. Whereas previous research (Joyce & Harwood, 2014; Moyer-Gusé et al., 2018; Ortiz & Harwood, 2007) has used identification as the vehicle of mediated contact effects, Park (2012) assumes that PSRs can also serve a role in this process. In the current study, we compare both involvement types and pose the following research question:

RQ1:   Which type of involvement (parasocial relationship or identification) and with which character (in-group or out-group) is most influential in promoting support for public health policies?

The Study Context

This study explores the hypotheses and the research question in the context of support for policies assisting individuals struggling with opioid addiction. The opioid crisis in the United States has quickly become one of the most profound public health crises in the nation's history. Yet individuals struggling with the addiction face negative social stigma (Kennedy-Hendricks et al., 2017). A large portion of the population considers addiction to be a behavioral failing; 44% of Americans believe that opioid addiction indicates a lack of willpower or discipline, while 32% uphold that opioid addiction is caused by a character defect or bad parenting (Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research, 2017). These stigmas are particularly harmful because they are associated with opposition to spending on providing treatment to affected individuals (Matheson et al., 2014) and lead to punitive attitudes rather than support for public health policies that could curb the opioid epidemic (Kennedy-Hendricks et al., 2017; McGinty et al., 2018).

Method

A 2 (narrator perspective: in-group/out-group) × 2 (amount of self-disclosure: high/low) experimental design was employed. Data for the study were collected in accordance with the Institutional Review Board approval granted by the researchers' institution. Members of the general public who were U.S. residents age 18 or older were recruited through Amazon's Mechanical Turk and paid $0.50. After indicating their consent, participants were randomly placed into one of the experimental conditions. Participants then read the stimulus article and completed a questionnaire containing theory-pertinent measures, demographic questions, and data quality checks.

Sample

A total of 409 individuals completed the survey. Since the study was concerned with opioid misuse as an in-group/out-group characteristic, participants were asked about their own history of opioid misuse, resulting in the exclusion of 47 respondents. Next, to ensure data quality, we eliminated responses from 159 participants who failed attention check questions that instructed them to select a response option and/or those who did not spend at least 90 seconds on the stimulus page (based on reading time during a pilot study).

The final sample comprised 203 participants ($n_{\text{in-group low self-disclosure}}$ = 56, $n_{\text{in-group high self-disclosure}}$ = 48, $n_{\text{out-group low self-disclosure}}$ = 49, $n_{\text{out-group high self-disclosure}}$ = 50). Table 1 presents the demographic characteristics of the study participants alongside U.S. census data for comparison. As can be gleaned from the table, although the sample for this study is diverse, it tends to be more educated, is more homogeneous in terms of income, and underrepresents Latinos and African Americans in comparison to the general population.

Table 1. Sample Demographic Characteristics Compared With U.S. Census Data.

	Sample (N = 203)	U.S. Census 2017
Age (M)	36.9	37.8
Sex (% female)	42.9	50.8
Ethnicity/race (%)		
African American/Black	8.9	12.7
American Indian/Alaskan Native	0.5	0.8
Asian or Asian American	5.9	5.4
Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander	0.5	0.2
White	77.8	73.0
Hispanic/Latino	4.9[a]	17.6
Educational attainment (%)		
High school incomplete	0.0	12.6
High school graduate/GED	7.9	27.3
Some college	32.0	29.1
Four-year college/bachelor's degree	41.9	19.1
Some postgraduate/professional	2.5	—
Postgraduate/professional degree	15.8	11.8
Annual pretax household income (%)		
Less than $10,000	3.0	6.7
$10,000 to less than $50,000	40.6	37.1
$50,000 to less than $75,000	24.4	17.7
$75,000 to less than $100,000	15.3	12.3
$100,000 or more	16.7	26.2

[a] The remaining 1.5% of respondents chose "Other" or did not respond to the question.

Stimuli

Study participants read a magazine story modeled after real articles on the subject matter and it was designed to appear to be published in *Time* magazine. The article shared the story of a young man who became addicted to opioids after being prescribed them following an injury (i.e., outgroup member) and his best friend (i.e., ingroup member). All versions of the article depicted the intergroup relationship as positive and cooperative and stressed that the out-group character's experiences were typical of individuals with opioid addiction. Four versions of the article were created to manipulate the narrator's perspective and disclosure. The effectiveness of the manipulations was established using a pilot study of Mechanical Turk workers who did not participate in the main study ($N = 79$) after one participant was dropped after skipping the stimulus page (M age = 33.20, $SD = 11.98$, 53% female, 66% White, 14% Asian American, 10% Latino, 8% African American, 2% other).

Perspective

The story was narrated in the first-person from either the out-group's perspective (by the individual struggling with the addiction) or from the in-group's perspective (by his best friend who supports him on his journey toward recovery). In the pilot study, all (100%) participants correctly identified the narrating character.

Self-Disclosure

Disclosure level was manipulated by either including or omitting a description of the narrating character's inner state at various points in the narrative (e.g., "My stomach dropped and my mind began to race"). In other words, all versions of the story describe the same events, but the depiction varied both in the point of view from which the story is told and the extent to which the narrator's (either in-group or out-group character's) thoughts and feelings about these events are explicated. For example, the high self-disclosure conditions include the narrator's statement: "I was terrified. The same thought kept running through my mind—I had never imagined that my life [my friend's life] would come to this point." This statement was not included in the low self-disclosure condition, which only reported the events without divulging the character's emotions and thoughts about them.

To ensure the integrity of the manipulation, a pilot study was conducted in which participants were asked to rate on a 7-point scale (ranging from *not at all* to *very much*) the extent to which the narrator shared his thoughts and feelings about what happens in the story. Compared with participants in low self-disclosure conditions, participants in high self-disclosure conditions indicated that the author reveals significantly more of his thoughts ($M_{\text{in-group}}$ low = 3.17, $SD = 1.82$ vs. $M_{\text{in-group}}$ high = 6.26, $SD = 0.73$, $M_{\text{out-group}}$ low = 4.32, $SD = 1.97$, vs. $M_{\text{out-group}}$ high = 6.14, $SD = 0.85$), $F(3, 73) = 20.50$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .402$, and feelings ($M_{\text{in-group}}$ low = 3.61, $SD = 2.17$ vs. $M_{\text{in-group}}$ high = 6.53, $SD = 0.61$, $M_{\text{out-group}}$ low = 4.47, $SD = 1.93$, vs. $M_{\text{out-group}}$ high = 5.95, $SD = 1.07$), $F(3, 73) = 13.87$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .310$. Post hoc Bonferroni tests reveal that all the contrasts between the high and low manipulation conditions were significant at $p < .001$, while none of the contrasts between narrator conditions with the same level of disclosure were significantly different from each other. This indicates that the disclosure condition was

effective and was independent of the manipulation of the narrator's perspective. Importantly, this manipulation did not affect the clarity of the narrative; across conditions, participants rated the story to be very clearly written ($M_{\text{in-group}}$ low = 6.83, SD = 0.38 vs. $M_{\text{in-group}}$ high = 6.68, SD = 0.58, $M_{\text{out-group}}$ low = 6.74, SD = 0.56, vs. $M_{\text{out-group}}$ high = 6.90, SD = 0.44), $F(3, 73)$ = 0.76, p = .51, η^2 = .001.

Measures

All the variables were measured on a 7-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*).

Parasocial Relationships

Participants were asked to report their PSRs with the in-group and the out-group character using a short version of Hartmann et al.'s (2008) positive PSRs scale. Five items that are less relevant to a one-time exposure were dropped from the original scale (e.g., "I think about my favorite racing driver even when he is not on TV"). The remaining eight items included statements such as, "The character makes me feel as comfortable as when I am with friends" (Cronbach's $\alpha_{\text{in-group}}$ = .91, Cronbach's $\alpha_{\text{out-group}}$ = .92).

Identification

Identification with the in-group and the out-group character was assessed using a shortened version of Cohen's (2001) identification scale. Two items from the original scale that were later criticized for tapping into transportation rather than identification (Tal-Or & Cohen, 2016) were excluded, leaving eight items, such as, "While reading the article I could feel the emotions the character felt" (Cronbach's $\alpha_{\text{in-group}}$ = .91, Cronbach's $\alpha_{\text{out-group}}$ = .91).

Support for Opioid Addiction–Related Public Health Policies

Participants were asked to indicate the extent to which they favored or opposed implementation of five policies to assist individuals struggling with opioid addiction. The specific policies have been listed because they speak directly to the experiences of the out-group character in the narrative and ostensibly would have assisted that character's recovery: "mandating health insurance providers to cover in-patient treatment for opioid addiction," "increasing regulation of quality of care in opioid addiction treatment facilities," "tax-funded programs to educate physicians regarding opioid medications and their risks for abuse," "tax-funded programs to educate patients regarding opioid medications and their risks for abuse," and "tax-funded pain and addiction specialist consultation to patients who are prescribed opioids" (Cronbach's α = .83).

Control Variables

Participants were asked to indicate whether they had personal experiences with opioid misuse as well as whether they had personal contact with anyone who was addicted to or had misused opioids. Participants who reported having personal contact with someone misusing opioids (39.4% of the sample) were prompted to rate the degree of closeness of the relationship with that person on a scale from 1 to 5. Direct contact was

then recoded into a single measure ranging from 0 (*no direct contact*) to 5 (*very close relationship*). When asked to identify their political leaning on a scale from 1 (*strong Democrat*) to 7 (*strong Republican*) (adapted from Levin, Van Laar, & Sidanius, 2003), responses averaged 3.74 (*SD* = 1.78). Finally, participants reported demographic information including their age, ethnicity, gender, educational attainment, and household income.

Analysis Strategy

First, to test the in-group favoritism hypothesis (H1), a series of paired *t* tests were used to compare readers' involvement with the in-group and with the out-group character. The paired *t* test (comparing characters) was conducted twice—once for PSRs and once for identification. Next, analysis of covariance was used to examine the main effect of narrator perspective (H2a, H2b) and its interaction with disclosure (H3) on out-group character PSR and identification. Narrator condition (in-group/out-group) and disclosure conditions (low/high) were used as fixed factors. Sex and race (dummy-coded as White/racial minority) were entered as random factors. All other control demographic variables (political identification, age, income, and extent of interpersonal contact with individuals who misused opioid) were continuous variables and thus were entered as covariates. Finally, to examine the effect of the two involvement types (PSR and identification) with in-group/out-group characters, a multiple linear regression was conducted. The demographic control variables were entered into the first block. The second block included the in-group identification and in-group PSR, and the third block included out-group identification and out-group PSR.

Results

In-Group Favoritism

H1 posits that readers will report stronger identification and PSRs with the in-group character than with the out-group character. Results of paired *t* tests support this hypothesis. Across conditions, readers report higher levels of identification with the in-group character (*M* = 5.23, *SD* = 0.98) than with the out-group character (*M* = 4.86, *SD* = 1.21), *t*(202) = 5.41, *p* < .001. Similarly, readers expressed higher PSRs with the in-group character (*M* = 4.69, *SD* = 1.23) than with the out-group character (*M* = 4.14, *SD* = 1.31), *t*(202) = 7.09, *p* < .001.

The Effect of Narrator Perspective and Self-Disclosure on Out-Group Character Identification

Narrator perspective had a significant main effect on identification with the out-group character, *F*(1, 189) = 8.93, *p* < .01, η^2 = .05, such that participants who were exposed to the narrative told from the out-group character's perspective reported stronger identification with the out-group character (*M* = 5.11, *SE* = 0.13) than those who were exposed to the in-group narrative perspective (*M* = 4.59, *SE* = 0.14). Thus, H2a was supported. This effect, however, was not moderated by amount of self-disclosure, *F*(1, 189) = 0.46, *p* = .56, η^2 = .003, contrary to the prediction in H3.

The Effect of Narrator Perspective and Self-Disclosure on Out-Group Character PSR

A similar pattern emerged for predicting PSRs with the out-group character. Narrating the story from the out-group character's perspective significantly increased PSRs with the out-group character, $F(1, 189) = 8.59$, $p < .05$, $\eta^2 = .03$, M in-group condition = 3.92, $SE = 0.15$ vs. M out-group condition = 4.34, $SE = 0.14$. However, once again, contrary to the prediction in H3, there was no interaction between self-disclosure and the narrator's perspective, $F(1, 189) = 0.001$, $p = .97$, $\eta^2 < .001$.

Effect of Involvement on Support for Public Health Policies

RQ1 asked about the type of involvement (PSR or identification) and character (in-group or out-group) that is most influential in promoting support for public health policies. Table 2 presents the standardized regression coefficients predicting support for policies as a function of demographics, PSRs, and identification with the in-group and out-group character.

Table 2. Hierarchical Multiple Regression Analyses Predicting Support for Public Health Policies.

	β
Step 1: Control variables	
Sex (male = 1)	.07
Age	−.02
Race (White = 1)	−.04
Political leaning[a]	−.34**
Education	.02
Income	.04
Direct contact[b]	.16*
$F(7, 192)$	5.56**
Adjusted R^2	.14
Step 2: In-group character involvement	
In-group identification	.20*
In-group parasocial relationship	.14
$F(9, 190)$	7.53**
Adjusted R^2	.23
$F(2)\ \Delta R^2$	12.20**
Step 3: Out-group character involvement	
Out-group identification	−.01
Out-group parasocial relationship	.08
$F(11, 188)$	6.19**
Adjusted R^2	.14
$F(2)\ \Delta R^2$	.37

[a] Measured on a scale from 1 (*strong Democrat*) to 7 (*strong Republican*).
[b] Measured on a scale from 0 (*no contact*) to 6 (*very close contact*).
* $p < .05$. ** $p < .001$.

As can be seen from the table, political leaning and direct contact are the only control variables that predict support for public health policies. The addition of involvement with the in-group character significantly increases the variance explained by the model, with identification serving as the sole significant predictor. However, inclusion of involvement with the out-group character makes no significant contribution to the model. Taken together to answer RQ1, only identification with the in-group character promotes more favorable attitudes toward policies supporting the out-group.

Discussion

This study explores the mediated contact effect on support for public health policies. First, the study demonstrates an in-group favoritism tendency, as media users are found to be less inclined to relate to out-group characters. In other words, the process that is supposed to underlie the effects of mediated contact is undermined by the intergroup dynamic that the parasocial contact seeks to combat in the first place. The study then tests two strategies for reverting this tendency. In line with past research on narrator perspective (De Graaf et al., 2012), the current study finds that presenting the story from the point of view of the out-group indeed enhances identification with that character.

However, contrary to the expectation, the richness of the character's inner world, including sharing his thoughts and feelings, does not enhance this effect. It is curious why such self-disclosure did not enhance identification. Perhaps the answer lies in the valence of the information that was revealed by the character. Past research has identified the character's virtue and moral standing as important predictors of identification (Cohen, Tal-Or, & Mazor-Tregerman, 2015; Tal-Or & Cohen, 2010). However, in our study, the actions of the out-group character were not particularly positive. The narrative described the out-group character having a violent outburst toward his friend and using dishonest means to obtain drugs. Reflecting on these negative events, even as they provide the character's side of the story, could lead the audience to develop an even more negative disposition toward the character, hindering the effect of self-disclosure. Deeper understanding of the character's inner experiences promotes identification, but dwelling on the negative aspects of the character's persona pushes the reader away from that character. It is likely that the study found no effect of self-disclosure because these two opposing forces canceled each other out.

This study's second objective was to examine whether the mediated contact effect operates through relating directly with the out-group character or whether the effect occurs through engagement with an in-group character that models the intergroup contact in the media. Interestingly, only identification with the in-group character, but not involvement with the out-group character, was significantly associated with support for public health policies. This finding implies that (at least in some cases) media users do not change their attitudes on policies as a result of putting themselves in the out-group member's shoes and feeling empathy toward the out-group character—nor are they necessarily persuaded by expanding their social network through parasocial relationships. Rather, the results are consistent with the theorization that media users adopt the perspective of the in-group and change their beliefs to be consistent with the position advocated by that character in defense of the out-group. In other words, audience members identify with the in-group that is kind toward and supportive of the out-group character rather than an in-group that feels the out-group's pain directly. These findings follow the social learning theory approach (Bandura, 1999, 2009) to mediated contact, suggesting that modeling of intergroup relationships, rather than elicitation of

intergroup empathy, is key to attitude change. To our knowledge, the current research is the first to include all four measures discussed in Park's (2012) models in a single study and to compare their relative effect on mediated contact. Importantly, this study's findings affirm the intuitive choice made by previous studies to focus specifically on in-group identification (Joyce & Harwood, 2014; Moyer-Gusé et al., 2018; Ortiz & Harwood, 2007), offering empirical support for this direction in future mediated contact research.

Practical Implications

The findings of this research inform ways that media messages can be designed to enhance the mediated contact effect. Journalism researchers and advocacy groups maintain the importance of media offering a platform for voices of marginalized individuals, particularly those with a stigmatized medical condition (e.g., Whitley & Berry, 2013). Indeed, including direct quotes of an individual increases the audience's understanding of that person's firsthand experience (Aust & Zillmann, 1996; Zillmann, 2000). In line with this argument, the results of the present study suggest that if elicitation of an empathetic response is desirable, the use of first-person narration is an effective way to do so.

However, if the objective is to move beyond empathy to promote social justice and public policies, this approach is not necessarily effective. It may be more important to offer media users an in-group member character to relate to who models positive contact with the out-group. It appears that the use of in-group characters as a bridge between the audience and the out-group is of paramount importance, particularly when the out-group's behavior is stigmatized and is viewed as undesirable. In the current study, it seems that the antisocial behavior of the out-group character created a negative response in media users. Nonetheless, they were able to overcome this prejudice and support the social policies to assist the out-group because of their identification with an in-group character who modeled supportive actions to assist his out-group friend.

Limitations and Future Directions

This study provides a first comparison between various modes of character involvement with in-group and out-group members to promote support for social policies benefiting the out-group. Like many communication experiments, ours is limited to the use of a single stimulus, exploring the hypotheses and questions in one particular context. It is important to replicate these findings in various contexts to increase the generalizability of the results and to further explore their boundary conditions.

First, we used a single exposure to a written text. However, parasocial relationships have been generally understudied in the context of print stimuli (Liebers & Schramm, 2019), and most of the mediated contact literature involves research on film and television messages. It is conceivable that PSRs evolve differently across modalities because of the availability of different parasocial cues and mental simulation processes. However, the question of how involvement operates with characters in written and audiovisual messages is gravely understudied and will be important for advancing the field.

Second, PSRs, like interpersonal relationships, develop over time and over the course of repeated interactions with the media figure (Klimmt et al., 2006). Unfortunately, little empirical research has

considered PSR evolution. Although it has been hypothesized that parasocial contact effects occur when PSRs are relatively mature (Tukachinsky & Stever, 2018), it remains unknown how long it takes for audiences to develop sufficient PSRs. In the current study, participants read only a single text, which might have not allowed them to reach sufficiently high levels of PSR to produce the effect. The study does find effects of character identification, which occurs while reading the story. However, it is possible that long-term, repeated exposure (e.g., reading a series of blog posts over time) is warranted to produce PSR effects. Future research that considers this question will make a tremendous contribution to the field's understanding of PSR theory in general and mediated contact in particular.

Additionally, it is important to consider the group membership type. The current study uniquely used a stigmatized medical condition as a group membership, whereas past studies on mediated contact that examined in-group identification considered racial, religious, and sexual group memberships. Replications with other health-based group membership would be helpful in understanding support for health policy as an intergroup process. Moreover, although the results of the current study and research on other intergroup contexts appear to converge, it is also important to consider circumstances under which it is possible for the varying group contexts to produce different effects. For example, compared to stigmatized health conditions such as addiction or an HIV diagnosis, sexual identity and race are stable group membership characteristics. It is possible that the transient nature of the medical in-group can have a unique effect on how mediated contact through an in-group character operates.

This study's results are based on a relatively diverse but nonrepresentative sample. A larger and more varied sample could be used in the future to examine whether mediated contact is particularly important in the absence of opportunities for intergroup contact in one's close environment. For instance, Bond and Compton (2015) found that, whereas exposure to televised gay characters increased support for gay equality among viewers with little to no direct contact, the effect was not significant for viewers who had three or more gay friends or family members. Similarly, it is possible that modeling of intergroup relationships is only important for those who do not have such models in their actual environment or for those who are surrounded by negative in-group role models. Most studies that consider both direct and mediated contact (albeit not always an interaction between them) do so in the context of stereotypical media representations that have negative effects on intergroup attitudes, while interpersonal contact leads to more harmonious intergroup beliefs (e.g., Saleem et al., 2016; Tan, Fujioka, & Lucht, 1997). It is, therefore, valuable to understand whether media-based modeling of an identification-provoking in-group who is engaged in intergroup relationships applies to these circumstances as well. While the current study uses direct contact with the out-group as a control variable, future studies employing a larger sample with a range of direct experiences can probe the interaction between direct and mediated contact to shed light on these important questions. In all, the current study demonstrates the heuristic value of considering both in-group and out-group character involvement in parasocial contact processes and offers a road map for further exploration.

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