

**The Relation Between Empathy and Contact Intentions:
The Role of Group-Based Guilt**

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Abstract

Empathy is defined as the ability to understand and share the feelings of others. Previous research indicated that empathy predicts feelings of group-based guilt about transgressions of one's own group. The question is whether these factors also play a part in the intention to seek contact with a victimized group. For this reason this study aimed to find a relation between empathy, guilt and intentions to seek contact. We hypothesized that empathy would lead to feelings of guilt, which would then predict contact intentions. A video manipulation was used to induce empathy in participants, who were instructed to either imagine being in the same situation as the victim group or stay as objective as possible. The results showed the manipulation to be ineffective. We did, however, find the expected relations between empathy, guilt and contact intentions though no mediation could be shown. However, we did not find evidence that the relation between empathy and contact intentions towards the victim group was mediated by group-based guilt about the deeds of one's own ingroup.

Keywords: empathy; group-based guilt; contact intentions

The Relation Between Empathy and Contact Intentions:

The Role of Group-Based Guilt

In pursuing further education after high-school many students move out from the parental home. While many universities encourage living closer to the place of study this is not always possible. In Groningen this proves difficult as housing has become scarce with the amount of students travelling to this city. While both Dutch and international students face this same issue, international students often have a harder time finding a place to live. Many are faced with rejection messages from places because they only accept Dutch students. It appears as if Dutch students only wish to live with other Dutch students and shun the internationals. This form of discrimination makes it incredibly hard for those students to find a home in time for the college year. Since both groups face the same struggle in finding housing, perhaps we can make the Dutch students aware of the situation of their international counterparts. By making the Dutch students aware of the situation perhaps they will empathize with the international students. Then, if they are aware of the discrimination on the housing market they may feel guilty about how international students are treated and feel the need to change this. In the current study we aimed to test this by making Dutch students feel empathy towards international students. We believe that inducing empathy will make the participants feel guilty and try to solve this by seeking contact with the international group.

Does empathy improve intergroup relations?

Empathy is defined as “*the ability to understand and share the feelings of others*”. This has been used in previous research for a similar goal as it will be used here. In order to increase contact between groups the present research seeks to induce empathy. Empathy has been shown

to increase willingness to seek contact with a group. Vanman (2016) studied the importance of empathy in seeking contact with outgroup members. It makes sense that Dutch students relate more to other Dutch students rather than international ones. Inducing empathy can blur the line between groups, making members of one group more likely to seek contact with members of another. The role of empathy in contact and helping is also highlighted by Carrera et al. (2013). In their research they state that empathy leads to helping behavior by wanting to lessen the burden of the victim group. In the current research this will also play a part, we believe to see a similar effect when Dutch students empathize with the international group. But why do we see this effect? We believe that empathy with a victim group will lead to feelings of guilt about the role their group may have played in the struggles of the victim group.

Does group-based guilt increase contact intentions?

Empathy may lead someone to feel guilty about the role their group has played in the discomfort of another group. We call this group-based guilt, feelings of guilt towards undesirable deeds perpetrated by other members of one's own group (McGarty et al. 2005). We believe that increasing empathy will lead to feelings of guilt, which will then in turn lead to a willingness to help the victim group. Howell et al. (2012) showed a link between empathy, guilt and willingness to apologize. In their study they showed that increased empathy would increase willingness to apologize, they also showed levels of guilt to have the same effect. They did not show a direction of this effect but showed instead the links between these three factors. McGarty and colleagues showed that feelings of guilt increased willingness to apologize as well. In their study they believed an apology to be a way to relieve guilt. They found that levels of guilt felt towards a victim group predicted a willingness to apologize. While these studies focus on intentions and willingness to apologize, the current study will focus on contact intentions in the

form of sharing information and housing with the victim group. We believe these studies to still apply to our own research. We expect the workings of empathy and guilt to be the same in the context of sharing housing and information as it would be in the context of apologizing.

This Study

This study will look at Dutch students' intentions towards sharing housing and information on how to find housing with international students. Based on previous research we assume that inducing empathy will increase the willingness to share with the other group (Kruetzkamp, 2022. Febriana, 2022). We also assume that group-based guilt will mediate this effect based on the research by Howell and colleagues (2012), Febriana (2022) and Krützkamp (2022).

This study is an attempted replication of two previous studies by Febriana (2022) and Kruetzkamp (2022). Both studies looked at the effect of empathy on intentions to apologize, attempting to show group-based guilt as a mediator to this effect.

Febriana (2022) did a study about discrimination of Indonesians against Papuans. In this study they attempted to induce empathy with the intention to increase feelings of guilt in Indonesian participants. The way this was done was by using a method by Batson et al. (2002), the participants were given an article detailing the discrimination Papuans faced in Indonesia. Participants were divided in two groups, one was instructed to read the article objectively while the other was instructed to read it empathically. In this study Febriana studied feelings of group-related guilt. They found that empathy increased intentions to apologize to the victim group. They also found indications of a partial mediation of group-based guilt. However, the manipulation itself had failed, showing no differences in levels of empathy between the experimental and control groups.

Krützkamp (2022) studied the effect of empathy on men faced with stories of sexual harassment against women. Here the researcher induced empathy by having participants read stories of sexual harassment paired with victim portraits. Krützkamp found that empathy lead to an increase in intentions to apologize in the target group, they also found a partial mediation with guilt. The methods they used were from previous research by Batson et al. (2002). Krützkamp sought to improve on the manipulation used by Febriana (2022) by making the stories shorter as opposed to an article which took up over an A4 page. This way participants were more likely to take the time to read the stories and let them sink in. They found that empathy was positively linked to intentions to apologize, this relationship was partially mediated by group-based guilt. Here, too, the manipulation had failed and no differences were found between experimental and control.

While both studies found links between empathy and apology intentions, they did not find differences between their experimental and control group. Perhaps this could be because of the topics used, both racial discrimination and sexual harassment are heavy topics in which most people will feel empathy towards the victim group. An alternative explanation could be that reading the stories did not have enough impact compared to hearing about these stories in an audible manner. As mentioned before, the current study seeks to replicate the aforementioned studied and improve on their manipulation. The difference will be that we do not study intentions to apologize, rather we look at intentions to seek more direct contact. We hope to show that the induction of empathy will increase feelings of guilt and intentions to seek contact with the victim group. We also hope to show a mediation effect of group-based guilt between empathy and contact intentions.

Methods

Participants and Design

A total of 115 participants took part in the study. Only Dutch students above the age of 16 were able to participate. The participants consisted of a convenience sample recruited through social media and the SONA credit system. No financial compensation was offered for participation, but first-year students who participated through the SONA system received SONA credits. Among the participants, 38 were excluded (based on preregistered criteria, see from https://aspredicted.org/GLY_PJW) from the study since they were below the age of 16 (N = 0), were not studying at a university or hogeschool at the moment (N = 2), filled less than 50% of the questions (N = 34), gave the same answer to all the questions (N = 0), or failed $\frac{2}{3}$ of the attention checks (N = 2). In total, the data of 77 participants (29 males, 47 females, 1 unknown) were used for the analysis (1.3% were 16-17 years old, 33.8% were 18-19 years old, 37.7% were 20-21 years old, 27.3% were older than 21 years old). Regarding living conditions, participants lived alone in a studio or flat (N = 10), together with other people in shared housing (N = 47), or together with a family in a parenting house (N = 20).

This study was designed as an experimental study with two conditions, manipulating the empathy towards the outgroup. Participants were randomly assigned to either the condition with induced empathy (N = 38) or the control condition (N = 39). The study also aimed to test a simple mediation model: group-based guilt is expected to mediate the relationship between empathy and intention to have contact. An a priori power analysis was used to estimate the sample size using the online tool Monte Carlo Power Analysis for Indirect Effects (Schoemann et al., 2017). This power analysis indicated that at least 121 participants were necessary to analyze a simple mediation model with one mediator to find an effect of $f = .20$ with a $\alpha = .05$ and a power of 80%. Therefore, our sample of 77 participants had insufficient

power to find the desired effect.

Procedure

The questionnaire was administered through the online platform Qualtrics. Participants were referred to the link through SONA or social media. First, participants were asked to read information about the study and how it will proceed. Before participating in the study, informed consent was provided, and participants were asked about their decision to participate or not. If consent was given, some questions were posed about demographics such as age, gender, and living conditions. Then, participants were asked about their identification as a Dutch student, specifically with statements, e.g., “I see myself as Dutch.” and “I am glad to be Dutch.”.

Answers were given on a 7 point Likert scale (1 = Not at all, 7 = Very much).

After this, all participants were given information about the housing crisis. They were told they would watch a video on this topic. However, before watching the video, they were randomly assigned to either the *empathy* condition or the *control* condition. In the *empathy* condition participants were instructed to put themselves into the shoes of the international students, imagining their feelings and reactions to being in that situation. Specifically, before presenting the video, participants were instructed as “While watching the video, try to imagine the emotions of these students. Try to imagine what they feel by taking their perspective. This may help you understand their experiences and what it must be like to come to the Netherlands to study but not be able to find a place to live.”

On the other hand, in the *control* condition, participants were told to remain objective towards the video, they were reminded that Dutch students also face issues finding housing. Specifically, the instructions given before presenting the video include that “while watching the video, try to stay objective. Try to keep in mind the

general housing situation to all students in Groningen, including Dutch students.”

After giving relevant instructions for each condition, participants watched the same short video showing three international students’ experiences in the Dutch housing market regarding finding a place to live in Groningen for their studies. These stories included the struggles they faced finding housing and their opinions and feelings on their situation upon studying in Groningen. After watching the video, the dependent measures were asked. At the end of the questionnaire, two items were used to ask the participants about how they were either objective or empathetic towards the students in the video such as “to what extent did you focus on being objective” and “to what extent did you focus on the feelings of students who told their stories.” Participants were asked to rate these statements on a seven-point Likert scale (1 = not at all, to 7 = very much). These manipulation checks were used to test whether participants followed the instructions to the given conditions. Throughout the survey, three attention checks were included (e.g., Please choose “Not at all”). Lastly, the survey ended with appreciating the participants for their participation and a debriefing. Along with the debriefing, they were given the email of one of the researchers for any questions. The ethical committee (EC) of the University of Groningen approved the study. For the complete instructions and questionnaires, see Appendix A.¹

Dependent Measures

Empathy. This measure was adapted from De Vos et al. (2018) who used eight items, divided in four for affective empathy and four for perspective taking. Our study used similar items, re-phrased to fit the context. We will not differentiate between types of empathy in this paper. The measure consisted of six questions ($M = 5.54$, $SD = 1.39$, Cronbach’s $\alpha = .81$). This measure included questions about empathetic feelings and capacities with respect to the housing

situation of international students (e.g., “I feel bad for international students being refused into “Dutch-only” housing”). Two items were recoded due to negative phrasing.

Group-based Guilt. This measure was based on items adapted from Zebel et al. (2009) and the Collective Guilt Acceptance measure (Ferguson & Branscombe, 2014). Four items were used and made relevant to this context ($M = 4.29$, $SD = .52$, Cronbach’s $\alpha = .87$). One item was recoded due to negative phrasing before carrying out the analysis.

Contact Intentions. We measured contact intentions by creating items directed at immediate contact with the victim group (e.g. “I would be willing to share housing with international students.”; $M = 4.33$, $SD = 1.87$, Cronbach’s $\alpha = .78$). These questions were aimed at the individual level of contact.

Results

Empathy manipulation check

To test the manipulation, this study used a one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) to study the two manipulation check items. There was no significant difference found in levels of objectivity between the control group ($M = 4.30$, $SD = 1.45$) compared to the empathy group ($M = 4.31$, $SD = 1.47$), $F(1,75) = .001$, $p = .98$, $\eta^2 < .001$. The same can be said about the other manipulation check. No significant differences were found between the empathy group ($M = 5.90$, $SD = 1.25$) compared to the control group ($M = 5.57$, $SD = 1.32$) in levels of empathy when watching the video, $F(1,75) = 1.25$, $p = .27$, $\eta^2 = .17$. Looking at these means we can say that, like in previous studies, the empathy manipulation has failed.

Hypothesis testing

Despite the apparent failure of the manipulation checks we would still like to look at the hypotheses through our data. We looked at the first hypothesis using ANOVA. We found that

participants in the empathy group ($M = 4.35$, $SD = 1.27$) did not differ significantly from participants in the control group ($M = 4.19$, $SD = 1.59$) in reported levels of group-based guilt, $F(1,75) = .23$, $p = .634$, $\eta^2 = .003$. The same goes for the effect of inducing empathy on contact intentions. Here, too, no significant differences were found between the empathy group ($M = 5.09$, $SD = 1.38$) and the control group ($M = 5.14$, $SD = 1.46$) on levels of contact intentions, $F(1,75) = .020$, $p = .889$, $\eta^2 < .001$. Based on these results we can say that our data does not support the hypothesis that inducing empathy increases feelings of guilt. Neither does it increase intentions to seek contact with a victim group.

Explorative analyses

Since the empathy manipulation failed we decided to explore whether our empathy measure showed the expected relationships. First we found that the empathy group ($M = 5.76$, $SD = .84$) did not differ much from the control group ($M = 5.78$, $SD = .93$), $F(1,75) = .13$, $p = .909$, $\eta^2 < .00$. As with the other measures there was no effect to be seen in the measure of empathy either.

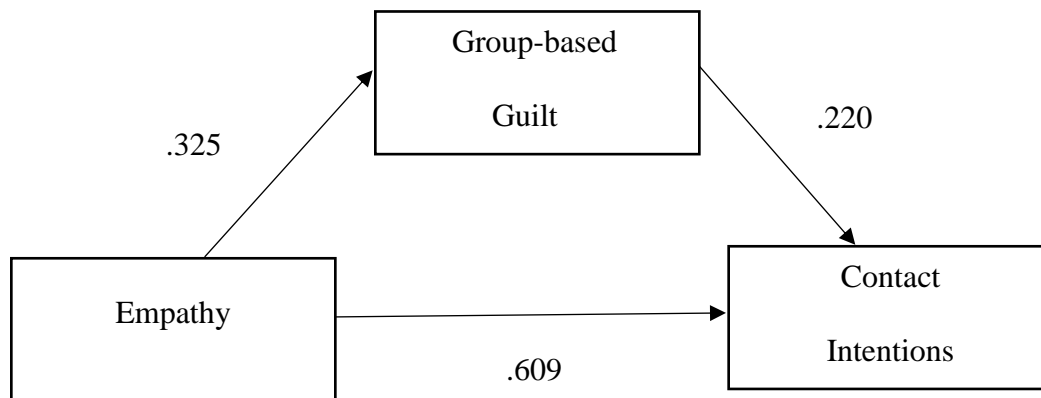
Next, we looked at the correlation between empathy and our other measures. We found a positive relation between empathy and guilt ($r = .325$, $p = .002$). A positive relation was also found between empathy and contact intentions ($r = .609$, $p < .001$). Though the empathy did not show differences between groups, these results do indicate some support for the hypothesis that empathy predicts feelings of guilt and intentions to seek contact, although no causal conclusions can be drawn.

After this, we used Process regression tool (Hayes, 2017, Model 4) to study the mediation effect of group based guilt. Using this model it showed that the direct effects between empathy and group-based guilt ($b = .123$, $SE = .056$, $p = .031$) and contact intentions ($b = .348$, $SE = .056$,

$p < .001$) were statistically significant. Looking at the indirect effects of guilt on the model showed that empathy does not predict higher levels of contact intentions via guilt (IE = .027, $SE = .021$, 95% CI [-.004, .074]). Looking at the confidence interval we can say that the effect is not significant and thus does not support the hypothesis that guilt functions as a mediator to the effect of empathy on contact intentions.

Figure 1

Explored mediation analysis



Our results, however, did not show that guilt mediated the effect between empathy and contact as it did with empathy and apology intentions (Febriana, 2022, Krützkamp, 2022). Guilt and contact intentions only showed a modest correlation. Together, our findings suggest that guilt and empathy make people seek to repair relationships (McGarty, 2005), although the relation between empathy and contact intentions was much stronger than the relation between group-based guilt and contact intentions.

Discussion

The purpose of the present study was to examine ways to increase the likelihood of Dutch students to engage with international students, specifically when it comes to housing. We attempted to increase contact intentions through increasing empathy in the hopes of creating

feelings of guilt which was expected to make participants want to seek contact with the victim group. We expected that feelings of group-based guilt would increase contact intentions when inducing empathy in participants.

The study used a video, paired with instructions to either stay objective or imagine one self in the shoes of the person shown, to induce empathy. These methods were based on previous research by Batson et al.(2002). We did not find significant differences between the empathy and control groups with respect to empathy, which lead us to conclude that the manipulation had failed.

Despite the manipulation failing, we still decided to explore relationships between our factors. This way we found support for the expectation that empathy is related to feelings of guilt. Furthermore, we found support for the expectation that empathy is related to contact intentions. We did not, however, find support for the hypothesis that guilt mediated this relationship. While we did find support for the relationships between our variables, we could not make any causal claims about them due to the failed manipulation.

Theoretical and practical implications

The findings of the present research show some interesting results, although they should be taken with caution due to the failing of the manipulation. Our findings were consistent with previous research in that we found strong relations between empathy and guilt. Like Febriana (2022) and Krützkamp (2022), we found that stronger feelings of empathy predict stronger feelings of guilt. Unlike their research, we did not focus on apology but rather looked at contact intentions. We found that feelings of empathy predict contact intentions. This adds to the existing literature on empathy as it shows a potential relation between empathy and seeking contact with a victim group. This also adds to the idea that guilt and empathy make people seek to repair

relationships (McGarty, 2005). While previous research mainly focused on apologies in relation to empathy and guilt, contact intentions may add to this.

This study could be used as an extension on understanding intergroup relations. If empathy with the victim group can increase the likelihood to seek contact it could be used by policy makers to make landlords open their rental houses to international students. This could be used on both landlords and Dutch students depending on who decides who gets to live somewhere.

Limitations and suggestions for future research

In future studies some limitations should be addressed. Firstly, as mentioned prior, the manipulation had failed again leading us to believe a different approach may be necessary to properly induce empathy while keeping an objective control group. Because the manipulation failed we could not infer causality between our variables as we relied on our empathy measure instead.

Another factor that hindered our research was a lack of participants. Due to many having to be removed as they did not meet requirements we were left with a small sample. Because of this we lacked the power necessary to properly test our model.

Lastly, it may be interesting to consider looking at the relationships between empathy, guilt and contact or apology from a different perspective. Since we could not show any causal relationship it is possible that the relationships go in a different direction than hypothesized. Perhaps looking at empathy through guilt, rather than the other way around, would give new insights into their relationship and effects on each other. We know that empathy and guilt are related but it would be interesting to study if it is empathy or guilt that springs someone into action. It could be that feelings of guilt may increase self-reflection on the actions of one's

ingroup. This may lead to people feeling an increased need to mend relationships with the victim group. Another perspective to take is from contact, using contact theory. Perhaps contact between groups would make them more familiar with each other's problems and the impact of them. This then may increase empathy and feelings of guilt in turn. We know the variables are related but it would be interesting to study different directions.

Conclusions

In the present study we attempted to investigate how one group could be brought in contact with another. Specifically, we sought to make a group of Dutch students want to seek contact with international students who were seeking housing. This was done by way of inducing empathy in a group of Dutch students in the hope they would feel empathy, and in turn guilt, towards the international students. There has been some work related to the relationships between empathy and guilt, mostly with the added context of apology. This study sought to not look at apology but contact seeking, which was assumed to have similar workings. We found evidence that the extent of which Dutch students felt empathy did relate to feelings of guilt and intentions to seek contact. However, we could not find a causal relationship between the three.

Overall, our findings suggest that empathy and guilt play a role in seeking contact with a victim group, however, this relation needs further investigation. The role of empathy and guilt could be used by policymakers to increase the chances of international students to find housing. This could be done by spreading awareness among Dutch students about the situation international students find themselves in.

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