

## Having friends with gay friends? The role of extended contact, empathy and threat on assertive bystanders behavioral intentions

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**Abstract:** Peers are present in more than 80% of bullying episodes and research showed that bystanders have a very important role in stopping bullying episodes. However, little is known about the predictors of assertive interventions by bystanders. The current study explored if extended contact (i.e., having friends who have gay friends), is related to assertive behavioral intentions to help the victims of homophobic bullying, through increased empathy and decreased masculinity/femininity threat. An online survey was completed by 87 heterosexual adolescents (12 to 18 years old). Results revealed that, as expected, extended contact was associated with more assertive interventions, via increased affective empathy and decreased masculinity/femininity threat. These findings replicated and extended previous studies by illustrating the underlying mechanisms through which extended contact positively affects bystanders' interventions.

**Keywords:** *Bullying; Homophobia; Extended contact; Bystanders.*

**Ter amigos com amigos gays/lésbicas? O papel do contacto alargado, empatia e ameaça nas intenções comportamentais assertivas dos *bystanders*:** Os pares estão presentes em mais de 80% dos episódios de *bullying* e a investigação tem revelado que os *bystanders* têm um papel muito importante na interrupção dos episódios de *bullying*. No entanto, pouco se sabe acerca dos preditores das intervenções assertivas dos *bystanders*. Este estudo explorou se o contacto alargado (i.e., ter amigos que têm amigos gays/lésbicas) está relacionado com intenções comportamentais assertivas de ajuda às vítimas de *bullying* homofóbico, através do aumento da empatia e da diminuição da ameaça à masculinidade/feminilidade. Um questionário online foi preenchido por 87 adolescentes heterossexuais (entre os 12 e os 18 anos). Como esperado, os resultados revelaram que o contacto alargado esteve associado a mais intervenções assertivas, através do aumento da empatia afectiva e da diminuição da ameaça à masculinidade/feminilidade. Estes efeitos permitem replicar e alargar a investigação anterior, ilustrando os mecanismos através dos quais o contacto alargado influencia positivamente as intervenções dos *bystanders*.

**Palavras-chave:** *Bullying; Homofobia; Contacto alargado; Bystanders.*

Bullying is a specific form of violence that occurs when a student is exposed to negative actions, repeatedly and over time, by one or more students (Olweus, 1993; Olweus & Limber, 2010), that has serious psychological, social and academic consequences (e.g., depression, suicide ideation, delinquency; Berlan, Corliss, Field, Goodman, & Austin, 2010).

Research on bullying has traditionally focused on the victims and aggressors taking an individualistic approach to the phenomenon. However, several recent studies consider bullying to be a group phenomenon (Meter & Card, 2015; Salmivalli, Voeten, & Poskiparta, 2011). Specifically, this new approach to bullying highlighted the importance of the peers' role, given that they are present in more than 80% of bullying episodes (Hawkins, Pepler, & Craig, 2001). These peers, usually known as bystanders, can endorse different roles such as encouraging the aggressor, helping the victim, or passively accept bullying by watching without acting (Polanin, Espelage, & Pigott, 2012; Pronk, Goossens, Olthof, De Mey, & Willems, 2013; Salmivalli, Lagerspetz, Bjorkqvist, Osterman, & Kaukianen, 1996). Previous research showed that bystanders can have a very important role in stopping bullying episodes. Specifically, research found that bystanders can stop bullying very quickly (10-12 seconds) and that bullying decreases when bystanders intervene on behalf of the victim (Midgett, Doumas, Sears, Lundquist, & Hausheer, 2015).

Given the importance of bystanders' intervention, recent research focused on bystanders' assertive

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interventions in favor of the victims of bullying (Aboud & Joong, 2008). Assertive interventions by peer bystanders are rare (Hawkins, et al., 2001; Samivalli et al., 1996) and little is known about its predictors (Abbott & Cameron, 2014; Hawkins et al., 2001). The current study extends previous research in several ways: by a) examining bystanders' assertive interventions (i.e., behavioral intentions) in a homophobic bullying context, b) exploring a new intergroup factor (i.e., extended contact) that promotes bystanders' assertive interventions, and c) exploring empathy and masculinity/femininity threat as potential underlying mechanisms that account for these positive effects.

### **Bias-based bullying: homophobic bullying**

Bullying is particularly prevalent in socially marginalized groups, such as sexual or ethnic minorities and disabled people. Research shows that bias-based bullying carries more negative consequences than traditional forms of bullying (i.e., absent of bias) (Poteat, DiGiovanni, & Scheer, 2013; Poteat & Vecho, 2015). In the current study we focused on a specific form of bias-based bullying, the homophobic bias-based aggression. Research showed that homophobic bias-based harassment is very common (Poteat et al., 2013), however, it is still a largely unaddressed phenomenon (Poteat & Vecho, 2015). Previous research showed that 55% of LGB (lesbian, gay or bisexual) young people are victims of homophobic bullying and stressed its negative effect on LGB youth's mental health and well-being (Formby, 2015). Importantly, homophobic bullying behavior is not only directed towards lesbian and gay individuals, but also towards heterosexuals. Thus, heterosexual students may also be victims of homophobia because they may be perceived as being different from traditional male or female gender role expectations (e.g., a boy who likes to dance or a girl who likes to play football could be targets of homophobic bullying because of their non-traditional gender role performances; Green, 2008; Poteat & Espelage, 2005). Therefore, given societal heterosexist norms and beliefs, bystanders who intervene in homophobic behavior episodes may be exposed to greater social risks than those who intervene in general bullying episodes (Poteat & Vecho, 2015).

### **Extended Contact and homophobic bullying**

There are several factors that define those who engage in more defending behaviors, such as demographic factors, leadership, justice sensitivity or having LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender) friends (Poteat & Vecho, 2015). Having LGBT friends is associated with engaging in more active bystander interventions in homophobic bullying episodes (Poteat & Vecho, 2015). These findings are consistent with social psychological research examining the impact of extended contact on intergroup relations (e.g., Cameron, Rutland, & Brown, 2007; Eller, Gomez, Vázquez, & Fernández, 2015). The extended contact hypothesis proposes that knowing an ingroup member who has a close relationship with an outgroup member can improve intergroup attitudes (Wright, Aron, McLaughlin-Volpe, & Ropp, 1997). Research showed that the positive effects of extended contact vary depending on the level of intimacy with ingroup members (e.g., Tausch, Hewstone, Schmid, Hughes, & Cairns, 2011) or the quality of direct contact (e.g., Cameron, Rutland, Hossain, & Petley, 2011). Importantly, however, the positive effects of extended contact are consistent across studies even without controlling for level of intimacy or quality of direct contact (e.g., Cameron, Rutland, & Brown, 2007). The extended contact hypothesis has some advantages over direct contact (Eller, Abrams, & Gomez, 2012; Wright et al., 1997). For example, it reduces prejudice in contexts where direct contact is not possible, and can be a less threatening (i.e., less anxious) experience than direct contact (Eller et al., 2012). The positive effects of extended contact have been strongly supported. Previous research showed that extended contact improved attitudes towards refugees (Cameron et al., 2007), predicted lower prejudice towards different status group countries (Eller et al., 2012) and also related to increased humanization of the outgroup (i.e., homosexuals) (Capozza, Falvo, Trifiletti, & Pagani, 2014).

Recent research explored the impact of heterosexuals' direct and extended friendships with lesbian and gay individuals on homophobic behaviors. Results revealed that both direct and extended friendships predicted less homophobic behaviors, and this positive effect was mediated by reduced intergroup anxiety and sexual prejudice (Mereish & Poteat, 2014). Thus, extended contact with sexual minorities appears to be related to less negative attitudes toward this group. Research also showed that indirect contact (i.e., the level of contact participants have with ethnic minority individuals) in an intergroup name-calling situation was positively related to assertive bystanders' behaviors, through increased empathy and cultural openness and decreased in-group bias (Abbott & Cameron, 2014).

Based on these findings, we propose extended contact to be associated with increased assertive interventions to help the victims of homophobic bullying. Extending previous research on this topic (Poteat & Vecho, 2015), we will explore the underlying mechanisms that account for the positive relation of extended contact with bystanders' assertive interventions of helping homophobic bullying victims.

### **Empathy and helping behaviors**

Research consistently shows that empathy is related to more helping and pro social behaviors and lower prejudice (Abbott & Cameron, 2014; Batson, Fultz, & Schoenrade, 1987; Nesdale, Griffith, Durkin, & Maass, 2005; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2008). Empathy is consensually defined as encompassing two distinct components: the affective component (i.e., the capacity to experience the others emotions; Bryant, 1982) and the cognitive component (i.e., to recognize and understand another person's emotions; Hogan, 1969). Both affective and cognitive empathy have been negatively associated with bullying behaviors, and positively related to helping behaviors (e.g., Gini, Albiero, Benelli, & Altoe, 2007; Jolliffe & Farrington, 2006). In fact, empathy has been identified as a mediator of the relationship between intergroup contact and assertive bystander intentions (Abbott & Cameron, 2014). Specifically, greater intergroup contact was related to higher levels of empathy, which in turn were associated with greater assertive bystander intentions.

Based on these findings, we propose that greater extended contact will be related to more empathy (cognitive and affective), which will then be associated with increased bystanders' assertive behavioral intentions of helping the victims of homophobic bullying. Having friends who have gay/lesbian friends should increase the capacity to experience the same emotions of victims of homophobic bullying, as well as increase the recognition of the victim's emotions.

### **Masculinity/Femininity threat and negative out-group attitudes**

Homophobia and sexual prejudice involve negative attitudes or behaviors towards sexual minorities and both have been related to traditional masculine and feminine beliefs (Poteat & Espelage, 2005). Likewise, students engage in homophobic behavior, to some extent, to prove their heterosexuality or to avoid gender nonconforming behaviors (Phoenix, Frosh, & Pattman, 2003; Poteat & Russell, 2013). Others suggest that expressing sexual prejudice is a way to prove cultural expectations about masculinity (Herek & McLemore, 2013). Consistent with this reasoning, research showed that heterosexual youth tends to prove their masculinity to avoid being bullied or being targeted as gay (Phoenix et al., 2003). Recent research further revealed that students whose peer groups have high traditional masculinity attitudes perpetrated more homophobic name-calling (Birkett & Espelage, 2015).

Overall, research suggest that masculinity threat is perceived "as the fear or concern that one's masculinity is questioned" (Reese, Steffens, & Jonas, 2014, p. 342). Experimental studies demonstrated that inducing masculinity threat increased participants' aggressive behavior towards gay men (e.g., Talley & Bettencourt, 2008). Other research showed that masculinity threat enhanced negative affect toward effeminate gay men (Glick, Gangl, Gibb, Klumpner, & Weinberg, 2007). Additionally, heterosexual men have more negative behaviors toward gay men than women, and usually behave in order to defend their masculinity (Glick et al., 2007). Still, to our knowledge, there are no studies that examine simultaneously sexual prejudice, homophobia and femininity threat. In this study, we will consider both masculinity and femininity threats in homophobic bullying episodes. Specifically, we will examine if extended contact is related to assertive behavioral intentions to help victims of homophobic bullying, by decreasing masculinity/femininity threat among heterosexual youth.

### **The Present Study**

This study extends previous research by illustrating the underlying mechanisms through which extended contact positively relates to bystanders' assertive interventions in homophobic bullying episodes. Specifically, this study explores if extended contact relates to bystanders' assertive behavior, and examines potential underlying mechanisms (empathy and masculinity/femininity threat). Given the positive effects of extended contact on intergroup relations (e.g., Cameron et al., 2007; Eller et al., 2015), we expect extended contact to be indirectly related to assertive behavioral intentions of bystanders, through increased affective and cognitive empathy (H1) and decreased threat to masculinity/femininity (H2).

## **METHOD**

### **Participants**

Participants were 115 Portuguese students (81 female and 34 male), aged between 12 and 18 ( $M=16.39$ ,  $SD=1.28$ ). The majority of participants were in 12<sup>th</sup> grade (47%), 25.2% was in 10<sup>th</sup> grade and the reference to lower grades was residual (2.6% in 7<sup>th</sup> grade, 0.9% in 8<sup>th</sup> grade and 1.7% in 9<sup>th</sup> grade). Most students identified as heterosexual (75.7%). As the out-group target in this study was homosexual/bisexual, data from participants identifying as homosexual, bisexual and the remainder (i.e.,

did not respond to the question or declared having doubts as to their sexual orientation) were omitted from the analyses, resulting in a final sample of 87 participants (68 female and 19 male).

### **Procedure**

The data were collected online<sup>2</sup>. Participants older than 16 years were recruited via email through students' associations and also by the Portuguese Institute of Sport and Youth (IPDJ). Participants younger than 16 received the online survey only after parental informed consents were obtained. It was stressed that there were no right or wrong answers and that participation was voluntary and anonymous. The survey took approximately 20 minutes to be completed. After completing the survey, participants were debriefed and thanked for their participation.

### **Measures**

Participants indicated, at the beginning of the survey, their age, gender, sexual orientation and level of education<sup>3</sup>.

#### ***Extended Contact***

We used Eller et al. (2012) extended contact measure. Participants first indicated if they had friends who had gay/lesbian friends (No; Yes). If participants answered "Yes", they were then asked to indicate how many friends their heterosexual friends had (0, 1–4, 5–10, 10 or more, scored as 1–4). The analyses were performed using a dummy-coded variable of the answers No and Yes (i.e., if participants had friends who had gay/lesbian friends). Most participants reported having heterosexual friends with gay/lesbian friends (87.4%) and 78.9% stated having between 1 and 4 heterosexual friends with gay/lesbian friends.

#### ***Basic Empathy Scale Adapted (BES Adapted)***

BES Adapted is a short 7-item version of the BES that assesses affective and cognitive empathy, translated and validated to Portuguese samples (Pechorro, Ray, Salas-Wright, Maroco, & Gonçalves, 2015). Participants indicated, on a 5-point scale (1=strongly disagree to 5= strongly agree), to what extent several sentences describe them (e.g., *'I often get swept up in my friend's feelings'*; *'I can usually work out when my friends are scared'*). Both affective empathy (3 items;  $\alpha = .79$ ) and cognitive empathy presented good reliability (4 items;  $\alpha = .71$ ). We created two composite scores, i.e., affective empathy and cognitive empathy, where higher values meant higher empathy.

#### ***Masculinity/Femininity Threat***

We adapted Reese et al. (2014) measure of masculinity/femininity threat. Participants were asked to what extent they agreed or disagreed with 3 statements on a 7-point scale (1= strongly disagree to 7= strongly agree). The items were *'I would feel my masculinity/femininity threatened if a gay boy/ lesbian girl flirted with me'*; *'If a gay boy/ lesbian girl made a move on me, I would feel disgusted'* and *'A boy/girl should defend himself/herself when a gay boy/ lesbian girl flirts with him/her'* ( $\alpha = .81$ ). We created a composite score of threat, where higher values indicate higher perceived threat.

#### ***Assertive behavioral intentions***

We adapted a previously used measure of bystander's behavioral intentions (Abbott & Cameron, 2014; Palmer & Cameron, 2010; Palmer, Rutland, & Cameron 2015). Participants read a vignette describing an episode of homophobic bullying (i.e., name-calling) and indicated their intention to engage in 10 bystander behaviors (*"I would tell a teacher or member of staff"*, *"I would tell person A not to say nasty things"*, *"I would try and make person B feel better"*, *"I would tell person B to ignore person A"*) on a 5-point scale (1 =never do; 5 =always do). This research focused on assertive bystander intentions only. The four items assessing assertive intentions presented a good reliability ( $\alpha = .80$ ). Higher scores indicated the endorsement of more assertive behaviors.

## **RESULTS**

The descriptive findings, means and zero order correlations, are shown in Table 1.

<sup>2</sup> Two participants used a paper and pencil version of the survey.

<sup>3</sup> The questionnaire also included other measures that were not relevant for this study.

**Table 1.** Means, standard deviations, and correlations between the variables.

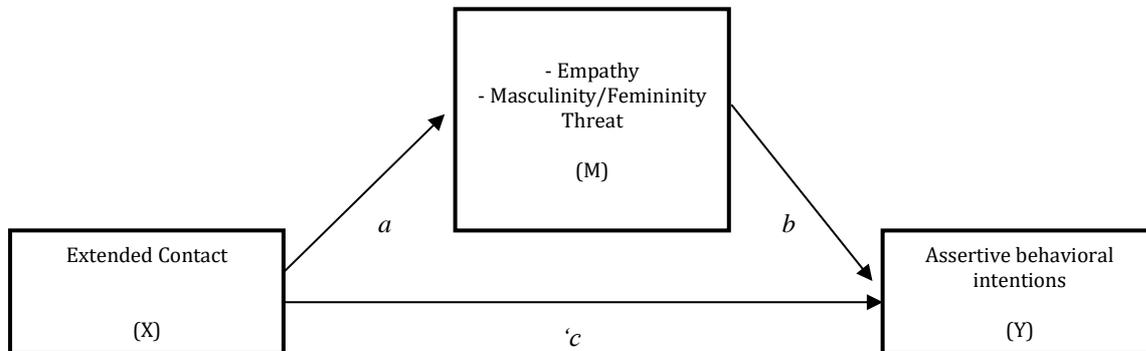
|                                    | M     | SD   | 1      | 2     | 3    | 4      | 5      | 6      | 7 |
|------------------------------------|-------|------|--------|-------|------|--------|--------|--------|---|
| 1. Extended Contact                | -     | -    | -      |       |      |        |        |        |   |
| 2. Affective Empathy               | 2.76  | 0.88 | .19    | -     |      |        |        |        |   |
| 3. Cognitive Empathy               | 4.00  | 0.59 | .14    | .15   | -    |        |        |        |   |
| 4. Masculinity/femininity Threat   | 2.68  | 1.67 | -.40** | -.17  | -.01 | -      |        |        |   |
| 5. Age                             | 16.39 | 1.28 | .33**  | -.04  | -.01 | -.35** | -      |        |   |
| 6. Gender <sup>a</sup>             | -     | -    | -.30** | -.18  | -.20 | .49**  | -.27** | -      |   |
| 7. Assertive behavioral intentions | 3.39  | 1.01 | .28**  | .36** | .22* | -.34** | -.11   | -.32** | - |

Note. \* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ .

<sup>a</sup>0= Female; 1= Male

We used a multiple mediator model to examine the indirect effect of extended contact on assertive bystander intentions, through increased empathy (affective and cognitive) and decreased masculinity or femininity threat (H1 & H2).

The expected mediation model was done with PROCESS bootstrapping macro (Hayes, 2013) for SPSS with 5,000 resamples and 95% bias-corrected standardized bootstrap CI. As depicted in Figure 1, extended contact was the predictor (dummy-coded, where higher values meant having extended contact), empathy (cognitive and affective) and masculinity/ femininity threat were the mediators, and assertive bystanders' intentions were the outcome<sup>4</sup>. The main results are shown in Table 2.



**Figure 1.** Hypothesized model

**Table 2.** Extended contact's indirect effect on assertive behavioral intentions.

| Predictor                          | M (Affective Empathy) |     |     | M (Cognitive Empathy) |     |     | M (Masculinity/ Femininity Threat) |     |     | Y (Assertive Bystanders) |      |     |
|------------------------------------|-----------------------|-----|-----|-----------------------|-----|-----|------------------------------------|-----|-----|--------------------------|------|-----|
|                                    | Coeff.                | SE  | p   | Coeff.                | SE  | p   | Coeff.                             | SE  | p   | Coeff.                   | SE   | p   |
| (X) Extended Contact               | .49                   | .30 | .11 | .19                   | .20 | .35 | -1.15*                             | .49 | .02 | .48                      | .32  | .13 |
| Constant                           | 3.28**                | .60 | .00 | 4.41**                | .40 | .00 | 3.00**                             | .97 | .00 | 3.46**                   | 1.00 | .00 |
| M (Affective Empathy)              | -                     | -   | -   |                       |     |     |                                    |     |     | .27*                     | .11  | .02 |
| M (Cognitive Empathy)              | -                     | -   | -   |                       |     |     |                                    |     |     | .21                      | .17  | .20 |
| M (Masculinity/ Femininity Threat) | -                     | -   | -   |                       |     |     |                                    |     |     | -.15*                    | .07  | .03 |

Note. \* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ .

The values are unstandardized regression coefficient (co-varying gender and age)

Results revealed that the direct relations of extended contact with affective empathy ( $b = 0.50, p = .11$ ), and cognitive empathy ( $b = 0.19, p = .35$ ) were not reliable. Additionally, only affective empathy, and not cognitive, was positively associated with assertive behavioral intentions ( $b = 0.27, p = .02$ ). However, supporting H1, the indirect effect of extended contact on assertive bystander intentions through affective empathy was significant,  $b = 0.13, 95\% \text{ CI } [0.01, 0.40]$ . Additionally, as hypothesized, extended contact was negatively related to masculinity/femininity threat ( $b = -1.15, p = .02$ ), such that higher extended contact related to lower masculinity/femininity threat. Masculinity/femininity threat was then negatively related to assertive bystander intentions,  $b = -0.15, p = .03$ , that is, the greater the masculinity/femininity threat, the less assertive behaviors to help the victims. Supportive of H2, the indirect effect of extended contact on assertive bystander intentions through masculinity/femininity

<sup>4</sup>Because age and gender were related to most of our variables of interest, they were included as covariates in the model.

threat was significant,  $b = 0.18$ , 95% CI [0.03, 0.48]. Thus, extended contact was indirectly and positively related to assertive behavioral intentions towards victims of homophobic bullying. Supporting our hypotheses, this positive effect occurred simultaneously through reduced masculinity/femininity threat and affective empathy.

## DISCUSSION

The current study examined whether extended contact (i.e., having friends who have gay friends) is related to assertive intentions to help the victims of homophobic bullying, specifically by increasing empathy and decreasing masculinity/femininity threat. There is relatively little research on the intergroup factors that improve assertive bystanders' behaviors in bullying episodes (e.g., Abbott & Cameron, 2014), and also on the mechanisms that underlie these positive effects. The current research extended previous research in several ways: a) by testing two new potential mediators, i.e., empathy and masculinity/femininity threat, and b) by exploring the effects of extended contact on a different form of bullying that is increasingly prevalent: homophobic bullying.

Overall, our findings showed that, for heterosexual adolescents, having friends who have gay friends improved bystanders' assertive behavioral intentions (i.e., intentions of helping victims of homophobic bullying). These results are consistent with previous findings revealing that greater intergroup contact is associated with greater assertive bystanders' interventions (Abbott & Cameron, 2014; Poteat & Vecho, 2015). Extending previous work on this topic, the current research illustrated the distinct mediating roles of empathy and masculinity/femininity threat. Our results revealed that the positive association of extended contact with bystanders' assertive behavioral intentions was mediated by increased empathy and decreased masculinity/femininity threat. This finding supports previous research showing that empathy is associated with more helping and pro social behaviors (e.g., Abbott & Cameron, 2014; Correia & Dalbert, 2008; Nesdale et al., 2005). However, only affective empathy, and not cognitive empathy, mediated the positive relation of contact with assertive behavioral intentions. This finding replicates previous research showing that affective empathy is a stronger predictor of defending behavior (e.g., Peets, Pöyhönen, Juvonen, & Salmivalli, 2015). Thus, it was the capacity to experience the same emotions as the victims that was related to more assertive bystanders' behaviors.

Extending previous research on bystanders' behaviors, this study also revealed that extended contact is associated with increased assertive behaviors, by decreasing masculinity/femininity threat among heterosexual adolescents. This result is consistent with previous findings showing that having LGBT friends is associated with engaging in more active bystander interventions in homophobic behavior episodes (Poteat & Vecho, 2015). Future research could explore these findings in other contexts (e.g., from the perspective of LGB students) and further examine these findings experimentally (e.g., manipulating extended contact).

## Limitations, implications and future research

The present study has limitations due to the correlational nature of our data, but overall, the findings are consistent with previous empirical work and provide important theoretical insights. The procedure used for data collection presented some limitations because we could not guarantee single participant response or even if the participants completed the survey without parenting or other adult supervision. In addition, given the sensitive nature of the topic under research (e.g., prejudice towards sexual minorities) and the explicit nature of our measures, we think future studies could control for potential effects of social desirability. This will give stronger support for the positive effects of extended contact on bystanders' assertive intentions. Importantly, the sample size was relatively small, and thus future studies could use larger and more representative samples of Portuguese youth. Future research could also test these findings experimentally, as well as exploring other underlying mechanisms that account for the effects of extended contact. Future studies could also explore the moderator role of direct contact, even though this variable was not associated with the results in the present study. Finally, we also recognize the potential imitations of the threat measure for the female sample, given that this measure is used mainly with male samples.

In terms of theoretical and practical implications, this work extends research on intergroup contact by replicating the findings that extended contact increases empathy, and also by showing, for the first time, the potential of extended contact to decrease masculinity/femininity threat. Overall, this research illustrated that extended contact can be used to promote more assertive bystanders in the school context (e.g., anti-bullying school interventions to promote assertive bystanders), and help creating an inclusive school environment that embraces and supports all youth.

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