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Fighting stigma-based bullying in primary school children: An experimental intervention using vicarious intergroup contact and social norms

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Abstract

In this theory-driven experimental field intervention, we used vicarious intergroup contact, a popular prejudice-reduction strategy, to fight stigma-based bullying. We focused on the role of peer norms, manipulated by asking participants to work individually or collectively in reinforcing activities following vicarious contact (operationalized as story reading). Participants were 346 Italian 4th-5th grade primary school children (48% females). Participants were allocated to a 2 (Target: outgroup vs. ingroup vicarious contact) × 2 (reinforcing activities: collective vs. individual) experimental design. Results revealed that outgroup (vs. ingroup) vicarious contact was indirectly associated with greater intentions to react to name-calling and socially exclusionary behavior (two common forms of bullying) toward foreign children, only when participants collectively negotiated responses to reinforcing activities.

KEYWORDS
children, prejudice, social norms, stigma-based bullying, vicarious contact

1 | INTRODUCTION

Stigma-based bullying represents a common and dangerous form of bullying. However, interventions specifically focused on it are relatively rare (Earnshaw et al., 2018). Recent research has taken into account the group-based nature of bullying, highlighting the role of factors such as peer support and social norms (Jones et al., 2012; Salmivalli & Voeten, 2004), yet, mainly focusing on interpersonal rather than stigma-based bullying. In doing so, it has not provided direct evidence for the role of a relevant group-based factor (i.e., social norms) in driving the effects of a stigma-based bullying reduction intervention among children.

To address these gaps, we conducted a vicarious contact experimental intervention, specifically designed to target social norms against race-based bullying as a type of stigma-based bullying. Specifically, we focused on peer norms, because peers represent the immediate social context where stigma-based bullying occurs in school. Drawing on the larger intergroup contact literature (Cameron & Turner, 2017), researchers read ad-hoc created stories to small groups of majority (Italian) primary school children; the stories depicted ethnic minority characters being bullied because of their different ethnicity, before being socially included. Social norms were manipulated by means of activities which were collectively (vs. individually) performed after reading the story. The dependent variables were intentions to react to two common forms of bullying, specifically, name-calling and exclusionary behavior. To the extent that the consequences of stigma-based bullying on well-being may be especially severe in childhood, we believe this study has important theoretical as well as practical implications (Gee et al., 2012).

1.1 | Developmental intergroup approach and social reasoning development perspective

The present study moves from the developmental intergroup approach developed by Palmer and Abbott (2018; see also Jones et al., 2017) in relation to stigma-based bullying. It posits that intergroup processes constitute an important part of children's development (Abrams & Killen, 2014; Abrams et al., 2017; Rutland & Killen, 2015; Rutland et al., 2010). In line with cognitive developmental theory, during middle to late childhood, children develop a set of cognitive abilities relevant to intergroup processes, shifting the focus from the self to the group (Aboud, 1988, 2008; Levy et al., 2016). In this period, cognitive abilities related to abstract reasoning in social categorization increase (Aboud & Spears Brown, 2013), and children develop perspective-taking and multiple classification skills (Aboud, 2003; Abrams et al., 2008). Importantly, they display increased reliance on group norms, which contribute to the formation of outgroup attitudes (Abrams & Rutland, 2008; Miklikowska, 2017; Nesdale et al., 2005; Rutland et al., 2005). Knowing that peers endorse social norms against bullying may make bystander children more likely to intervene in bullying episodes, since they do not have to fear negative repercussions from them.

The developmental intergroup approach presented above is consistent with the developmental intergroup perspective, which assigns a key role to group processes in the examination of children's prejudice (Rutland et al., 2010). Bridging social psychological theories of intergroup relations and social cognitive developmental theories, this perspective recognizes that group norms can motivate social reasoning and intergroup attitudes, to the extent that adherence to group norms is more relevant than group membership. For example, Mulvey et al. (2014) found that children and adolescents were more likely to include in their group an outgroup member who endorsed the group norm rather than an ingroup member who challenged the norm. Given that children believe that ingroup members disapprove challenges to group norms (McGuire et al., 2019), mainly because they are often seen as a threat to group identity, it is important to create positive shared group norms that individuals are unlikely to challenge.

1.2 | Stigma-based bullying

Stigma-based bullying refers to bullying of a person because of prejudice and discrimination toward the group s/he belongs to, for instance on the basis of ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, disability (NASEM, 2016). Majority, high-power groups are especially likely to engage in stigma-based bullying, which generally has more detrimental effects for the victims compared to interpersonal bullying (Killen et al., 2013; Russell et al., 2012).

Recent research has moved beyond considering bullying as an individual and interpersonal phenomenon, recognizing the role of the group and the larger social context (Jones et al., 2009; Meter & Card, 2015; Salmivalli, 2010). Research has highlighted in particular the role of social norms and peers, who are involved in the majority of bullying episodes (Atlas & Pepler, 1998), contributing to its perpetuation (Hong & Espelage, 2012). Although peer intervention can be effective (Frey et al., 2014), peers rarely intervene to stop bullying (Craig & Pepler, 1997). When group norms support (interpersonal) bullying, involvement in bullying is more likely (Duffy & Nesdale, 2009), while defending behavior is inhibited (Espelage et al., 2012). In contrast, anti-bullying norms are associated with increased defending behavior (Lucas-Molina et al., 2018; Salmivalli et al., 2011).

The role of group-level factors also emerges when considering stigma-based bullying (Jones et al., 2017). It was found that 7-9-year-old children's intentions to bully were lower when the ingroup had an outgroup-liking (vs. outgroup disliking) norm (Nesdale et al., 2008). In another study, when the ingroup norm was pro-bullying, 10-13-year-old children's perceptions that the ingroup member should be retained in the ingroup were higher when s/he bullied an outgroup member, and lower when s/he helped an outgroup member (Ojala & Nesdale, 2004). There is now consistent evidence that stigma-based bullying and associated phenomena, such as social exclusion, are stronger when the bully and bystanders share group membership (Nesdale et al., 2013; Palmer et al., 2015) and when they are supported by social norms (Brenick & Romano, 2016; Duffy & Nesdale, 2009; Gini, 2007; Jones et al., 2011). However, empirical evidence for the role of social norms in promoting bystanders' defending reactions in stigma-based bullying is lacking (for exceptions, see Gonultas & Mulvey, 2021; Palmer et al., 2015).

1.3 | Stigma-based bullying interventions

Stigma-based bullying is related to constructs such as bullying and prejudice and discrimination (Earnshaw et al., 2018; Palmer & Abbott, 2018). Interventions designed to target interpersonal bullying may be less effective in lowering *stigma-based* bullying (Evans et al., 2014). We argue that, since stigma-based bullying is driven by prejudice, interventions typically used to reduce prejudice may be adapted to target stigma-based bullying (Earnshaw et al., 2018).

Studies on interventions specifically addressing stigma-based bullying are relatively rare. Earnshaw et al. (2018) conducted a systematic review, identifying 21 stigma-based bullying interventions. Of these, only five targeted children aged 10 years or younger, and only two addressed bullying based on race/ethnicity. Furthermore, only three interventions (none of which was conducted with children aged 10 years or younger) used contact theory as the guiding framework.

According to the contact hypothesis, positive contact between groups can reduce prejudice (Hodson & Hewstone, 2013; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006; Tropp & Prenovost, 2008; Vezzali & Stathi, 2021). Direct, face-to-face contact is also effective in fostering bystanders' intentions to intervene in stigma-based bullying situations (Abbott & Cameron, 2014; Dessel et al., 2017; Palmer et al., 2017). Antonio, Guerra, and Moleiro (2017) provided preliminary evidence for the role of indirect (that is not face-to-face) intergroup contact. Using a sample of heterosexual adolescents, they found that extended contact (an indirect form of contact based on knowing that ingroup members have outgroup friends; Vezzali et al., 2014) was associated with increased intentions to help gay people in homophobic bullying situations.

In the present article, we rely on vicarious contact, an indirect contact form conceptually similar to extended contact, which posits that observing positive interactions between ingroup and outgroup members ameliorates

intergroup attitudes (Vezzali et al., 2014; White et al., 2021; Wright et al., 1997). Vicarious contact, generally implemented by means of story reading in educational contexts, has been successfully implemented to reduce prejudice. Cameron and colleagues conducted a series of studies based on reading stories of positive contact between ingroup and outgroup characters (Cameron & Rutland, 2006; Cameron et al., 2007; Cameron et al., 2006). Researchers methodically prepared these stories, read and discussed them with small groups of children. Results from these and other studies conducted in different cultural contexts showed the effectiveness of story reading for prejudice-reduction toward different target outgroups (Aronson et al., 2016; Cocco et al., 2021; Greenwood et al., 2016; Husnu et al., 2018; Liebkind et al., 2014; Liebkind et al., 2019; Mäkinen et al., 2019; McKeown et al., 2017).

Social norms are key underlying processes of vicarious contact (White et al., 2020). The effects of vicarious contact among children are mediated by favorable ingroup norms toward the outgroup (Cameron et al., 2011; Cocco et al., 2021). Given the key role of social norms in guiding behavior (Jetten et al., 1996), as well as their importance in explaining the effects of vicarious contact (White et al., 2020), and the group-based nature of stigma-based bullying (Jones et al., 2017), we focused on group norms as the mediating process.

1.4 | The present research

The aim of the present study is to test the effectiveness of a vicarious contact intervention and of social norms in fostering child bystanders' intentions to counteract race-based bullying (i.e., a specific form of stigma-based bullying). Assertive bystander behavior may be particularly effective for tackling intergroup name-calling, as peer bystanders have been found to be present in as many as 85% of bullying incidents (Atlas & Pepler, 1998; Craig & Pepler, 1995). Assertive bystanders can help establish new social norms and intergroup attitudes of tolerance and acceptance (Aboud & Joong, 2008). Participants were Italian 4th and 5th grade primary school children; the outgroup was represented by children of a foreign background.

We decided to focus our analysis on the relationship between Italian children and children of a foreign background in light of the high and growing percentage of individuals with foreign origins in Lombardia (11.5%) and Emilia-Romagna (12%), where the intervention was administered, in comparison with the percentage of foreigners in Italy (8.5%). Such percentages are reflected in the percentage of primary school children of a foreign background (16.9% and 17.04% in Lombardia and Emilia-Romagna, respectively), compared with the Italian situation (11.4%; Italian National Institute of Statistics, 2021).

In line with literature on vicarious contact based on story reading (see Vezzali & Stathi, 2021, Chapter 3), we created an ad-hoc story, in which a child is bullied because of his/her origin, but then is helped and supported by peers, leading to the social inclusion of the child and reconciliation with the bully. A researcher read the story to small groups of children. In the outgroup vicarious contact condition, the victim was a child of different ethnicity. To provide a stringent test for our hypotheses, in the ingroup vicarious contact condition children engaged in an identical intervention as those in the outgroup vicarious contact condition. In this case, however, all characters belonged to the ingroup. Therefore, children in the ingroup vicarious contact condition also took part in a bullying intervention. Finding an effect of outgroup vicarious contact against this control condition (i.e., ingroup vicarious contact condition) would demonstrate the specificity of stigma-based (compared to interpersonal) bullying, as well as the need of conducting interventions specifically focused on stigma-based bullying.

To manipulate social norms, we relied on reinforcing activities, administered immediately after story reading. In the collective reinforcing activities condition, for each reinforcing activity, participants were asked to negotiate a response and provide it collectively. In this way, they were given the chance to create a shared social norm against bullying together with their peers. We also included a control condition where reinforcing activities were conducted individually.

For our dependent variables, we focused on responses to two common forms of bullying that can cause damage to children's well-being, namely name-calling and social exclusion (Aboud & Joong, 2008; Abrams et al., 2007).

Because literacy skills are one of the best predictors of narrative listening comprehension (Kendeou et al., 2009), we administered a test of vocabulary knowledge, indicative of good literacy skills, before the intervention. Including children with low literacy skills may obscure the results.

The hypothesis is that peer norms, name-calling and exclusionary behavior will be greater in the condition of outgroup (vs. ingroup) vicarious contact, when children perform reinforcing activities collectively (vs. individually); the effects of the condition (and specifically, of the interaction between the two conditions) on the two dependent variables (name-calling and exclusionary behavior) should be mediated by peer norms. In other words, we expect that outgroup (vs. ingroup) vicarious contact will be effective only when participants perform reinforcing activities collectively, and not when they perform them individually.

2 | METHOD

2.1 | Participants

Participants were 369 Italian children (48% females) from eight 4th and fifteen 5th grade classes from four Italian primary schools. The final sample, obtained after excluding participants with low literacy skills (see section of Results), was comprised of 346 children (48% females). [1] Informed consent was obtained by parents, and children expressed their assent to the study.

Participants within each class were randomly allocated to one of the four cells of a 2 (Target: outgroup vicarious contact vs. ingroup vicarious contact) × 2 (Reinforcing activities: collective vs. individual) experimental design.

Based on effect sizes (f^2 = .06 emerged in indirect contact literature; see meta-analysis by Zhou et al., 2019), a power analysis (α = .05, power = .80) suggested a sample of 202 participants for detecting a small to medium effect in regression models with four predictors. This value increases to 400 participants when considering an effect size equal to .03, obtained after controlling for direct contact (Zhou et al., 2019). With the goal of recruiting a sufficient sample between 200 and 400 participants, schools were invited to participate to the intervention. The final sample size was a function of school availability and school requests to take part in the intervention.

2.2 | Procedure

All researchers who conducted the study were university students trained by the second and last authors of this article. Participants in each experimental group and class were divided into same-gender groups of three to four children. In each group, the researcher read the story to children. In the story, the protagonist, a child of the same age as the participants, is bullied by a popular classmate by means of name-calling, causing social exclusion of the protagonist by the other children. After working together for a school project, the protagonist befriends the bully's best friend, who asks to play together. After this event the bully's best friend understands that s/he was wrong to comply with the bully: after apologizing to the protagonist, they become good friends, and the protagonist is eventually fully socially included by the other children.

In order to manipulate the type of intervention, the story was developed in two ways: in the outgroup vicarious contact condition, the protagonist has a different ethnicity, as s/he comes from another country; in the ingroup vicari-

[1] The intervention also included 122 children with foreign origins (that is, with foreign parents, although they may have been born in Italy or have the Italian citizenship), identified on the basis of school teachers' indications. These children read the stories, completed the activities and the questionnaire in separate groups within the same class as the other participants.

ous contact condition, all characters have the same ethnicity (therefore, also the victim is of the same ethnicity as the bully and the other characters). To avoid gender bias and facilitate identification with the character, all story characters match the gender of participants (as described above, the small groups were homogeneous in terms of gender). Therefore, participants in all conditions were read a story (which had an outgroup or an ingroup focus, depending on the condition).

After reading the story, while participants were still in small groups, they were asked to take part in some reinforcing activities. These aimed at highlighting the just and unjust behaviors they observed in the story, at identifying appropriate behaviors, and at recognizing the emotions experienced by the characters. In other words, these activities aimed at creating an anti-bullying norm. We conducted three reinforcing activities. In the first, participants were asked to draw the different characters in one of two circles, one associated to fair and one to unfair behaviors. In the second, participants were provided with three rules (don't offend other children; help out children who need it; invite all children to play and to birthday parties) and were asked to first discuss and then order them according to their importance. In the third, participants were asked to draw the characters provided in a sheet on the basis of how they thought they had felt (e.g., yellow had to be used to indicate happiness, red to indicate anger, etc.).

In the collective reinforcing activities condition, for each activity participants needed to negotiate a collective response with the other children in their small group. In the condition where reinforcing activities were conducted individually, while still in their small group, children were administered the reinforcing activities individually, without conversing with other children.

At the end of the session, which lasted approximately 1 hr, children were administered the questionnaire. To reduce the risk of demand characteristics, researchers who administered the questionnaire were different from researchers delivering the intervention.

All materials used (stories and reinforcing activities) are provided in the online supplementary material.

2.3 | Measures

2.3.1 | Comprehension test

Before starting the session, children individually answered a brief written questionnnaire including 10 items (selected in agreement with school teachers), asking for the meaning of potentially complex words included in the stories. This preliminary questionnaire was aimed at verifying language and comprehension skills. Each item had four possible answers, with only one being the correct answer. We summed answers for each child (attributing 1 to correct and 0 to wrong answers), with potential scores ranging from 0 (*no correct answers*) to 10 (*all correct answers*). The actual score ranged from 3 to 10 ($M = 8.78$, $SD = 1.29$).

2.3.2 | Peer norms

Participants were asked to think about a foreign child who is socially excluded or offended only because of his/her foreign origins. They then answered the following three items: "According to your friends, is it fair to mistreat foreign children?"; "In your view, would your friends say it is fair to exclude a foreign child only because s/he is a foreigner?"; "In your view, would your friends say it is fair to offend a foreign child only because s/he is a foreigner?" The response scale ranged from 1 (*absolutely not*) to 5 (*absolutely yes*). Responses were reverse coded, so that higher scores represent stronger norms against bullying. Scores were averaged to create a reliable composite score (alpha = .74).

2.3.3 | Reactions to bullying

Children were presented with scenarios of name-calling behavior and of exclusionary behavior toward a foreign child (adapted from Abbott & Cameron, 2014; Vezzali et al., 2020). For name-calling behavior, the scenario read: "Imagine that the school day is ending and, while you're walking down the corridor, you hear an Italian child saying bad words to a foreign child only because s/he is foreign." The scenario for exclusionary behavior read as follows: "Imagine that it is sunday and you are at the park. You're playing with your friends, but then a foreign child that you don't know comes closer and asks to play with you. But one of your friends tells him to go away because s/he is foreign." Participants were then invited to answer items investigating their reaction intentions. For reactions to name calling, six items were included: "I'd say to the Italian child not to say bad things to the foreign child"; "I'd try to comfort the foreign child"; "I'd tell the foreign child to ignore the things said by the other child"; "I would get angry with the Italian child for the way s/he behaved toward the foreign child", "I'd report it to the teacher"; "I'd report it to my parents." The measure was reliable (alpha = .69); a composite score of reactions to name calling was created, with greater scores indicating stronger intentions to react. For reactions to exclusionary behavior the measure consisted of four items: "I'd play with the foreign child"; "I'd try to comfort the foreign child"; "I'd tell the foreign child to ignore my friends"; "I'd tell my friends to play all together with the foreign child." Answers were provided on a scale from 1 (*absolutely not*) to 5 (*absolutely yes*). Reliability as measured by Cronbach's alpha was .69. We created a composite score of reactions to exclusionary behavior: higher scores reflect greater reaction intentions. [2]

3 | RESULTS

After consultation with school teachers, we decided to include in the data analysis only participants who scored at least 7 in the comprehension test ($n = 346$). This choice allowed us to include children who had a rather good level of literacy skills, increasing confidence that eventual effects are due to experimental manipulation rather than individual differences in the comprehension of the story (however, we also conducted additional analyses with different cut-off criteria, summarized in Footnote 3).

Means and standard deviations of the measures in the four cells of the experimental design are presented in Table 1; correlations between measures are reported in Table 2.

The data structure included three levels: children, nested in groups (the small groups within which they read the stories and performed the reinforcing activities), nested in classes. We conducted a preliminary three-level analysis, calculating whether there was significant variance of the dependent variables at the group- and class-level. For both outcome variables, class-level variance was nonsignificant (for reactions to name calling ICC = .05, $\sigma 2 = .02$, $SE = .01$, $p = .131$; for reactions to exclusionary behavior ICC = .04, $\sigma 2 = .01$, $SE = .02$, $p = .580$), therefore further analyses did not control for classes. In the two-level analysis, group-level variance was significant both for reactions to name-calling (ICC = .15, $\sigma 2 = .05$, $SE = .02$, $p = .022$) and exclusionary behavior (ICC = .27, $\sigma 2 = .10$, $SE = .04$, $p = .006$). Therefore, we ran regression analyses by controlling for group-level variance using the Complex command in Mplus.

To test the hypotheses, we ran two moderated mediation regression models, where intervention (+1 = outgroup vicarious contact, −1 = ingroup vicarious contact) was the independent variable, reinforcing activities (+1 = collective, −1 = individual) was the moderator, peer norms was the mediator, and reactions to name-calling and reactions to social exclusion were the dependent variables (see Table 3). First, considering the two forms of reactions to bullying as dependent variables and before introducing peer norms as a mediator, no main or interaction effect emerged. Next,

[2] The questionnaire included other exploratory measures: strange stories (a measure commonly used to evaluate the theory of mind in the developmental age; Happé, 1994), dispositional empathy (administered before the manipulation); inclusion of the other in the self, one-group representation, attribution of primary and secondary emotions to ingroup and outgroup targets, intergroup attitudes, emotions experienced and attributed to the outgroup in response to a bullying situation, perceptions of injustice. The choice to include these exploratory measures is because they have been shown to be relevant to attitude development and change, also when considering vicarious contact literature. In this study, we decided to focus our main analyses on the mediator directly

TABLE 1 Means, (standard deviations), [Cohen's ds], and *n* by experimental condition ($N = 346$)

	Outgroup vicarious contact		Ingroup vicarious contact	
	Collective reinforcing activities $n = 84$ (67% 5th grade)	Individual reinforcing activities $n = 87$ (63% 5th grade)	Collective reinforcing activities $n = 92$ (66% 5th grade)	Individual reinforcing activities $n = 83$ (53% 5th grade)
Peer norms	4.42 (.57) [2.49]	4.26 (.74) [1.70]	4.20 (.76) [1.58]	4.33 (.64) [2.08]
Reactions to name calling	4.07 (.60) [1.78]	4.14 (.57) [2.00]	4.21 (.47) [2.57]	4.17 (.64) [1.83]
Reactions to exclusion	4.14 (.64) [1.78]	4.23 (.72) [1.71]	4.31(.51) [2.57]	4.30 (.59) [2.20]

Note. All mean scores are significantly above the mid-point of the scale (3), $ts > 15.16$, $ps < .001$. In brackets, Cohen's ds for one sample *t* tests.

TABLE 2 Correlations between variables ($N = 346$)

	1	2
1. Peer norms	–	
2. Reactions to name calling	.17**	–
3. Reactions to exclusion	.26***	.59***

**$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$.

TABLE 3 Regression analysis predicting peer norms and reactions to bullying ($N = 346$)

	Peer norms	Reactions to name calling	Reactions to name calling	Reactions to exclusion	Reactions to exclusion
Intercept	4.30*** (.04)	4.15*** (.04)	3.50*** (.22)	4.25*** (.04)	3.16*** (.23)
Intervention	.04 (.04)	−.04 (.04)	−.05 (.03)	−.06 (.04)	−.07 (.04)
Reinforcing activities	.01 (.04)	−.01 (.04)	−.01 (.04)	−.02 (.04)	−.02 (.04)
Intervention × Reinforcing activities	.07† (.04)	−.03 (.04)	−.04 (.04)	−.03 (.04)	−.03 (.04)
Peer norms	–	–	.15** (.05)	–	.25*** (.05)

Note. The nested structure of the data was controlled for by using the Complex command in Mplus. Unstandardized regression coefficients are presented (standard errors within parentheses). Intervention: +1 = outgroup vicarious contact, −1 = ingroup vicarious contact. Reinforcing activities: +1 = collective, −1 = individual.†$p = .063$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$.

using peer norms as the dependent variable, we found an interaction between the two manipulated factors that did not reach conventional levels of significance (there was, however, a tendency toward significance, $p = .063$). Based on our theoretically-driven hypotheses, we decomposed the interaction. Results showed that peer norms were higher in the outgroup (vs. ingroup) vicarious contact condition for children in the condition where reinforcing activities were performed collectively ($b = .11$, $SE = .05$, $p = .039$), but not in the condition where they were performed individually ($b = -.03$, $SE = .06$, $p = .559$) (see Figure 1). Therefore, the intervention was effective in fostering perceptions of peer

related to our experimental manipulation (peer norms) and on the measures reflecting our aims of fighting group-based bullying (intentions to react to name-calling and exclusionary behavior).

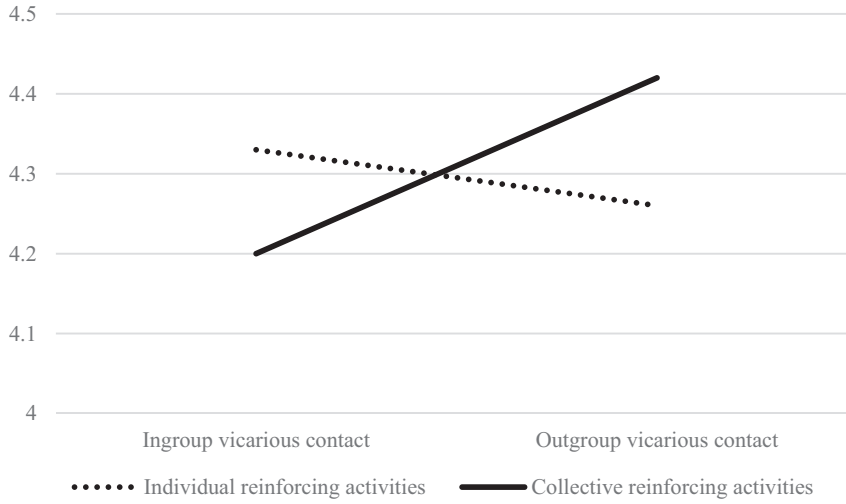

FIGURE 1 Peer norms as a function of the experimental manipulations

norms against bullying toward outgroup members only when the bullied character in the story belonged to the outgroup, and children negotiated the response to reinforcing activities, therefore creating an anti-bullying norm.

Finally, when peer norms were included amongst the predictors, they were positively associated with both reactions to name-calling and reactions to exclusionary behavior (Table 3). Analysis of indirect effects revealed that, in line with our hypothesis, outgroup (vs. ingroup) vicarious contact was indirectly associated with greater reactions to bullying via peer norms in the collective reinforcing activities condition (for reactions to name-calling behavior, $b = .02$, $SE = .01$, $p = .074$, marginal effect; for reactions to exclusionary behavior, $b = .03$, $SE = .01$, $p = .043$). Indirect effects were instead nonsignificant in the individual reinforcing activities condition (for reactions to name-calling behavior, $b = .01$, $SE = .01$, $p = .325$; for reactions to exclusionary behavior, $b = .01$, $SE = .01$, $p = .315$). [3]

4 | DISCUSSION

As noted by Earnshaw et al. (2018), bullying interventions typically do not address stigma and specifically stigma-based bullying; on the other hand, prejudice-reduction interventions typically fail to address their impact on bullying. Palmer and Abbott (2018) argued that interventions tackling stigma-based bullying can benefit from approaches aimed at promoting more positive outgroup attitudes and inclusive social norms, drawing on research on intergroup relations. This is precisely what we did in this research. We used vicarious contact via story reading as a popular prejudice-reduction strategy, adapting it to address stigma-based bullying. Given the role of social norms in determining whether individuals endorse or reject bullying, we combined vicarious contact with a procedure allowing children to create and share norms against bullying.

The predicted interaction between the two manipulated variables did not reach conventional levels of significance (although it was marginal for social norms). Because of our hypothesis-driven research, we decided to look at the simple slopes for norms and the indirect effects on reactions to bullying via peer norms; these effects were in line with predictions. Note, however, that nonsignificance of the interaction terms denotes the weakness of findings and the need to replicate them. Consistent with our prediction, peer norms in the intergroup vicarious contact condition were

[3] We re-ran regression analyses by including gender and grade (fourth vs. fifth) as control variables, and results did not change. Further additional analyses with different cut-off criteria on the comprehension test (minimum score of 5, $n = 366$; minimum score of 6, $n = 358$; minimum score of 8, $n = 316$) confirmed the indirect effects only in the condition where reinforcing activities were performed collectively, but not when they were performed individually.

higher when participants worked collectively on reinforcing activities. In turn, peer ingroup norms were positively associated with two common forms of bullying, that is intention to intervene against name-calling and exclusionary behavior toward foreign peers. We note that we did not obtain a direct effect on our two dependent variables. We argue this does not diminish the importance of findings. In fact, our reasoning was based on peer norms creation and sharing as the main driver of anti-bullying reaction intentions.

It is worth noting that participants in the ingroup vicarious contact condition were also exposed to an anti-bullying intervention, where no intergroup differences were presented. We therefore used an especially demanding experimental design, with findings showing the specificity of the phenomenon of stigma-based bullying and the need to conduct interventions tailored to address it (Earnshaw et al., 2018). In other words, interventions targeting bullying in general may not lead to change in stigma-based bullying episodes.

The story presented to children in all conditions implied peer norms against bullying, because the victimized protagonist was helped by other characters that stood against the bully. Nonetheless, the effectiveness of our intervention was limited to those negotiating norms with peers after reading the story. As stated by Jones et al. (2017), despite children are aware of group norms, they follow them only when these are especially salient. We reasoned that directly negotiating them with peers represents an especially powerful way to make them salient and enhances the perception that they are socially shared. However, we suggest caution in interpreting our findings: the effect of peer norms may interact with norms from other sources, such as school norms, in determining responses to bullying (McGuire et al., 2015; Nesdale & Dalton, 2011). There might also be other factors that need to be taken into account. According to the social reasoning developmental approach (Rutland et al., 2010), peer evaluation and prejudice dynamics are a function of a range of factors, including group processes, morality considerations, personal autonomy (see also Killen et al., 2017). This approach can allow an understanding of whether and when group norms or morality become especially relevant, taking into account the level of children's cognitive development. It is thus important to consider the larger context, as well as the influence of other group-level as well as individual-level and morality factors that can interact with peer norms (Earnshaw et al., 2018). Future research may investigate how individual-level (e.g., self-efficacy, interpersonal empathy) and intergroup-level factors (e.g., group norms, ingroup identification) and morality considerations interact with social norms in determining appraisals of and responses to stigma-based bullying (c.f. Palmer & Abbott, 2018).

We note that our manipulation of norms departs from manipulations in the broader literature, often based on explicitly providing participants with information on social norms rather that asking them to negotiate them together (e.g., Duffy & Nesdale, 2010; Killen et al., 2013). Our choice was based on the dual focus of our study, which was at the same time an intervention realized in collaboration with schools and an experiment; we aimed to make the school intervention effective and the effects potentially longer lasting. Therefore, rather than "manipulating" the social norm by providing it externally, we aimed to allow children to "create" their social norm "internally." Therefore, we did not explicitly provide the norm, but we asked participants to negotiate it on the basis of the story we provided. We reasoned that negotiating it directly with peers would increase the realism of norms as well as the likelihood of internalizing them. This approach is in line with cognitive dissonance theory (Festinger, 1957): negotiating and expressing the norm should lead to acting on it. Adding to this, we asked children to negotiate it with a meaningful ingroup, that of classmates with whom they spend most of the day: ingroup rather than outgroup norms should be especially relevant to attitude formation and change (Jetten et al., 1996; Turner et al., 1987).

We argue that, although the anti-bullying norm was not directly provided, participants created it themselves, with scores above the mid-point of the scale in the four cells. In addition, as predicted, there were indirect effects of outgroup (vs. ingroup) vicarious contact via peer norms when activities were performed collectively, adding confidence in our manipulation. It should be noted that this manipulation may have produced additional effects, such as ingroup commitment (which we did not measure, but would be in line with our rationale of providing a social norm for a meaningful social identity). The manipulation could have also raised socially desirable responses, however, the results obtained with the completion of questionnaires administered individually help rule out this possibility.

Drawing on social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), self-categorization theory (Turner et al., 1987), and the social developmental intergroup approach (Palmer & Abbott, 2018; Rutland et al., 2010), we argue that future interventions taking into account the group-based nature of stigma-based bullying might capitalize on prototypical group members as agents for the creation of social norms against bullying (Paluck & Shepherd, 2012).

We believe the present study has several strengths, including adapting a commonly-used prejudice-reduction intervention for use in stigma-based bullying, empirically manipulating and evaluating peer norms as a group factor implicated in the success of the intervention, considering (in stigma-based bullying research) a rather neglected theoretical approach (intergroup contact), the population (primary school children), and the target outgroup (ethnicity-based; Earnshaw et al., 2018). We also acknowledge some limitations. First, participants only belonged to the majority group. Although children of foreign background also took part to the intervention (see Footnote 1), this was not tailored to their group (that is, stories used were the same as for Italians; this was done because observing native children fighting ethnic-based bullying in the stories might have favored their perceptions of social inclusion), and their responses were not considered. Future studies should design interventions considering both majority and minority groups' perspectives and examine eventual differences in their reactions. Second, the intervention consisted of a single session. Although this may paradoxically be interpreted as a strength, as we demonstrated effectiveness despite the low duration of the intervention, future studies should employ multiple sessions and evaluate the persistence of peer norms to produce long-lasting effects. In addition, the assessment occurred immediately after the intervention, therefore we do not know how long the effects could last (although according to the literature, the effects of vicarious and similar indirect contact forms such as extended contact can last at least some months; Vezzali et al., 2015).

In conclusion, we showed that stigma-based bullying can be fought with ad-hoc interventions adapted from strategies typically used to reduce prejudice, and that social norms play a key role in shaping bystanders' reactions to bullying.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

ETHICS STATEMENT

The study presented received ethical approval from the University of Verona.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data can be freely shared upon request to the first author of this article.

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