



Intergroup Contact Theory: Past, Present, and Future

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In the midst of racial segregation in the U.S.A and the 'Jim Crow Laws', Gordon Allport (1954) proposed one of the most important social psychological events of the 20th century, suggesting that contact between members of different groups (under certain conditions) can work to reduce *prejudice* and *intergroup conflict*. Indeed, the idea that contact between members of different groups can help to reduce *prejudice* and improve social relations is one that is enshrined in policy-making all over the globe. UNESCO, for example, asserts that contact between members of different groups is key to improving social relations. Furthermore, explicit policy-driven moves for greater contact have played an important role in improving social relations between races in the U.S.A, in improving relationships between Protestants and Catholics in Northern Ireland, and encouraging a more inclusive society in post-Apartheid South Africa. In the present world, it is this *recognition* of the benefits of contact that drives modern school exchanges and cross-group buddy schemes. In the years since Allport's initial *intergroup contact hypothesis*, much research has been devoted to expanding and exploring his *contact hypothesis*. In this article I will review some of the vast literature on the role of contact in reducing *prejudice*, looking at its success, mediating factors, recent theoretical extensions of the hypothesis and directions for future research. Contact is of utmost importance in reducing *prejudice* and promoting a more tolerant and integrated society and as such is a prime example of the real life applications that psychology can offer the world.

The Contact Hypothesis

The *intergroup contact hypothesis* was first proposed by Allport (1954), who suggested that positive effects of intergroup contact occur in contact situations characterized by four key conditions: equal status, intergroup cooperation, common goals, and support by social and institutional authorities (See Table 1). According to Allport, it is essential that the contact situation exhibits these factors to some degree. Indeed, these factors do appear to be important in reducing *prejudice*, as exemplified by the unique importance of cross-group friendships in reducing *prejudice* (Pettigrew, 1998). Most friends have equal status, work together to achieve shared goals, and friendship is usually absent from

strict societal and institutional limitation that can particularly limit romantic relationships (e.g. laws against intermarriage) and working relationships (e.g. segregation laws, or differential statuses).

Since Allport first formulated his *contact hypothesis*, much work has confirmed the importance of contact in reducing *prejudice*. Crucially, positive contact experiences have been shown to reduce self-reported *prejudice* (the most common way of assessing intergroup attitudes) towards Black neighbors, the elderly, gay men, and the disabled - to name just a few (Works, 1961; Caspi, 1984; Vonofako, Hewstone, & Voci, 2007; Yucker & Hurley, 1987). Most interestingly, though, in a wide-scale *meta-analysis* (i.e., a statistical analysis of a number of published studies), it has been found that while contact under Allport's conditions is especially effective at reducing *prejudice*, even unstructured contact reduces *prejudice* (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). What this means is that Allport's proposed conditions should be best be seen as of a facilitating, rather than an essential, nature. This is important as it serves to show the importance of the *contact hypothesis*: even in situations which are not marked by Allport's optimal conditions, levels of contact and *prejudice* have a negative correlation with an effect size comparable to those of the inverse relationship between condom use and sexually transmitted HIV and the relationship between passive smoking and the incidence of lung cancer at work (Al-Ramiah & Hewstone, 2011). Contact between groups, even in sub-optimal conditions, is strongly associated with reduced *prejudice*.

Condition	Meaning	Example	Evidence
Equal Status	Members of the contact situation should not have an unequal, hierarchical relationship.	Members should not have an employer/employee, or instructor/student relationship.	Evidence has documented that equal status is important both <i>prior</i> to (Brewer & Kramer, 1985) and <i>during</i> (Cohen & Lotan, 1995) the contact situation.
Cooperation	Members should work together in a non-competitive environment.	Students working together in a group project.	Aronson's 'jigsaw technique' structures classrooms so that students strive cooperatively (Aronson & Patnoe, 1967), and this technique has led to positive results in a variety of countries
Common Goals	Members must rely on each other to achieve their shared desired goal.	Members of a sports team.	hu and Griffey (1985) have shown the importance of common goals in interracial athletic teams who need to work together to achieve their goal.
Support by Social and Institutional Authorities	There should not be social or institutional authorities that explicitly or implicitly sanction contact, and there should be authorities that support positive contact.	There should not be official laws enforcing segregation.	Landis' (1984) work on the importance of institutional support in reducing prejudice in the military.

Importantly, contact does not just influence explicit self-report measures of *prejudice*, but also reduces *prejudice* as measured in a number of different ways. Explicit measures (e.g. 'How much do you like gay men?') are limited in that there can be a self-report bias: people often answer in a way that shows them in a good light. As such, research has examined the effects of contact on implicit measures: measures that involve

investigating core psychological constructs in ways that bypass people's willingness and ability to report their feelings and beliefs. Implicit measures have been shown to be a good complement to traditional explicit measures - particularly when there may be a strong chance of a self-report bias. In computer reaction time tasks, contact has been shown to reduce implicit associations between the participant's own *in-group* and the concept 'good', and between an outgroup (a group the participant is not a member of) and the concept 'bad' (Aberson and Haag, 2007). Furthermore, positive contact is associated with reduced physiological threat responses to outgroup members (Blascovich et al., 2001), and reduced differences in the way that faces are processed in the brain, implying that contact helps to increase perceptions of similarity (Walker et al., 2008). Contact, then, has a real and tangible effect on reducing *prejudice* – both at the explicit and implicit level. Indeed, the role of contact in reducing *prejudice* is now so well documented that it justifies being referred to as intergroup contact theory (Hewstone & Swart, 2011).

Multiple mechanisms have been proposed to explain just how contact reduces *prejudice*. In particular, "four processes of change" have been proposed: learning about the *out-group*, changing behavior, generating affective ties, and *in-group* reappraisal (Pettigrew, 1998). Contact can, and does, work through both cognitive (i.e. learning about the *out-group*, or reappraising how one thinks about one's own *in-group*), behavioural (changing one's behavior to open oneself to potential positive contact experiences), and affective (generating affective ties and friendships, and reducing negative emotions) means. A particularly important mediating mechanism (i.e. the mechanisms or processes by which contact achieves its effect) is that of emotions, or affect, with evidence suggesting that contact works to reduce *prejudice* by diminishing negative affect (anxiety / threat) and inducing positive affect such as *empathy* (Tausch and Hewstone, 2010). In another *meta-analysis*, Pettigrew and Tropp (2008) supported this by looking specifically at mediating mechanisms in contact and found that contact situations which promote positive affect and reduce negative affect are most likely to succeed in conflict reduction. Contact situations are likely to be effective at improving intergroup relations insofar as they induce positive affect, and ineffective insofar as they induce negative affect such as anxiety or threat. If we feel comfortable and not anxious, the contact situation will be much more successful.

Generalizing the effect

An important issue that I have not yet addressed, however, is how these positive experiences after contact can be extended and generalized to other members of the outgroup. While contact may reduce an individual's *prejudice* towards (for example) their Muslim colleague, its practical use is strongly limited if it doesn't also diminish *prejudice* towards other Muslims. Contact with each and every member of an outgroup – let alone of all out-groups to which *prejudice* is directed – is clearly unfeasible and so a crucial question in intergroup contact research is how the positive effect can be generalized.

A number of approaches have been developed to explain how the positive effect of contact, including making group saliency low so that people focus on individual characteristics and not group-level attributes (Brewer & Miller, 1984), making group

saliency high so that the effect is best generalized to others (Johnston & Hewstone, 1992), and making an overarching common *ingroup* identity salient (Gaertner, Dovidio, Anastasio, Bachman, & Rust, 1993). Each of these approaches have both advantages and disadvantages, and in particular each individual approach may be most effective at different stages of an extended contact situation. To deal with this issue Pettigrew (1998) proposed a three stage model to take place over time to optimize successful contact and generalization. First is the decategorization stage (as in Brewer & Miller, 1984), where participants' personal (and not group) identities should be emphasized to reduce anxiety and promote interpersonal liking. Secondly, the individuals' social categories should be made salient to achieve generalization of positive affect to the outgroup as a whole (as in Johnston & Hewstone, 1992). Finally, there is the recategorization stage, where participants' group identities are replaced with a more superordinate group: changing group identities from 'Us vs. Them' to a more inclusive 'We' (as in Gaertner et al., 1993). This stage model could provide an effective method of generalizing the positive effects of intergroup contact.

Theoretical Extensions

Even with such work on generalization, however, it may still be unrealistic to expect that group members will have sufficient opportunities to engage in positive contact with outgroup members: sometimes positive contact between group members is incredibly difficult, if not impossible. For example, at the height of the Northern Ireland conflict, positive contact between Protestants and Catholics was nigh on impossible. As such, recent work on the role of intergroup contact in reducing *prejudice* has moved away from the idea that contact must necessarily include direct (face-to-face) contact between group members and instead includes the notion that indirect contact (e.g. imagined contact, or knowledge of contact among others) may also have a beneficial effect.

A first example of this approach comes from Wright, Aron, McLaughlin-Volpe, and Ropp's (1997) extended *contact hypothesis*. Wright et al. propose that mere knowledge that an *ingroup* member has a close relationship with an outgroup member can improve outgroup attitudes, and indeed this has been supported by a series of experimental and correlational studies. For example, Shiappa, Gregg, & Hewes, (2005) have offered evidence suggesting that just watching TV shows that portrayed intergroup contact was associated with lower levels of *prejudice*. A second example of an indirect approach to contact comes from Crisp and Turner's (2009) imagined *contact hypothesis*, which suggests that actual experiences may not be necessary to improve intergroup attitudes, and that simply *imagining* contact with outgroup members could improve outgroup attitudes. Indeed, this has been supported in a number of studies at both an explicit and implicit level: British Muslims (Husnu & Crisp, 2010), the elderly (Abrams, Crisp, & Marques 2008), and gay men (Turner, Crisp, & Lambert, 2007).

These more recent extensions of the *contact hypothesis* have offered important suggestions on how to most effectively generalize the benefits of the contact situation and make use of findings from work on mediating mechanisms. It seems that direct face-to-face contact is always not necessary, and that positive outcomes can be achieved by positive presentation of intergroup-friendships in the media and even simply by imagining interacting with an outgroup member.

Issues and Directions for Future Research

Contact, then, has important positive effects on improved intergroup relations. It does have its critics, however. Notably, Dixon, Durrheim, & Tredoux (2005) argue that while contact has been important in showing how we can promote a more tolerant society, the existing literature has an unfortunate absence of work on how intergroup contact can affect societal change: changes in outgroup attitudes from contact do not necessarily accompany changes in the ideological beliefs that sustain group inequality. For example, Jackson and Crane (1986) demonstrated that positive contact with Black individuals improved Whites' affective reactions towards Blacks but did not change their attitudes towards policy in combating inequality in housing, jobs and education. Furthermore, contact may also have the unintended effect of weakening minority members' motivations to engage in collective action aimed at reducing the intergroup inequalities. For example, Dixon, Durrheim, & Tredoux (2007) found that the more contact Black South Africans had with White South Africans, the less they supported policies aimed at reducing racial inequalities. Positive contact may have the unintended effect of misleading members of disadvantaged groups into believing inequality will be addressed, thus leaving the status differentials intact. As such, a fruitful direction for future research would be to investigate under what conditions contact could lead to more positive intergroup relations without diminishing legitimate protest aimed at reducing inequality. One promising suggestion is to emphasize commonalities between groups while also addressing unjust group inequalities during the contact situation. Such a contact situation could result in [prejudice](#) reduction without losing sight of group inequality (Saguy, Tausch, Dovidio, & Pratto, 2009).

A second concern with contact research is that while contact has shown to be effective for more prejudiced individuals, there can be problems with getting a more prejudiced individual into the contact situation in the first place. Crisp and Turner's imagined [contact hypothesis](#) seems to be a good first step in tackling this problem (Crisp & Turner, 2013), though it remains to be seen if, and how, such imagined contact among prejudiced individuals can translate to direct contact. Greater work on individual differences in the efficacy of contact would provide an interesting contribution to existing work.

Conclusions

Contact, then, has been shown to be of utmost importance in reduction of [prejudice](#) and promotion of more positive intergroup attitudes. Such research has important implications for policy work. Work on contact highlights the importance of institutional support and advocacy of more positive intergroup relations, the importance of equal status between groups, the importance of cooperation between groups and the importance of positive media presentations of intergroup friendships - to name just a few. As Hewstone and Swart (2011) argue, *"Theory-driven social psychology does matter, not just in the laboratory, but also in the school, the neighborhood, and the society at large"* (Hewstone & Swart, 2011. p.380).

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