Imagining harmonious intergroup relations

Rhiannon N. Turner on her Doctoral Award-winning research on the impact of direct and indirect forms of contact

In order to ensure harmony in multicultural societies, it is essential that interventions are developed to tackle intergroup prejudice and discrimination. This article examines three types of intergroup contact that help to improve intergroup relations. Encouraging friendships between members of different groups should be especially effective in multicultural settings. In segregated settings, however, indirect forms of contact, such as learning about the contact experiences of others, or even imagining an intergroup encounter, may be useful.

questions

How can we best encourage positive relations between members of different social groups?

Are different interventions useful in different social contexts?

resources

Crisp, R.J. & Turner, R.N. (2009). Can imagined interactions produce positive perceptions? Reducing prejudice through simulated social contact. *American Psychologist, 64*, 231–240.

Turner, R.N., Hewstone, M., Voci, A., Paolini, S. & Christ, O. (2007). Reducing prejudice via direct and extended cross-group friendship. *European Review of Social Psychology, 18*, 212–255.

One of the most challenging issues facing this country today, occupying the thoughts of policy makers, educators, and academics alike, is how we can ensure harmonious intergroup relations in the multicultural society in which we live. The United Kingdom is composed of a diverse array of social group memberships. For example, according to the Office for National Statistics, approximately 8 per cent of British people belong to a minority ethnic group, 15 per cent belong to a minority religious group, and 6 per cent report being gay or lesbian. And there are, of course, a multitude of other ways in which people are socially categorised, including gender, age, education and socio-economic status. But despite this diversity, members of different groups do not always live harmoniously alongside one another: in the recording year 2007/8 the British Crime Survey reported over 35,000 incidents of racially aggravated harassment, common assault and wounding in England and Wales; age discrimination is rife (Age Concern, 2005); and in one survey, a third of gay respondents reported being bullied at school on the grounds of sexuality (YouGov, 2008).

Arguably one of the best ways to alleviate these tensions is 'intergroup contact', the idea that bringing people from different social groups together to interact positively with one another will lessen hostility and generate more positive intergroup attitudes (Allport, 1954). A recent meta-analysis of 515 of studies on intergroup contact found a robust negative relationship between contact and prejudice (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). In this article, I discuss my research on three unique types of intergroup contact. The first, cross-group friendship, is an intimate and particularly effective form of contact. The other two, extended contact and imagined contact, are forms of 'indirect contact', strategies that don't involve any direct interactions between group members.

Cross-group friendship

Theorists have argued that intergroup contact based on long-term close relationships rather than initial acquaintanceship should be particularly effective at reducing prejudice (Pettigrew, 1998). Interactions between friends tend to be pleasant and comfortable, so it make sense that cross-group friendships would have an especially positive impact on attitudes towards outgroup members. Analysing a large sample from across Europe, Pettigrew (1997) found that participants with outgroup friends reported significantly less prejudice, whereas the effects of neighbour and co-worker contact were considerably weaker.

My research has focused on *why* people with cross-group friends tend to have more positive outgroup attitudes. Previous research has shown that this relationship might be explained in part by reducing anxiety about intergroup encounters (Paolini et al., 2004). Intergroup anxiety is the negative emotional arousal that can characterise intergroup encounters, arising as a consequence of expectations of rejection or discrimination during cross-group interactions, and worries about behaving incompetently or offensively (Stephan & Stephan, 1985). When individuals have had a successful intergroup encounter, however, it challenges negative expectations, reducing anxiety and generating more positive perceptions of outgroup members.

My colleagues and I were interested in an additional possible mechanism, self-disclosure: the voluntary presentation of

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Dadds, M.R., Bovbjerg, D.H., Redd, W.H. & Cutmore, T.R. (1997). Imagery in human classical conditioning.

information of a personal nature to another person. Self-disclosure features prominently in theories of friendship development, which argue that close relationships develop as a result of an escalation of the breadth and intimacy of the information that two individuals reciprocally disclose to one another (Altman & Taylor, 1973). Studies show that when people disclose to us, we not only feel greater attraction towards them, but we also disclose more in return, leading to mutual interpersonal attraction (Berg & Wright-Buckley, 1988). In parallel to its role in interpersonal relationships, we wondered whether self-disclosure might be an important component of intergroup friendships.

We investigated the processes underlying the relationship between cross-group friendships and outgroup attitudes in the context of relations between the South Asian and white communities in the UK (Turner et al., 2007b, Study 1). White primary school children completed a questionnaire regarding their number and closeness of friendships with, and attitude towards, South Asians. We also asked children how anxious they felt at the prospect of interacting with South Asian children, and how much they intended to self-disclose to South Asian children. We found that the more time participants spent with South Asian friends, the more positive was their attitude towards South Asians in general, a relationship that was partly explained by reduced intergroup anxiety. However, the relationship between cross-group friendship and outgroup attitude was also mediated by self-disclosure: the more South Asian friends children had, the

Indirect forms of contact may help reduce intergroup anxiety

greater their intention to disclose to outgroup members, and in turn, the more positive their attitude towards South Asians generally. Our later studies replicated this finding using a more comprehensive measure of self-disclosure, which incorporated actual disclosure as well as intentions to disclose, and disclosure to and from the outgroup member.

So why is self-disclosure associated with more positive outgroup attitudes? We conducted a questionnaire study among white British undergraduates regarding their experiences with South Asians, and found that three mechanisms play a role (Turner et al., 2007b, Study 4). First, self-disclosure was associated with greater empathy towards the outgroup, presumably because it is likely to involve learning about the innermost thoughts, hopes and fears of an outgroup member. The more empathy expressed towards South Asians, the more positively South Asians were perceived in general. Second, self-disclosure increased the perceived importance of cross-group friendships. Self-disclosure among friends is thought to enhance potential efficacy. That is, people learn new information which increases the resources, perspectives, and identities available to them, and these things are important to us because they help us to achieve personal goals (Aron et al., 2001). This is especially likely among cross-group friends, because they can draw on one another's differences in experience and perspective. We found that participants who perceived cross-

group friendships as important had a more positive outgroup attitude: we tend to like those who help us to achieve personal goals (Van Dick et al., 2004). Third, the more people self-disclosed and were disclosed to by outgroup members, the more outgroup trust they reported. Trust develops over time as a result of experiences that show that a person's behaviour is predictable and dependable (Kerr et al., 1999). The more we learn about someone through their disclosures, the more certain we are that we can predict their future behaviour in critical, integrity-testing situations. Trust in turn, was associated with more positive outgroup attitudes. This is because self-disclosure implies a trust and confidence in the recipient, and people trust and like those who trust them (Petty & Mirels, 1981).

Despite the clear benefits of cross-group friendships, it has one significant practical limitation: it can only be useful when the opportunity for contact exists. Unfortunately, there are many examples where intergroup relations afford few such opportunities. Take Northern Ireland, for example: according to the Office for National Statistics, many Catholic and Protestant communities in Belfast have a very low percentage of residents from the other community, and only 5 per cent of Northern Irish children attend mixed Catholic/Protestant schools. There is also evidence that even in diverse and multicultural communities where people do have the opportunity to make cross-group friends, they tend to form friendships primarily with ingroup members (e.g. Aboud & Sankar, 2007). At first glance, this may seem like an intractable limitation of the contact hypothesis. But research on two indirect forms of contact – extended and imagined – may provide a solution.

Extended contact

Extended contact is the idea that mere knowledge that ingroup members have friends in the outgroup will reduce intergroup prejudice. Wright et al. (1997)
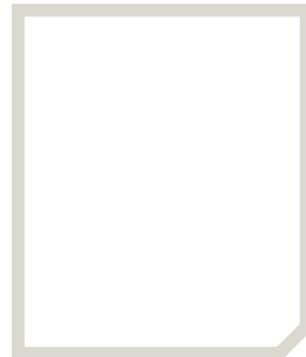
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found that the more ingroup members people know who have outgroup friends, the more positive are their attitudes towards that outgroup in general. This concept has been successfully developed as an educational intervention to encourage intergroup tolerance: Cameron et al. (2006) developed stories involving friendships between British and refugee children, which primary school children read over several consecutive weeks. The researchers found this to be effective at generating more positive attitudes towards refugees.

We investigated extended contact in a questionnaire study among South Asian and white secondary school students (Turner et al., 2007b, Study 2). Participants were asked to report how many outgroup friends they had, how many ingroup members they knew with outgroup friends, and their attitude towards the outgroup. We also asked them to indicate their degree of opportunity for contact: the proportion of outgroup members living in the same neighbourhood or attending the same school as them. In line with previous findings, greater experience of cross-group friendship and extended contact were associated with more positive outgroup attitudes. But interestingly, we found that while people living in a mixed neighbourhood or attending the same school as members of the outgroup reported having more cross-group friends, there was no relationship between opportunity for contact and experience of extended contact. These findings imply that while direct cross-group friendship is reliant on there being opportunities to interact with the outgroup, extended contact is not. This is important because it suggests that even those in segregated, homogeneous communities, who do not personally know any outgroup members, can benefit indirectly from contact.

We also found that the positive relationship between extended contact and outgroup attitude was explained by reducing intergroup anxiety. Specifically, the more ingroup members participants

knew who had outgroup friends, the less anxious they were at the prospect of contact, and in turn, the more positive their outgroup attitude. There are two reasons for this. First, participants are able to observe intergroup contact from a 'safe distance', and learn about outgroup members without the anxiety inherent in initial direct intergroup encounters. Second, observing a positive relationship between members of the ingroup and outgroup should lead participants to realise that they have nothing to fear from the outgroup, and make them less anxious about the prospect of future face-to-face encounters (Wright et al., 1997).

Work on extended contact shows that actual experience of contact with outgroups is not the only way that contact can benefit intergroup relations. The importance of this idea for policy makers and educators seeking to develop interventions to reduce prejudice cannot be overstated because it suggests that contact may be a far more powerful and flexible means of improving intergroup

relations than previously thought. But under some circumstances extended contact could suffer the same limitation as actual contact. In highly segregated settings one simply might not know anyone who has an outgroup friend: that is, it may be that no outgroup friends exist even within one's wider social network. Our recent research suggests, however, that even imagining intergroup contact might improve intergroup attitudes.

Imagined contact

Imagined contact can be defined as 'the mental simulation of social interaction with a member or members of an outgroup category' (Crisp & Turner, 2009, p.234); and it should have benefits for intergroup relations for two reasons. First, mental imagery has been found to elicit similar emotional and motivational responses as the real experience (Dadds et al., 1997), and neuropsychological studies have shown that it shares the same neurological basis as perception and

Cross-group friendship is more effective at reducing prejudice than less intimate forms of contact

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employs similar neurological mechanisms as memory, emotion and motor control (Kosslyn et al., 2001). Accordingly, imagining oneself interacting positively with an outgroup member should automatically activate thoughts and feelings similar to those experienced in real-life intergroup interactions, for example feeling more comfortable and less apprehensive about interacting with outgroup members. Second, imagined contact may generate deliberative thought processes similar to those experienced in real-life contact, for example thinking about what might be learned from the outgroup member and what emotions might be experienced during the interaction. By activating these automatic and deliberative processes that occur during actual contact, imagined contact should have the same positive effects on outgroup evaluations (Turner et al., 2007a).

In our research on imagined contact to date, participants receive a very simple instruction: 'We would like you to take a minute to imagine yourself meeting a [outgroup] stranger for the first time. Imagine that the interaction is positive, relaxed and comfortable.' This simple phrase includes two key elements that we have found to be the critical components. First is the instruction to engage in simulation. We have found that running through the mental script of an interaction is critical for observing positive effects (thinking, in contrast, of just an outgroup member in the absence of any simulated interaction has no positive effects on attitudes, Turner et al., 2007a, Study 2). Second is a positive tone: we know that this is important for direct contact, so we expected the same for imagined contact.

In order to test imagined contact, we asked young participants to imagine a positive interaction with an elderly stranger (Turner et al., 2007a, Study 1). Compared to participants in a control condition who imagined an outdoor scene, they subsequently showed less bias against elderly people. In a later study, we asked heterosexual men to imagine a positive interaction with a homosexual man. Participants subsequently evaluated homosexual men more positively and stereotyped them less than participants in the control condition (Turner et al., 2007a, Study 3). Imagined contact has also been shown to change Mexicans' attitudes towards Mestizos in Mexico (Stathi & Crisp, 2008). As with friendship and extended contact, the effect of imagined

contact on outgroup attitude towards homosexual men was also explained by reduced intergroup anxiety (Turner et al., 2007a). Participants who imagined contact were subsequently less anxious at the prospect of interacting with homosexual men. The lower intergroup anxiety participants reported the more positive were their attitudes towards homosexual men.

Finally, we have found that imagined contact affects implicit attitudes, attitudes that are unintentionally activated by the mere presence of an attitude object, and are therefore less likely to be influenced by social desirability than are explicit measures (Turner & Crisp, 2010). Young participants were asked to imagine a positive encounter with an elderly person, before completing a young–elderly version of the implicit association test (IAT: Greenwald et al., 1998). The IAT is a measure of implicit intergroup bias that assesses how strongly participants associate the outgroup (versus their own group) with words of positive and negative valence. We found that compared to those in the control condition, participants who had imagined contact showed less implicit intergroup bias: a reduced implicit preference for young people over elderly people. In a follow-up study, we found that non-Muslims who imagined contact with a Muslim subsequently also showed less implicit bias on a Muslim–non-Muslim version of the IAT.

Combining direct and indirect contact

So how do these different types of contact measure up against one another: is any one type superior? There is no easy answer to this question. But what is clear is that each type of contact has its strengths and weaknesses. On the one hand, by encouraging positive affective processes, such as generating self-disclosure and reducing intergroup anxiety, cross-group friendship is more effective at reducing prejudice than less intimate forms of contact (Pettigrew, 1997). It is, however, limited by its reliance on opportunity for contact, which means it may be unhelpful in segregated settings. Moreover, even in diverse communities, people tend to form friendships primarily with people from the same group as them. This makes cross-group friendships difficult to implement as a practical intervention technique. As indirect forms of contact, extended and imagined contact have the advantage of not being reliant on opportunity for contact and can therefore be used in segregated settings where

interventions based on direct contact would be impossible to implement. These interventions would also be inexpensive and relatively easy to apply. For example, schools could have classes in which they encourage children to share their experiences of cross-group friendships with one another, or get them to imagine what it would be like to meet outgroup members. This would help to generate intergroup tolerance without the logistical difficulties of bringing members of different groups together. But ultimately there is no substitute for real experience with the outgroup. Indirect forms of contact are unlikely to have as powerful or long-lasting an effect as actual contact, because direct experiences produce stronger attitudes on an issue than indirect experiences (Stangor et al., 1991).

Given their respective strengths and weaknesses, direct and indirect forms of contact might best be used in combination with one another (Turner et al., 2007a; Turner et al., 2007c). Specifically, indirect forms of contact could be used as a means of preparing people for face-to-face contact. Extended contact involves observing the successful behaviour of another person. This reduces fears and inhibitions (e.g. Turner et al., 2007a; Turner et al., 2007b) and should therefore increase self-efficacy about performing the same behaviour oneself. Imagined contact similarly reduces intergroup anxiety (Turner et al., 2007a), and there is evidence that imagining an event reliably increases the likelihood that the event will occur (Carroll, 1978). Given that, following these interventions, participants should feel more positive and comfortable about the prospect of actual contact, indirect contact should increase the likelihood that intergroup contact will be instigated. Moreover, when an intergroup encounter occurs, the interaction is likely to run more smoothly, be more successful, and therefore improve intergroup attitudes further. This should in turn increase the likelihood that, when the opportunities do arise, acquaintance contact will develop into long-lasting friendships, with considerable benefits for intergroup relations.

Rhiannon N. Turner
is a lecturer in social psychology at the Institute of Psychological Sciences, University of Leeds.
r.n.turner@leeds.ac.uk