

# Intergroup contact

# Panacea for prejudice?

It is nearly 50 years since Gordon Allport, in his classic volume *The Nature of Prejudice*, expounded on the 'contact hypothesis' for future generations of social psychologists and policy makers. The idea was a deceptively simple one:

*It has sometimes been held that merely by assembling people without regard for race, color, religion, or national origin, we can thereby destroy stereotypes and develop friendly attitudes.* (Allport, 1954, p.261)

But, as Allport added, 'the case is not so simple', and I am one of several social psychologists who has struggled with these issues, in my case for some 17 years (see Hewstone & Brown, 1986). So what have I learnt?

## WEBLINKS

Seminar series on social inclusion:

[www.social-inclusion.org.uk](http://www.social-inclusion.org.uk)

Article on conflict theory from *The Guardian*:

<http://education.guardian.co.uk/legweekly/story/0,5500,873800,00.html>

Resources for students and teachers:

[www.UnderstandingPrejudice.org](http://www.UnderstandingPrejudice.org)

Fight hate and promote tolerance:

[www.tolerance.org](http://www.tolerance.org)

Conflict data service: [www.incore.ulst.ac.uk/cds](http://www.incore.ulst.ac.uk/cds)

Conflict archive on the internet: [www.cain.ulst.ac.uk](http://www.cain.ulst.ac.uk)



**MILES HEWSTONE**, winner of the 2001 Presidents' Award, on a key social psychological strategy for reducing intergroup conflict.

## Impact and application of the contact hypothesis

The first point to emphasise is that the contact hypothesis applies not only to relations between members of different ethnic or racial groups. Positive effects of contact have been demonstrated in many domains including attitudes towards the elderly, psychiatric patients, gays, and children with disability (for reviews see Hewstone, 1996; Pettigrew, 1998; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2000).

This body of research has outlined five key favourable conditions under which contact between members of different groups should be implemented; we can think of these as the 'independent variable' side of contact. Members of the two groups should be brought together under conditions of equal status, in situations where stereotypes are likely to be disconfirmed, where there is intergroup cooperation, where participants can get to know each other properly, and where wider social norms support equality. But these, and many other conditions considered in the literature, should be thought of as

facilitating rather than as essential conditions (Pettigrew, 1998).

What can contact actually change? We can think of this as the 'dependent variable' side of contact. First and foremost, successful intergroup contact promotes more positive, or at least less negative, outgroup attitudes. It can also increase the perceived variability of the outgroup, rendering it less homogeneous. As my colleagues and I have shown in our own recent work, contact can also promote increased outgroup forgiveness for past deeds and atrocities, and increased outgroup trust (Hewstone, Cairns, Voci, Paolini *et al.*, in press).

Whether the effects of contact are limited to the context of that research study has been a central aspect of critiques of the contact hypotheses (Hewstone & Brown, 1986; Rothbart & John, 1985). There is now, however, much greater optimism that positive effects of contact can generalise in several ways: across situations; from specific members of the outgroup to the outgroup as a whole; from the immediate outgroup to other outgroups; and across different types of responses (Gaertner &

Dovidio, 2000; Hewstone, 1996; Pettigrew, 1997). Contact can also 'work' via more subtle processes than generalisation. It can provide access for members of social, especially ethnic, minorities to informal social networks, and bring about a reduction in 'almost automatic fear' with which members of one group respond to members of the other (see Schofield & Eurich-Fulcer, 2001).

#### Four key questions

The first, and most obvious, question is *Does contact work?* Thanks to the Herculean labours of Thomas Pettigrew and Linda Tropp, and the wonders of meta-analysis, we can now answer with an emphatic 'yes' (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2000, 2003). They aggregated the effects of contact over 516 studies, and reported a highly significant inverse relationship between contact and prejudice (effect size, Cohen's  $d = -.47$ ;  $r = .23$ ). But results varied between studies, and Pettigrew and Tropp identified several important moderators: effects were larger in more rigorous and experimental research; with better measurement; with adequate control groups; with attitudinal measures; and for samples including the key 'favourable conditions' considered above. For intergroup contact to *increase* prejudice, however, there must be directly negative factors operating in the situation – such as high anxiety and threat.

The second question is *Does contact lead to attitudes, or vice versa?* This question arises because of the ambiguity of cross-sectional survey data (only a very small number of the studies in the meta-analytic database collected longitudinal data). Both directions of causality are plausible, and sometimes evidence for both has been found (e.g. Herek & Capitano, 1996). But we do know from experimental studies (such as pioneering work by Cook, 1978) that contact can and does affect attitudes. We also know from sophisticated statistical analyses, which estimated causal effects from cross-sectional data, that the path from contact to attitudes tends to be stronger than the reciprocal path (Pettigrew, 1997). This is really all the evidence we need to argue that contact can be used as an intervention to reduce prejudice.

The third question is a mediational one: *How does contact work?* Pettigrew (1998) has proposed four main potential mechanisms: learning about the outgroup; behaviour-driven attitude change (e.g. forming a more positive attitude towards outgroup members after being involved in

a cooperative learning task with them); ingroup reappraisal; and generating affective ties. This last mechanism appears to be the key one, and includes forming close friendships; this intimate form of contact appears to be the most effective in reducing prejudice, certainly more so than rather superficial outgroup contact in the neighbourhood or at work (Hamberger & Hewstone, 1997; Pettigrew, 1997).

Affective processes involved in contact are also illustrated by research on 'intergroup anxiety' (Stephan & Stephan, 1985) – negative arousal about interacting with the outgroup. My own work has demonstrated the crucial mediating role of

#### 'indirect friendships had a direct and positive effect on perceived outgroup variability'

contact in reducing anxiety. We have demonstrated this effect in samples as varied as Hindus and Muslims in Bangladesh (Islam & Hewstone, 1993), and Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland (Paolini *et al.*, in press). Pettigrew and Tropp (2003) calculated that approximately 21 per cent of the effect of contact reducing prejudice is mediated by contact also reducing anxiety.

We have also explored intergroup anxiety in research comparing the effects of direct and indirect contact. While the contact hypothesis clearly refers to direct contact between members of two groups, Wright and colleagues have proposed that knowledge that a fellow ingroup member has a close relationship with an outgroup member ('indirect' or 'extended' contact) can be used as a catalyst to promote more positive intergroup attitudes (Wright *et al.*, 1997). This form of contact has a number of advantages: it increases the potential impact of cross-group friendships, and may be a form of contact that is less likely to induce intergroup anxiety. We recently conducted two studies on this with Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland (Paolini *et al.*, in press). In a sample of students at the University of Ulster, direct cross-group friendships had a direct negative effect on prejudice. But such friendships only affected perceived variability indirectly, mediated by intergroup anxiety. Indirect cross-group friendships significantly affected prejudice, but only indirectly, mediated by intergroup anxiety; indirect friendships had a direct

and positive effect on perceived outgroup variability. We later replicated this model using a representative sample of the adult population of Northern Ireland.

The fourth question is a moderational one: *When does contact work?* Recent research has accumulated evidence that group salience is a key moderator of the effect of intergroup contact on criterion variables (Hewstone, 1996). The salience of group boundaries should be maintained during contact (e.g. by making participants *aware* of their respective group memberships) to promote generalisation across members of the target outgroup. The importance of group membership salience during contact has been demonstrated both experimentally (e.g. Brown *et al.*, 1999; Van Oudenhoven *et al.*, 1996) and in correlational studies (Brown *et al.*, 2001; Brown *et al.*, 1999). These studies provide evidence that the generalisation process (*from* the judgements concerning single individuals *to* the whole outgroup) is favoured by the presence of a link between those individuals who have actually been encountered and the group as a whole. We demonstrated this effect in two recent studies on contact with grandparents and attitudes towards the elderly (Harwood *et al.*, 2003): contact with grandparents was a much more significant predictor of generalised attitudes when young people reported being aware of age groups during contact.

There is a risk, however, that making categories salient during contact will reinforce perceptions of group differences and increase intergroup anxiety (Islam & Hewstone, 1993); thus it should not be done in the initial stage of contact, especially when intergroup relations are very negative.

The most effective way to capitalise on salience for generalisation while avoiding intergroup anxiety seems to be to promote contact that is simultaneously both 'interpersonal' (e.g. involving personal exchange within a close relationship) and 'intergroup' (i.e. both members are still aware that they belong to different groups). My recent research collaboration with Alberto Voci (Voci & Hewstone, 2003) showed the importance of studying simultaneously one key mediator, intergroup anxiety, and one key moderator, the salience of group memberships, during contact (between Italians and immigrants in Italy). We found that it was the combination of positive contact with individuals from the outgroup and the salience during contact of group

memberships which led to reduced anxiety and to more positive orientations towards the outgroup.

### Policy implications

The contact hypothesis had a profound impact on social policy in many countries (see Miller & Brewer, 1984; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2000), most notably in the case of school desegregation in the US (see Schofield & Eurich-Fulcer, 2001). Its great merit is that it provides not only a theoretical framework but also an intervention. Recent social unrest in this country (especially in Bradford, Burnley and Oldham) led to the influential Cattle Report, which referred to the 'depth of polarisation' and segregated communities living 'a series of parallel lives'. Cattle also referred to the segregation of our young in single-faith schools as a major factor contributing to the summer riots. Sir Herman Ouseley's Commission for Racial Equality report remarked: 'If left to their own devices it seems people will retreat into their own separate "comfort zones" surrounding themselves only by people like themselves.' Thus the contact hypothesis has an important contemporary appeal too. In fact, through an ESRC seminar series Dominic Abrams and I arranged a meeting with government officials, educators and the police to promote the application of this important social psychological idea to British society. We have also recently made presentations at the Home Office's Community Cohesion Unit.

The contact hypothesis has also underpinned the main policy initiatives pursued in Northern Ireland to overcome extensive segregation and improve community relations between Catholics and Protestants (see Cairns & Hewstone, 2002; Hewstone, Cairns, Voci, Paolini *et al.*, in press; Niens *et al.*, 2003). We have conducted six surveys in Northern Ireland (and also carried out secondary analysis of archival data sets: see Hewstone, Cairns, Voci, Hamberger *et al.*, in press). Our research has underlined the importance of outgroup friends, identified key mediators (reduced anxiety and increased perspective taking) and moderators (category salience) of contact, compared the effectiveness of direct and indirect forms of contact, and demonstrated the value of contact in educational settings. In a country where 97 per cent of school-age children attend denominational schools, attending university undoubtedly increases most people's overall amount of contact and their opportunity for intimate contact with members of the rival

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### Benefits of contact? Children at a 'Love Music Hate Racism' concert

community. Swapping segregated secondary education for integrated (or, at least, desegregated) higher education is a significant step. As journalist and television presenter Nick Ross, who studied in Belfast, put it: 'Many of my Protestant friends had not met a Catholic, and Catholics had scarcely met a Protestant, until they got to

increase perspective taking, while ensuring that participants are still aware of their own and others' group memberships. Done in this way, intergroup contact can mount an effective challenge to social exclusion.

### Do we expect too much from intergroup contact?

I am often asked (normally after enthusiastic talks on the benefits of contact) 'How do you explain what happened in Yugoslavia?' This European state was home to various ethnic groups who lived together (12 per cent of all marriages in Yugoslavia and 40 per cent in Sarajevo were mixed; see Hewstone & Cairns, 2001), yet it was catapulted into civil war and 'ethnic cleansing'. It became clear that close friendships with members of different ethnic groups offered no special immunity from barbaric acts. Consider the tale of Dusko Tadic, member of the Serb minority in the Bosnian town of Kozarac, and his best friend, Muslim policeman Emir Karabasic. Tadic was later accused on 34 counts at the international war crimes tribunal at The Hague, one of which was beating to death four of his former neighbours, including Karabasic, in the Omarska detention camp. Although this case is particularly tragic, it may be quite representative in the sense that 50 per cent of respondents to one survey in the region reported betrayal by neighbours belonging to the dominant or majority group (Hewstone & Cairns, 2001).

In another, more positive, example Ahmed, a Bosnian, related how his life was saved when Serbian forces intercepted a group of Muslims trying to escape from Srebrenica to the haven of Tuzla:

### 'The contact hypothesis had a profound impact on social policy in many countries'

university' (Ross, 1999). We have found that cross-community friendships at university have a highly significant effect on reducing prejudice, and promoting outgroup forgiveness (Hewstone, Cairns, Voci, McLernon *et al.*, in press). Contact at earlier stages of education is also influential. As one might expect, current university outgroup friends had the highest impact on bias of current university students, but secondary-school outgroup friends were also significant predictors of reduced bias; friends at primary school were not. We are not, however, denying the importance of primary-school outgroup friends, because these friendships were highly predictive of secondary-school outgroup friends, which themselves were significantly associated with lower levels of bias.

We believe that the consistent pattern of our results provides strong support for continuing contact schemes in the educational and community relations sectors in Northern Ireland. Specifically, those schemes need to promote contact under conditions that lower anxiety and

*My father was just ahead of me. In front of the tank, he turned to the left with the other men. Without thinking, I continued walking straight ahead with the women and children. After a few yards a hand reached out and grabbed my right shoulder. It was a Serb soldier, a neighbour of mine from Srebrenica. He shoved a blanket in my arms and motioned for me to put it on my head. He literally saved my life.* (reported in Stover & Peress, 1998)

Yet even in this latter case the close inter-ethnic friendship was not enough to prevent the Serb joining up to a force intent on 'cleansing' the area of Muslims.

It is obviously asking an enormous amount of any kind of contact that it should 'inoculate' the recipient against the host of forces urging it in the direction of ethnic conflict (e.g. group pressures such as conformity, calls to national identity, and

threats to one's family). There was, for example, extensive contact between Tutsi and Hutu in Rwanda, before 800,000 were slaughtered in 100 days (Prunier, 1995), and there is plentiful evidence that contact does not prevent people massacring former neighbours. It is important, then, to acknowledge that contact cannot offer 'immunity', and we should not have unrealistic expectations of what it can achieve. That does not mean, however, that it is ineffective, or that it is not worth attempting.

### Re-evaluating the contact hypothesis

It must first be acknowledged that contact is not the only 'cure' for prejudice. Many other interventions make important and complementary contributions, including promotion of empathy, cooperative learning paradigms, multicultural education programmes, crossing categorisations, and creation of superordinate group identities

(see Hewstone *et al.*, 2002). But all these interventions involve, to a greater or lesser extent, intergroup contact.

Let us return to the four main questions posed earlier. *Does contact work? Yes. Does contact lead to attitudes? Yes. How does contact work? Mainly via affective processes, especially reducing intergroup anxiety. When do the effects of contact generalise? Especially when the salience of categories is maintained during contact.*

This is conclusive support for the contact hypothesis, which, as we have seen, also has clear policy implications for pressing social issues in this country and across the world. But, especially in extreme conflict, contact is not a panacea for prejudice, let alone intergroup conflict.

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