Project Proposal

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1 Background

I'm interested in the role of ingroup observation, direct contact, and, most centrally, "vicarious contact" in informing cooperation behavior in settings marked by intergroup conflict. Intergroup contact theory (Allport, 1954) has been a prominent research topic in psychology for more than half a century (Hewstone & Swart, 2011) . In more recent decades, economists have also given it significant attention (Bazzi et al., 2019; Lowe, 2021) . Allport (1954) introduced the "contact hypothesis," which suggested that intergroup prejudice can be mitigated if members of the groups engage in contact that is characterized by certain conditions, e.g., common goals.

Decades after the introduction of the contact hypothesis, psychologists began to explore the possibility that a similar reduction in prejudice could be achieved through "*indirect* intergroup contact". In particular, studies began to suggest that prejudice could be reduced via simply 1) knowing that a member of one's in-group has a friend in the out-group (known as "extended contact"[1]), 2) watching intergroup interactions between members of one's in-group and the out-group ("vicarious contact"), or 3) imagining intergroup interactions between members of one's in-group and the out-group ("imagined contact"). In this proposal, I will focus on vicarious contact.

Vicarious contact has been the subject of a number of studies in psychology but has seemingly not garnered the same level of attention from economists. The seminal paper on vicarious contact is Wright et al. (1997) . Wright et al. (1997) , in the context of a minimal group paradigm with undergraduate psychology student participants, found that witnessing intergroup interaction in a puzzle game led to more positive attitudes towards the out-group when the interaction was positive, as compared to neutral or negative.

As two motivating examples, Schiappa et al. (2005) found that having participants watch television shows with central characters that were gay led to lower levels of prejudice against gay people. Meanwhile, Paluck (2009) randomly assigned participants in Rwanda to listen to a radio soap-opera-style broadcast highlighting inter-ethnic reconciliation and cooperation in a fictional setting within Rwanda or a health-drama-oriented control broadcast. They found that the former group was more likely to endorse views and perceptions of social norms corresponding to greater inter-ethnic cooperation, such as a greater willingness for their children to marry someone from outside of their ethnic group.

2 Proposed Study

The target participants would be individuals from two ethnic, racial, or religious groups in a context in which there is intergroup tension. I would congregate participants in a community center or rented building (or portion of building) that had rooms such that I could separate people as needed.

2.1 Study Design

The general structure of the experimental exercise would be as follows:

2.1.1 Phase 1

In the first phase of the game, two players will be paired, in some cases prompted to have a guided conversation, and asked to play a cooperative game. The cooperative game will share some features

[1] In some papers, "extended contact" refers to any form of indirect contact. I am adopting the terminology used in Mazziotta et al. (2011)

with the Public Goods Game and Trust Game. Specifically, the structure will be that each player is given an equivalent endowment. They are then asked to decide how much of their endowment to send to the other person. The amount sent will then be doubled upon delivery to the other player. In the most cooperative case, both players could double their initial endowment; in the least cooperative case, both players could keep their initial endowment; in a one-sided full cooperation, the non-cooperative player could triple their endowment and the fully-cooperative player could earn nothing (from this exercise), and in many cases, the players would end up somewhere in between.

In all cases, the players will be observed by another two participants, though whether they are aware of this will vary. The general structure of Phase 1 is as follows:

1. Group-Categorized Pair Assignment: Participants would be assigned a pair, which could be centrally characterized for analysis as:
    i. Same Group 1: Both participants are from Group 1.
    ii. Same Group 2: Both participants are from Group 2.
    iii. Mixed Group: One participant is from Group 1 and the other is from Group 2.
2. Pre-Game Direct Contact: The members of the pair would either engage in direct contact prior to the main game or not.
    i. Pre-Game Direct Contact: Participants would engage in a conversation with prompts before the main game.
    ii. No Pre-Game Direct Contact: Participants would not speak before the main game.
3. Cooperative Game with (Un)known Observers: The pair would engage in a cooperative game where participants vary at the pair-level in their knowledge of observers watching them.
    i. No Information: Participants would play the cooperation game under the presumption of no observers.
    ii. Ingroup Observers: Participants would play the cooperation game and be told that they are being observed by members of their own group.
    iii. Generic Observers: Participants would play the cooperation game and be told that they are being observed by other participants, without specifying any additional information about the observers.

2.1.2 Phase 2

In Phase 1, two observers were assigned to watch each player. In Phase 2, the observers are paired to play a set of games themselves.

1. Pair-Type Assignment: Observers would be (without their knowledge) assigned into a "pair type." The specific partner would be determined after the next step.
    i. Same Group 1: Both participants are from Group 1.
    ii. Same Group 2: Both participants are from Group 2.
    iii. Mixed Group: One participant is from Group 1 and the other is from Group 2.
2. Partner Choice Sub-Game

i. Observers would be told that they are going to play a game that involves cooperation. They would be provided with a list of 6 potential partners: 3 from their own group and 3 from the other group. They would be asked to choose 4 that they would be willing to play the game with.[2] Asking for 4 choices ensures that the participants' categorization from Step 1 above can be maintained.

3. Observers Play a Game

   i. Cooperation Game: A subset of observer-pairs would play the same cooperation game from Phase 1.

   ii. Dictator Game: A subset of observer-pairs would play the Dictator Game.

3 Identification Strategy

There are many analyses that would be interesting. Given page limits, I will focus on what I perceive to be the most central comparisons. In Phase 1, as a baseline, we'd be interested in the main effects of each of the three steps, which would allow us to assess whether cooperation is lower in the mixed group, whether direct contact increases cooperation,[3] and whether observation influences cooperation. We would also be interested in the effect of "Mixed Group - Ingroup Observers" compared against "Mixed Group - No Information" to see if this reduces cooperation amid reputational concerns. Taking a step further, we'd want to compare "Mixed Group - Ingroup Observers - Pre-Game Direct Contact" against "Mixed Group - Ingroup Observers - No Pre-Game Direct Contact" to see if direct contact can mitigate the negative effect of ingroup observers, supposing it exists. We could assess these dynamics by estimating a model with interaction terms.

In Phase 2, we would want to assess the effects of vicarious contact on behavior towards outgroup members among the observers. First, in the Partner Choice Sub-Game, we would use the number of outgroup members in their list of 4 choices as an outcome variable and look at the effect of having observed a mixed-group pair in Phase 1, in comparison to a same-group pair of either group, controlling for performance. Note that comparing against both types of same-group pairs allows us to assess the impact of intergroup contact relative to both a control of the observer only observing their own group, as well as a control –that could be construed as a different variety of treatment – of simply indirect *exposure* to the outgroup.

After the Partner Choice Sub-Game, we want to examine the effect of vicarious contact on the outcome of the observer-turned-player's behavior in the cooperation game. To do this, we want to look at the performance of the mixed-group observers that observed mixed-group pairs in Phase 1 compared against the mixed-group observers that observed each variety of same-group pairs in Phase 1, controlling for performance. We would want to conduct a similar analysis for the Dictator Game to analyze the effect on intergroup affect. Moreover, if the intergroup contact is less familiar to the observer than ingroup contact, then we may see greater updating occur when they observe the mixed-group pair than when they observe a same-group pair (for their ingroup). This could be assessed by comparing the behavior of mixed-group observers who watched mixed-group pairs with same-group observers who watched same-group pairs (of their own group) and seeing how their behavior corresponds to the behavior they watched versus the average first-round behavior in the condition they watched.

[2] This description is analogous to an exercise performed in Blouin and Mukand (2019)

[3] This could also usefully induce more variation in cooperation that may be helpful for varying "treatment dosage" received by Phase 2 players (Phase 1 observers).

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