Intergroup Contact

SRIVIDYA RAMASUBRAMANIAN
REBECCA COSTANTINI
Texas A&M University, USA

Defining intergroup contact

Intergroup contact refers to interactions between members of different, often conflicting, social groups. Intergroup contact as a means of prejudice reduction is a well-studied topic within psychology. In his groundbreaking book, *The Nature of Prejudice* (1954), Gordon Allport proposed the *contact hypothesis*, which states that when members of conflicting groups of equal status come together to cooperate on a common goal, they will develop close bonds, which will lead to prejudice reduction, especially when supported by institutional authority. Over the years, although some additional conditions have been added, the core ideas of contact hypothesis have received empirical support. The overall negative relationship between contact and prejudice was significant, though modest, especially when the contact involved cross-group friendships (Brown & Hewstone, 2005; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). From a communication perspective, every contact situation involves an interaction between people and is, therefore, a communicative process. Within media psychology, intergroup contact has largely been examined in the context of positive effects of media exposure to outgroups in reducing prejudice among audiences.

Types of intergroup contact

Contact can take many different forms, and the same individual could experience more than one type of contact with any outgroup. *Direct contact* is conceptualized as quality and quantity of interpersonal face-to-face interactions. Cross-group friendships, for instance, would be considered higher quality contact as compared to brief interactions with acquaintances. However, there are many reasons why direct contact might not be possible or preferred. There are other types of intergroup contact that can also lead to prejudice reduction. *Vicarious contact* occurs when contact is not initiated through direct face-to-face interaction but through other means such as mediated contact, extended contact, or imagined contact. *Mediated contact* refers to contact with outgroups through mass media exposure or computer-mediated interpersonal communication. *Extended contact* is measured as knowing members of your ingroup who have contact with outgroup members, including through weak ties in social media networks. Though more uncommon, some scholars also discuss *imagined contact*

where participants cognitively visualize positive contact with outgroup members. Harwood (2010) has developed a framework that further categorizes the contact space based on the level of involvement of the self and the level of richness or presence in the contact experience.

Factors that facilitate and inhibit intergroup contact effects

Several studies, both experimental and correlational, have been conducted to understand the factors that facilitate prejudice reduction from intergroup contact. Pettigrew and Tropp (2006) found that the outcomes vary by target groups, geographic locations, and contact settings. Contact is especially helpful for groups based on race, sexual orientation, and disability. Drawing on social identity theory, there have been newer models that further refine and expand on the conditions when contact is most effective.

Contact is effective when the interaction focuses on similarities as individuals and de-emphasizes social categories. Social categories dissolve and lose their value when presented with more individuating information. This model is also called *decategorization* or *personalization*. For example, when an interaction between a straight and a gay person de-emphasizes sexual orientation and allows for the individuals to pay greater attention to other personal factors such as shared personality, attitudes, emotions, or behaviors, prejudice reduction is more likely. Another factor that could encourage prejudice reduction through contact is seeing some *common identity salience*. The current outgroup and ingroup membership is replaced by an overarching superordinate identity. Social category boundaries are redrawn, and within the new superordinate identity group, all of the members become part of the new ingroup with a shared identity. However, some researchers argue that unless there is *group salience* (an awareness about social categories) in the intergroup interaction, the positive outcomes will not generalize to the entire outgroup. Thus, the *typicality* or *representativeness* of the target member is important in facilitating prejudice reduction toward the outgroup as a whole.

Other researchers discuss that prejudice reduction can happen through three processes: book-keeping, conversion, and subtyping. *Book-keeping* refers to a gradual change based on extended periods of exposure to positive interactions with outgroup members while *conversion* is more radical contact interaction from dramatic stereotype-disconfirming outgroup members. *Subtyping* explains that targets who disconfirm stereotypes in contact situations will likely be seen as exceptions to the rule and treated as a subcategory in which case the positive outcomes from the interaction might not generalize to the entire outgroup.

Moving to affective factors, one of the biggest barriers to the contact hypothesis has been *intergroup anxiety*. Intergroup anxiety envisages that contact situations provoke anxiety among majority and minority group members for reasons such as fear of rejection, discrimination, tokenism, defensiveness, being seen as incompetent, and offending others. Other negative emotions such as pity and contempt can lead to fight or flight

reactions that inhibit prejudice reduction. Another negative emotion is a sense of *group threat* from having to share tangible and intangible resources. In contrast, positive emotions such as *empathy*, *perspective-taking*, and a commitment to *restorative justice* can lead to favorable outcomes, especially when targets appreciate a greater overlap between self and other.

Effects of mediated contact on prejudice reduction

There are many different types of mediated contact that scholars have examined in the history of media effects. Mediated contact is an aspect of vicarious contact, which can come from *mass mediated contact* such as films, television programs, radio shows, magazines, and so forth, or *mediated interpersonal contact* such as phone, e-mail, and online interactions. Well-crafted media stories that are engaging and vivid are more likely to enhance the contact experience as explained by transportation theory where viewers feel narratively "transported" into the mediated story. Building on social cognitive theory, mediated contact can be seen as an opportunity for vicarious learning from media characters based on abstract modeling. However, the nature of contact is important. Given that mainstream media portrayals are not typically accurate, representative, or positive, such learning from media strengthens rather than reduces prejudice, especially among audience members who are high in prejudice (Mastro & Tropp, 2004).

Research shows that mediated contact is especially influential when direct contact is lacking or minimal (Fujioka, 1999; Mastro & Tropp, 2004). For example, Fujioka (1999) found that television portrayals of African Americans had a greater impact on shaping Japanese international students' racial beliefs and attitudes compared to White American students who had lesser or no direct contact with African Americans. These findings are in line with *media dependency* perspectives that suggest that when individuals depend heavily on media for information, the more likely their beliefs and attitudes are shaped by media portrayals. Similarly, *cultivation theory* also finds support for the notion that heavy media users as compared to light viewers are likely to have a biased view of the real world shaped by their media consumption.

The same individual can have multiple forms of contact with outgroups through direct and mediated contact. Given the long history of negative media images and stereotypes perpetuated about marginalized groups, prejudice is likely deep-rooted, and some scholars suggest that it is unlikely to be easily changed through direct contact. Other research shows that face-to-face contact can lead to stronger prejudice reduction effects as compared to mediated contact in the context of racial prejudice. Saleem, Yang, and Ramasubramanian (2016) found that those who relied more on mediated contact rather than direct contact had negative perceptions of and emotions toward Muslims, and showed greater support for policies such as civil restrictions and military action that harm Muslims. This could perhaps be due to greater richness and interactivity in direct contact situations as compared to mediated contexts due to opportunities to provide immediate feedback and to process verbal and nonverbal cues, and due to the use of multiple modalities. However, mediated narratives that are vivid, compelling, and have strong positive outgroup characters can lead to favorable outcomes.

Although media portrayals of minority groups have been historically negative and stereotypical, there has been an attempt to also include *counterstereotypical media* portrayals that are positive and challenge mainstream cultural stereotypes. Researchers find that through a process called *appraisal generalization*, these likable counterstereotypical exemplars as compared to negative or neutral ones can have a positive effect on the outgroup in general, especially if the target is not made aware of the atypicality of media exemplar (Ramasubramanian, 2015). Moreover, when exposure to positive counterstereotypical media content is combined with audience-centered approaches to prejudice reduction such as *critical media literacy*, the positive outcomes can be maximized (Ramasubramanian, 2007).

Connecting contact hypothesis with parasocial interaction literature, Schiappa, Gregg, and Hewes (2005) tested the *parasocial contact hypothesis*, which assumed that contact with a positive admired outgroup media character or persona can lead to forming friendship-like bonds with the character, which then leads to prejudice reduction toward the outgroup as a whole. Furthermore, negative mediated contact with outgroups can reduce support for pro-minority public policies such as affirmative action (Ramasubramanian, 2015; Saleem et al., 2016).

Applying the extended contact idea to media contexts, Ortiz and Harwood (2007) suggest that beyond outgroup media characters, another way in which mediated contact can be conceptualized is through *mediated intergroup relationships*. Focusing more on the vicarious learning aspect of social cognitive theory, they propose that viewing positive intergroup interactions in mediated narratives can serve as opportunities for role modeling for audience members. This is a type of extended contact because the viewers are observing how other ingroup members in the media interact with outgroup members. Positive mediated intergroup interactions in the media could shift perceived social norms about what are considered acceptable behaviors in intergroup contact situations, thus leading to favorable outcomes.

Future research in this area could examine the effects of the valence of portrayals, comparing the ratio of positive to negative portrayals. Additionally, taking an integrated approach to studying contact that combines mediated contact with face-to-face and other types of contact would especially make sense for emerging new media technologies that are interactive. Researchers should connect intergroup contact literature with media avoidance and selective processing. Finally, comparing intra- and intergroup contact could also yield interesting insights.

SEE ALSO: Effects of Media Use on Development of Gender Role Beliefs; Implicit and Explicit Measures of Prejudice; Media Use and the Development of Racial and Ethnic Attitudes and Stereotypes; Media Use and the Development of Racial and Ethnic Identities; Media Use, Sexual Identity, and Gender Identity; Parasocial Contact and Prejudice Reduction; Race, Ethnicity, and Media Preferences: Content and Media Form; Using Media to Promote Inclusive Attitudes in Childhood and Adolescence

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Srividya Ramasubramanian (Srivi) is Professor of Communication and Affiliated Faculty of Women's & Gender Studies at Texas A&M University. Her areas of research include prejudice reduction, stereotyping processes, mediated contact, diversity, stigma, identity, race/ethnicity, gender, and religion.

Rebecca Costantini is a doctoral student in Organizational Communication at Texas A&M University in the Department of Communication.