

# Intergroup Contact Theory – a summary

## The contact hypothesis

The contact hypothesis is one of the most studied concepts in social psychology, and its validity is supported by a wealth of evidence from over 60 years of research. The hypothesis was first formulated by Gordon Allport in his 1954 work *The Nature of Prejudice*:

Prejudice (unless deeply rooted in the character structure of the individual) may be reduced by equal status contact between majority and minority groups in the pursuit of common goals. The effect is greatly enhanced if this contact is sanctioned by institutional supports (i.e., by law, custom or local atmosphere), and provided it is of a sort that leads to ***the perception of common interests and common humanity between members of the two groups*** (emphasis added).

The idea that contact between different groups can reduce prejudice and lead to more positive attitudes has been thoroughly tested and validated through numerous studies since then. A review of 203 studies from 25 countries (involving 90,000 participants) in 2000 found that 94% of the time, prejudice diminished as intergroup contact increased. Studies have also found that contact, if properly managed, can work to improve relations even in situations of intense conflict.

If contact is such an effective method for reducing prejudice, then why are prejudice, racism and inter-group conflict still such big problems? The real challenge is that it's often difficult to meet the conditions laid out by the contact hypothesis and create the sorts of encounters that lead to relations and attitudes improving. If the status between people involved is perceived to be unequal, or if their interests are perceived to be at odds, contact can increase prejudice instead of decreasing it.

## Ingroups and outgroups

We all have groups we feel we belong to or identities we feel are 'ours'. In psychological terms, the people who share these features with us (for example people with the same nationality, faith, race, hobby or favourite sports team as us) belong to our ***ingroups***. Then there are people we view as different from us, as 'other'. Relative to us, these people belong to ***outgroups***.

Most people are more positively disposed towards people in their ingroups. We have an easier time accepting or liking people who are similar to us or are seen to be on our 'side'. For better or worse, it's a fairly consistent feature of human psychology to like 'us' better than 'them'. (A mental experiment to experience this for yourself: If you support a political party or a sports team, think about how you feel about the people on your side and compare this to your intuitive feelings about your opponents...)

Outgroups, on the other hand, are often treated with initial suspicion or even dislike. This is particularly true if there is a relationship of conflict between our ingroup and the outgroup, but even without overt conflict relations between groups who have had little opportunity to interact are often tense at first. Interacting with people from outgroups is often tied up with a sense of anxiety or threat, especially if we haven't had a chance to get to know them. Left unchecked, this can lead to prejudice and stereotyping of the outgroup. (People who are more prejudiced also tend to avoid intergroup contact, so the causality goes both ways.) In short, we fear what we don't know or understand.

## Threat and trust

A key insight from studies of intergroup contact is that ***prejudice is reduced as the sense of intergroup threat is lowered and anxiety about the outgroup diminishes.***

It is important to note that emotions, or affect, play a central role here. This is the primary process through which prejudice reduction works: Through the right kinds of contact, people from different groups develop a sense of familiarity and discover similarities as well as differences. The outgroup is no longer perceived to be as fundamentally different and threatening as before which leads to improved attitudes and lower prejudice. A central takeaway is that ***contact is likely to be effective at improving intergroup relations insofar as it induces positive affect such as empathy and trust, and ineffective insofar as it induces negative affect such as anxiety or threat.***

How, more specifically, does contact lead to reduced prejudice and stereotyping? Thomas F. Pettigrew's 1998 publication on intergroup contact theory proposes the following:

- **Learning about the outgroup.** Initial theory held this process to be the major way that intergroup contact has effects. When new learning corrects negative views of the outgroup, contact should reduce prejudice. Learning, however, is unlikely to be effective on its own and only works well in conjunction with other processes outlined below.
- **Changing behaviour.** Optimal intergroup contact acts as a benign form of behaviour modification. Behaviour change is often the precursor of attitude change. New situations require conforming to new expectations. If these expectations include acceptance of outgroup members, this behaviour has the potential to produce attitude change.
- **Generating affective ties.** Emotion is critical in intergroup contact. Anxiety is common in initial encounters between groups, and it can spark negative reactions. Such anxious, negative encounters can occur even without intergroup prejudice. Continued contact generally reduces anxiety, though bad experiences can increase it.
- **Ingroup reappraisal.** Optimal intergroup contact provides insight about ingroups as well as outgroups. Ingroup norms and customs turn out not to be the only ways to manage the social world. This new perspective can reshape your view of your ingroup and lead to a less provincial view of outgroups in general.

## Positive and negative contact

When contact situations create anxiety for those who take part, the outcome is often negative. Contact situations should ideally be long enough for anxiety to decrease and for the members of different groups to feel comfortable with one another. If participants argue with each other or engage in some other form of open conflict, then contact is unlikely to lead to positive effects. Gordon Allport suggested four key criteria that are needed for ***positive contact***, which have since been thoroughly tested and generally held to be true:

- **Equal status.** Both groups must engage on an equal footing. Most research supports this contention, although 'equal status' is difficult to define and has been used in different ways. It is important that both groups expect and perceive equal status going into the situation. The participants having equal status in society at large is generally thought to be less important for a positive outcome than equal status within the contact situation itself. Perception trumps reality here.
- **Common goals.** Both groups should work towards as a common goal, sometimes called a superordinate goal, that can only be attained if the members of the different

groups work together and pool their efforts. (Sports teams are a prime example of this, where people from different backgrounds achieve a common or superordinate group identity through working to win together.)

- **Intergroup cooperation.** Attainment of common goals must be an interdependent effort without intergroup competition. (The 'jigsaw classroom' technique that structures classrooms so that students from different groups are dependent on each other to complete a task is often held up as a good example of this.) Conversely, if there is a perception of intergroup *competition*, for status or resources or something else, outcomes are likely to be negative.
- **Support of authorities, law, or customs.** With explicit social sanction, intergroup contact is more readily accepted and has more positive effects. Support by relevant authorities establishes norms of acceptance. Social norms around the situation should encourage friendly, helpful, egalitarian attitudes and discourage ingroup-outgroup comparisons.

Thomas F. Pettigrew has also added a fifth condition:

- **Friendship potential:** The contact situation should provide the participants with the opportunity to become friends. It should involve informal, personal interaction with outgroup members. Ideally, there should be potential for extensive and repeated contact in a variety of social contexts. According to Pettigrew, more recent research suggests that Allport's conditions are important in part because they provide the setting that encourages intergroup friendship.

Contact situations that don't meet these criteria run the risk of heightening tensions between groups, leading to an increased sense of outgroup threat and an increase in prejudice.

## Group and individual

How can positive experiences of contact with outgroup members be generalised to more positive, less prejudiced views of the outgroup as a whole? There is something of a tension between making group saliency low so that people focus on individual characteristics and not group-level attributes, making group saliency high so that the effect is best generalised to others, and making an overarching common ingroup identity salient.

Each of these approaches have pros and cons, and different ones may be most effective at different stages of a contact situation. Pettigrew has proposed a three-stage model to take place over time to derive optimal benefits from all three approaches:

1. **Decategorisation:** Participants' personal (and not group) identities should be emphasised to reduce anxiety and promote interpersonal liking.
2. **Salient categorisation:** The individuals' social categories should be made salient to achieve generalisation of positive affect to the outgroup as a whole.
3. **Recategorisation:** Participants' group identities are replaced with a more superordinate group: changing group identities from 'us vs them' to a more inclusive 'we'.

The central point here is that for contact to be effective, participants should ***not relate to each other primarily on the basis of group categories***, but to see each other as individuals. Contact should be structured in a way that allows participants' ***individuality and common humanity*** to shine through, which allows a sense of personal connection and familiarity to develop. This leads to a lowering of intergroup anxiety and an increase in positive affect, which leads to improved attitudes and lower prejudice.

This does not mean, however, that group categories should be ignored. At some point or level of the interaction, **group membership should be salient, allowing the positive attitudes to generalise** to members of the group more broadly, rather than only being about the individual in question.

For optimal reduction in prejudice and intergroup anxiety, participants should also be encouraged to develop a shared or superordinate group identity. This identity does not negate their other group identities but exists alongside them and allows them to feel a sense of shared connection and belonging. (Again, sports teams can be a good example of this type of superordinate identity.)