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Article (Accepted Version)

Brown, Rupert and Paterson, Jenny (2016) Indirect contact and prejudice reduction: limits and possibilities. *Current Opinion in Psychology*, 11. pp. 20-24. ISSN 2352-250X

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Indirect contact and prejudice reduction: Limits and possibilities

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Abstract

Here we review recent developments in the field of indirect intergroup contact, an extension of the classic Contact Hypothesis. Three forms of indirect contact are assessed: extended, vicarious and imagined. The strengths and limitations of each are evaluated. Although not as potent as direct contact, indirect forms of contact generally offer a more diverse set of practical solutions for reducing prejudice, especially in challenging contexts where direct contact may be infrequent or impossible.

Regrettably, the incidence of problematic intergroup relationships around the world shows little sign of abating. A wealth of research indicates that face-to-face interactions can be used to improve some intergroup relationships [1,2], but in conflict areas characterized by segregation, genocide and war, such direct interventions may not be possible or even advisable. Undeterred, social psychologists have developed new means of reducing prejudice and discrimination which rely on indirect forms of contact.

Although indirect contact is often described as an extension to Allport's original contact hypothesis, Allport himself acknowledged that indirect approaches could also lead to prejudice reduction [3]. Realizing that direct contact may be too threatening for some, Allport suggested that vicarious contact through films, novels, dramas and fantasy could be "a more effective first step" [3] (p. 453). Despite this foresight, only relatively recently have social psychologists begun to investigate how indirect contact between members of different groups – whether through friends of friends (*extended* contact), via various media (*vicarious* contact), or even by means of imagination (*imagined* contact) – can reduce prejudice and improve intergroup relations.

Extended Contact

Extended contact stems from the knowledge that an ingroup member has a close relationship with someone in an outgroup [4]. In its original formulation, it was assumed that, similar to direct contact, these relationships reduce prejudice via three mechanisms, for which there is now evidential support: it reduces apprehension about intergroup contact (intergroup anxiety [5]); it facilitates a cognitive connection with outgroup members (inclusion of the other in the

self [5]); and it encourages the perception that ingroup and outgroup members accept intergroup contact (group norms [6,7]) . More recent research has focused on the relationship between direct contact and extended contact, and for whom extended contact works best.

In considering the relationship between direct and extended contact, an obvious question is: what is their respective power for reducing prejudice? Most research has found that extended contact has weaker effects than direct contact, especially when both forms of contact were included in the same analysis. Longitudinal studies in Northern Ireland and the Netherlands, for example, found that extended contact did not predict behavioral intentions or attitudes towards outgroups above and beyond the effects of direct contact [8,9**]. In several other, mostly cross-sectional, studies extended contact was negatively associated with prejudice, even controlling for direct contact, but its effects were consistently smaller [10-14,15*,16**].

Although extended contact is generally weaker than direct contact, its effects are by no means negligible, especially in particular contexts or for certain kinds of people. Perhaps the most important of the moderators of the extended contact – prejudice relationship is direct contact itself; extended contact seems to work best when people have little or no direct contact and much less well when there are many opportunities for direct contact [8,11,17] (but cf. [18] for a contrary result). These results are important because they suggest that extended contact can be an important foundation for promoting more favorable intergroup relationships, even in unpromising segregated environments [8].

In addition to this contextual moderator, there are several individual difference variables which affect the efficacy of extended contact. Somewhat counterintuitively, extended contact seems to work better for people whose initial intergroup attitudes are less favorable [9**,11].

This may be because more prejudiced people are also often higher in authoritarianism and hence more sensitive to and influenced by ingroup norms about the appropriateness of cross-group contact [11]. Or it may be that less prejudiced people have sufficient (positive) information about the outgroup already and are somewhat immune to any further information provided by extended contact [9**]. Or this could simply be due to a statistical ‘floor effect’ (e.g., the low RWA participants were already extremely low in prejudice [11]). Another moderator is social comparison orientation – those prone to make social comparisons show stronger associations between extended contact and prejudice than more autonomous individuals, again possibly due to their greater susceptibility to perceived norms [19]. In addition, extended contact effects via friends and family are stronger than those via neighbors and work colleagues, suggesting that interpersonal closeness to the partners within the extended contact relationships is another important moderator [20].

Although there is considerable support for the efficacy of extended contact, especially under certain conditions, one notable limitation is that it does not lend itself readily to the design of prejudice reduction interventions – it will seldom be feasible to arrange for known ingroup members to forge friendships with outgroup members. Other forms of indirect contact offer more promise in this respect and it is to those that we now turn.

Vicarious contact

As noted by Wright and colleagues [4], extended contact can include the mere *observation* of an ingroup member having a relationship with an outgroup member. This is known as *vicarious contact* [21,22**]. As vicarious contact does not require anyone in one’s social network to have direct intergroup contact, just that one observes or is made aware of an intergroup interaction, it is more easily implemented and therefore more practical as an

intervention strategy than either direct or extended contact. Indeed, it can be implemented to an audience of millions across a variety of different media, including newspapers, radio, internet, TV and films. Vicarious contact is not only more far-reaching and easier to implement, it is an effective way to reduce prejudice. A recent meta-analysis [23**] found that 8 vicarious studies (described as ‘extended contact’) reduced prejudice more effectively than the three other forms of contact investigated, including two forms of direct contact [see also 22**,24*]. We now focus on the application and possibilities of vicarious contact with two forms of media: books and audio-visual media.

Reading stories which depict positive intergroup interactions to young school students usually produces positive outcomes, especially when combined with a structured post-story discussion [25-28]. These effects seem to work via some of the known mediators of extended contact such as changing perceived outgroup norms (hearing about positive intergroup relationships may lead the reader to believe that the outgroup is more tolerant [26]), inclusion of others in self, and a reduced identification with the ingroup (reading about cross-group friendships may engender more perspective-taking and a less ‘provincial’ outlook [22**]). In addition, being less identified with the ingroup and perceiving the outgroup member as being typical of the outgroup have been shown to enhance vicarious contact effects [26,29]. Moreover, vicarious contact works just as well for minority group members as majority group members [25,27] and, similar to extended contact, is most effective when direct contact opportunities are minimal [26].

Even reading about a literary fantasy character (Harry Potter) who engages in intergroup interactions can reduce prejudice towards immigrants, homosexuals, and refugees [29]. As the outgroups in the books (e.g., elves, ‘mud-bloods’) are not remotely similar to the

outgroups investigated, such findings show the potential of vicarious contact to produce secondary transfer effects (generalization from one outgroup to others). Practically speaking, therefore, published books, which are generally accessible for schools and individuals, have considerable potential to be used as a tool in a structured classroom setting to produce positive intergroup outcomes [24*]. Nevertheless, it remains to be seen how durable such vicarious effects are; most studies show effects only a few days after the intervention; longer-lasting effects may be harder to produce [25].

Vicarious contact through audio-visual media, such as listening to or observing intergroup interactions via video clips, TV programs, films and radio broadcasts, has also proved to be beneficial. Just watching a friendly videoed interaction between a person without schizophrenia and a person with schizophrenia improved a range of intergroup outcomes including explicit attitudes and actual behavior in a subsequent intergroup encounter [30**]. Furthermore, the utility of vicarious contact has been demonstrated even in a post-conflictual zone [31,32]. Using a radio broadcasted soap opera, featuring members of rival (and formerly genocidal) ethnic groups as protagonists enjoying friendship and even courtship, brought about quite long-lasting positive change in normative beliefs and behavior in Rwanda and Democratic Republic of Congo [see also 33]. Nevertheless, the addition of mediated group discussion via a talk-show seemed to exacerbate intergroup tensions, possibly because it reopened previous ethnic fissures [32]. This underlines the need for caution about unintended consequences when implementing society-wide media interventions.

Although the above research is promising, not every intergroup interaction portrayed by the media is friendly, or even neutral. Intergroup atrocities, whether on an individual (e.g., the murder of Lee Rigby in London in 2013) or collective level (e.g., the 2015 Paris terrorist

attacks), are highly salient in the news. Unfortunately, these negative instances of vicarious contact can also affect the intergroup attitudes of viewers, especially if people are highly identified with the ingroup [34]. However, the effects of negative vicarious contact can be mitigated if the outgroup perpetrator(s) is portrayed, and seen, as atypical [35]. Just as in the case of literary stories, then, identification with protagonists and the perceived typicality of outgroup members can moderate the effects of audio-visual vicarious contact.

Considering these vicarious contact effects and their potential to improve intergroup relations on a mass scale, the scope for further practical application would seem to be enormous. Social psychologists could provide guidance to broadcasters on how to report on intergroup conflicts so as to minimize the social divisiveness caused by the actions of a few. In addition, taking their lead from Paluck [31], they could make telling contributions to anti-racist campaigns and post-conflict reconstruction by developing socially progressive media programs.

Imagined contact

Research in several domains has highlighted the importance of mental simulation on perceptions, attitudes, attributions, and behaviors [36]. Such cognitive elaboration is thought to help individuals rehearse, plan, prepare, and reduce anxiety for actual events, resulting in subsequent improved performances and goal acquisition [37]. Applying this idea to intergroup contact, Crisp and Turner formulated the *imagined contact hypothesis*: simply imagining interacting with a member of an outgroup should help produce more positive intergroup relations by preparing people for successful direct, face-to-face, intergroup contact through similar processes. In discussing subsequent research on this hypothesis, we examine

how recent findings address the initial criticisms levelled against the hypothesis and evaluate its practical effectiveness.

Since its inception [38], the imagined contact hypothesis has met with skepticism including claims that it cannot be implemented in conflictual intergroup settings and that it is a result of demand characteristics [39,40]. Yet it has continued to receive empirical support. A meta-analysis of over 70 studies from many different countries and using a multitude of outgroups found that imagined contact had a significant, albeit small, effect on implicit attitudes, explicit attitudes, emotions, behavioral intentions, and actual behaviors [41**].

Though some critics have doubted its effectiveness in more conflict-ridden contexts [39,40], imagined contact was found to reduce homophobia in Jamaica and Northern Cyprus, two countries where anti-gay hostility is rampant and male homosexuality is criminalized [42]. Those who simply imagined interacting with a gay man for five minutes reported relatively more positive attitudes, behavioral intentions, and social acceptance towards gay men than those who imagined an outdoor scene.

If intergroup bias can be reduced by such a simple imagined contact scenario, an obvious question is: how long will the improvements last? Most research has examined the effects immediately after the imagined contact intervention and, as noted, these effects are relatively small [41**], raising the question as to whether the improvements are just short-term reactions to the experimental materials rather than substantive changes to intergroup bias [39]. However, longitudinal effects of imagined contact have been observed with both school and university students [28,43-45]. For example, foreign exchange students who imagined contact with a host country national a month *before* leaving their home country showed

positive intergroup attitudes and behaviors towards the host country up to six months after returning home [43]. Imagined contact effects have also been found on implicit attitudes [46,47], which suggests that it is the contact, not the demand characteristics of the task, that accounts for the beneficial intergroup outcomes.

Despite these encouraging findings, the imagined contact field still faces challenges: some have been unable to replicate the imagined contact effects [48-51]; others have found limited effects of imagined contact among minority group members [52]; it is not clear how long the effects last for adults or how imagined contact is most effectively combined with other forms of contact; and, as with other contact interventions [23*], effect sizes are typically small. Nevertheless, we agree with Crisp and Turner [36] that the importance of imagined contact lies in the fact that it is not reliant on actual contact and so can be easily and cheaply implemented in the areas in which it is most needed and where other techniques are currently not possible (e.g., highly segregated or conflictual societies).

Concluding remarks

Despite the limitations of the indirect contact strategies reviewed in this paper and their relatively small effects on prejudice, we believe they constitute a promising strategy for improving intergroup relations. Though not as efficacious as direct contact, they are generally more practical and offer a more diverse set of solutions for reducing prejudice, especially in contexts where such interventions are needed most. Crucially, and as envisioned by Allport, they form an important part of the ‘contact continuum’ and lay the foundation for subsequent successful direct contact.

2173 words

Footnote

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