The Contact Hypothesis in Intergroup Relations

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Coming from the Middle-East I have many times observed a seemingly paradoxical behavior of people, which seems to be typical of this geographical area as well as elsewhere in the world. On the one hand, individuals are willing to endanger, even sacrifice their lives, such as in military combat or in a disaster situation, to save the life of a friend, neighbor, or even someone from their community they have never met. However, at the same time, they can completely ignore the lives of others (such as an enemy or member of a rival group), walk away from the disaster area, and let them suffer or even die when with a little effort the latter could have been saved.

One suggested remedy for our rejection of outgroups and outgroup members is intergroup contact. This indeed sometimes works, but on other occasions may have quite a negative effect. Thus, for instance, I remember a statement given during one of my studies in the Israel army by a young, upper middle-class soldier regarding his attitude and feelings towards soldiers from a much "lower" socioeconomic background. He responded: “Before I met them in the army I always thought that they are quite ignorant and limited in their interests, and I did not like it; now, after I met them I really know that that's what they really are—and I hate it.”

In an opening statement for a special issue of the Journal of Social Issues on intergroup contact George Levinger, the editor of that journal, wrote in 1985, generalizing the above examples:

One admirable characteristic of humans is their loyalty towards members of the ingroup... Conversely, a deplorable characteristic of humans is their rejection of members of an outgroup... Much human divisiveness, not to speak of exploitation, war, and even genocide, stems from prejudice against members of outgroups.

And he continues with regard to the contact hypothesis:

It is sometimes assumed that, if only members of different groups can have “contact” with one another, they will learn to appreciate strangers as worthy individuals... But there are also many cases in which the principles of “contact-leads-to-appreciation” fails. In some cases, in-
tergroup contact only confirms that "those other people" are "indeed" hostile, incompetent, or untrustworthy.

This general statement already demonstrates the complexity of the topic we shall be dealing with in this chapter, namely: When people from different groups—ethnic, racial, or cultural—meet with each other, what happens? Many aspects or components are involved in such a contact situation that may have a bearing on the outcome. In the following sections we shall try to analyze systematically variables that have already been studied and found to be relevant on this topic, namely: Under what conditions does intergroup contact have an impact, for whom, and regarding what outcomes? The main variables for which there is already some conclusive evidence will be elaborated henceforth under the following headings: intuitive and theoretical assumptions regarding intergroup contact, input and outcome variables, techniques for change, and conclusions.

INTUITIVE (COMMON SENSE) AND THEORETICAL ASSUMPTIONS

A social and perhaps even naively romantic myth accompanies intergroup contact, attributing to it the power to positively change ethnic and racial attitudes and promote better intergroup relations. This belief is based on the assumption that if people only had the chance to meet each other and interact, the invisible walls separating them would crumble, and better understanding would follow. Many international activities such as sport and cultural events, congresses, student and faculty exchanges, and direct talks between rivaling groups or countries are examples of this basic belief in the power of intergroup contact.

There is some basis in favor of this notion, both in psychological theory and research findings. Still, some disappointing results of intergroup contact are also seen. So, the question arises, why do we always return to "contact" as a major remedy when ethnic and racial conflicts arise? At this point I would like to mention two factors which I think contribute to this tendency:

1. Since the middle of this century, especially after WW II, a strong tendency toward intergroup interactions and international intermixing can be observed. Many countries absorbed immigrants from different ethnic and racial origins as well as foreign workers. New countries have been established that are based on a multiplicity of ethnic groups. International visits and tourism are more frequent and available for broader strata of the population, and more commercial and industrial enterprises have become international, requiring exchange of personnel between countries and cultures. Furthermore, this multiethnicity was followed by the realization, and maybe also an ideological belief, that people will have to live ethnically together rather than separately. Therefore, the question today is no longer "Should we live apart or together?"; it is rather "How can we live together?" The sooner we are able to provide an optimal answer to this question, the better for all of us.

2. Though "contact" has its limitations, it involves a possibility, even a probability, of success. As yet, society and social science have not provided a better approach or technique to help us overcome or reduce prejudice and discrimination. Thus, contact seems, at least for the present, the best potential remedy that can be offered.

There are a number of theoretical considerations that provide the basis for the assumption that intergroup contact can produce change. Here are a few.

Social psychological research has demonstrated that, in general, similarities between people attract them to one another while differences keep them apart. Moreover, people tend to like others who resemble them while they dislike and even resist others who are different. When considering groups, especially ethnic and social ones, it has also been found that in many cases individuals lack a basic knowledge or even have misconceptions about the other group. Such misconceptions are in most cases negative. For instance, in my own country, Israel, many of the Jewish mothers will address (and quite loudly) their children when they are very noisy: "Don't shout like the Arabs." However, one has only to visit a few Arab homes to observe how quietly the interactions between children and their parents are conducted. And another example: during the cold war between the United States and the Soviet Union, people in both countries attributed the same negative personal characteristics as typical of the members of the other group. Thus, there is a high probability that members of one group will
wrongly attribute negative characteristics to the other group. The power and damaging effects of stereotyping are important factors in this process.

One prominent social psychologist labeled this phenomenon "assumed dissimilarity of beliefs." In more general terms, outgroup rejection seems to stem from a conceptual distortion among members of one group that members of the other group are much more different from oneself or one's own group than they really are.

When contact occurs, a process of disconfirming initially held stereotypes regarding another group may start, stressing similarities between oneself and the other group, and consequently reducing prejudice, facilitating acceptance, and thus improving intergroup relations.

In recent years additional theoretical considerations have been emphasized, primarily based on principles evolving from cognitive psychology. The notion is that as intergroup contact increases, a number of cognitive processes may follow in the mind of the interacting group member: ingroup favoritism and outgroup rejection will tend to be less pronounced; people will perceive more variation among individuals of their own group and lesser differences between the groups. In other words, following contact I may feel that not all members of my group are nice and good and similar to each other, and not all the "others" are bad.

In addition, group members may start to interact on an interpersonal rather than an intergroup basis. That is, they will observe members of the other group and attribute characteristics to them as individuals rather than as representatives of the other group. They will equally attribute positive characteristics to the two (or more) interacting groups. In more concrete terms, the tendency will be to look for positive or negative aspects in other people, regardless of whether he or she comes from one's own group or another, even opposite one. Thus, the initial categorization into "we" and "they" may change, centering on the individual regardless of the group to which he or she belongs. Consequently, this may result in deemphasizing intergroup aspects and reducing stereotyping.

**INPUT AND OUTCOME VARIABLES**

**Outcome Variables**

Until recently almost all studies on contact dealt with minority/majority relations in the United States. The emphasis was on the effects of interethnic or racial contact on change in attitudes towards the other group. Most studies have concentrated on the majority (e.g., whites) and its attitudes towards minority (e.g., black) members. Fewer studies investigated attitudes of minority group members towards both the majority group (e.g., whites) and themselves (e.g., self-image, feeling of competence of blacks). In most studies, the emphasis has been on attitudes and feelings towards the other group. Studies on how one behaves in reality towards the group are much rarer. The settings that have been studied are places of work, housing, schools, recreational activities, etc. Thus, a typical study would involve the change of attitudes, perception, or feelings of whites toward blacks following a certain period of racial interactions in a desegregated school, or after working together with blacks in a department store.

Lately, this field of research has broadened: On the one hand, the groups involved in intergroup relations studies became somewhat wider including physically handicapped, slow learners in schools, racial and immigrant groups outside the United States, and so on. An additional development, primarily as a result of Tajfel's (1978) studies and theoretical contributions, is the emphasis on ingroup and outgroup relations in more general terms, regardless of whether the groups are based on ethnic/racial differences or minority/majority relations. While theoretical and empirical contributions regarding ethnic and racial relations originate primarily from studies in the United States, the latter (i.e., Tajfel and his followers) stem from European origin.

One additional important aspect concerning outcomes relates to the issue of generalization. Generalization occurs when contact results in changes that are not confined to the contact situation itself, but also spread beyond it. Furthermore, if a generalization occurs, one wants to know if it refers to intergroup settings or groups other than those related to or involved in the contact experience itself. Most empirical findings indicate specific effects, typical of a certain situation or group studied, rather than generalized results. At present, various social psychologists present controversial arguments as to the conditions required for a contact situation to produce generalized changes. However, it is beyond the scope of this chapter to detail these various arguments. At any rate, we will need more research to clarify this scientifically and socially important issue.
Input Variables

Research has shown that variables related to both the individual and the contact situation may have a decisive effect on outcomes. Findings indicate that most of these effects stem from situational (e.g., the general atmosphere in the group regarding intergroup relations, political attitudes related to the other group, the leadership's position on this issue) rather than individual (e.g., personality aspects or background variables of the interacting individual) aspects. However, before discussing these aspects, we should stress a preliminary consideration, namely, that such contact will occur at all.

People tend to function in groups that are relatively homogeneous in terms of ethnicity, religion, social class, and related factors. Generally, people will not make an effort to go out of their way to meet and interact with "others." So, the first question regarding possible effects of intergroup contact is whether such contact will occur at all in our daily life. As this generally does not occur, special emphasis is put, both in research and in policy decisions, on situations where such intergroup contact is unavoidable (e.g., at work) or occurs as a consequence of a social policy (e.g., interethnic housing projects or school desegregation). In these cases, the effectiveness of intergroup contact is especially important because the policy itself is built on the premise (and promise) of producing better intergroup relations.

We turn now to situational components. The following seem especially important:

1. **Acquaintance potential**, as termed by Cook (1970), is a general label expressing the opportunity inherent in a contact situation for members of one group to get better acquainted with members of the other group. Social settings (e.g., work, schools, social or political groups) may have quite different potentials for producing intergroup changes.

2. **Equal status** of the interacting groups. This variable is especially important in majority/minority group relations when the majority has higher status and the minority is of lower status. There is evidence that when the interacting groups are of equal status or have the same power within the contact situation (e.g., come from the same socioeconomic class, have the same occupational rank or position, or have the same educational background), the attitudes of the majority towards the minority will change in a positive direction. If the minority group or its representatives are on a higher level than the majority group and this does not threaten the latter group, the expected positive change may be even more marked. On the other hand, contact by the majority group with lower-status minority members (similar to the example I gave regarding the soldier who met in the army a "real" low-class member from the other group) may reinforce and even "justify" existing stereotypes, thus resulting in a negative change.

The following table illustrates the changes that tend to occur among majority members when they meet with minority groups or members of different status levels.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Minority Group or Members</th>
<th>Direction of Attitude Change</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Low status</td>
<td>→ Negative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Equal status</td>
<td>→ Generally positive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High status</td>
<td>→ Very positive</td>
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There is still disagreement among social scientists as to what the important components of status are. Are these the **general status components** in society, such as educational and socioeconomic and occupational levels, or are the decisive elements the ones which are relevant in the contact situation itself involving specific individuals (e.g., in school—a good or socially accepted student; at work—an efficient worker; in sports—an excellent player; etc.). The latter consideration is being used in many contact intervention programs. This is because it turns out to be easier to manipulate status components of a group or its members within the contact situation rather than bringing together groups on an equal-status basis when in reality they are of unequal status. Thus, for instance, in
desegregated schools, the status (e.g., level of achievement, general attractiveness) of the white students is generally regarded as higher than that of minority student groups. There is little that can be done about this. Still, what some of the intervention programs in the schools, especially those related to what is labeled “cooperative teaching” strategies, are trying to do is to assign, in rotation, both minority and majority students to status positions (leadership, resource persons, etc.), thus giving both groups equal power and importance within the classroom situation.

3. **Cooperation versus competition.** There can be little doubt that cooperation (e.g., interdependency, common goals, etc.) brings people together while competition draws them apart. This is true for individuals as well as for groups. If a group is involved in activities that require intergroup cooperation, mutual acceptance will follow. On the other hand, if competitive elements prevail, relations may even get worse (e.g., in desegregated schools never compose teams of the same ethnic or racial group, and then let them compete with each other; always intermix the rivaling groups racially). Positive research findings are quite conclusive when cooperative elements are successfully introduced into the contact situation (e.g., cooperative learning in schools).

4. **Intimate versus superficial contact.** When intimacy develops between members of different groups within the contact situation, positive intergroup change will result. Positive and ego-involving relations with a member of the other group and the new information thereby provided tend to facilitate changes in a positive direction. However, when the contact is only casual and on a relatively superficial level, intergroup relations do not change; if such a contact is prolonged, it may even reinforce and strengthen existing negative attitudes.

In studies on summer camps and interracial housing projects, intimacy seems to be a major factor in producing positive intergroup change. On the other hand, when the potential for intimate relations is relatively low, such as in work situations, findings are less consistent and at times even negative.

Ethnic and racial contact in the schools is an interesting case concerning this topic. Here research results are quite diverse. Some show positive changes, many do not report significant or psychologically meaningful findings, while others even indicate a trend in a negative direction. However, when the school desegregation process is accompanied by programs or interventions involving cooperation between the groups, the results are quite impressive in terms of both the development of intimate relations among students of the different groups and the positive change in attitudes and behavior. Though it is not always clear which element produced what outcome (i.e., what did the trick—was it the equal status, the cooperation, the intimacy, or whatever else), the interdependence and interconnections between these components seem to be quite obvious.

5. **Normative support.** The effectiveness of intergroup contact is enhanced when supported by societal norms and consensus. The backing for such intergroup mixing may come from accepted authorities in society such as political, religious, spiritual, or other prestigious public figures, by public institutions such as law-enforcing and other governmental agencies, the constitution of a group or country, and so on. Such support may directly promote social desirability in favor of intergroup contact; indirectly it manifests the social appropriateness of intergroup contact and thereby endorses it.

6. **Need satisfaction.** Hardly any research has directly investigated this dimension in order to evaluate whether attitudes and relations of members involved in intergroup contact will positively change if some personal need is satisfied through this experience. Still, many researchers emphasize the positive attributes of “enjoyment” from intergroup contact and the contact situation itself and its influence on change. In some studies, additional needs were studied, such as affiliation or power. It was found that when personal needs were satisfied through the experience of intergroup contact, enjoyment followed and consequently a change towards the other group was found.

It seems therefore advisable that this dimension should be further studied because it could serve as an important tool for improving intergroup relations through contact. After all, it seems much easier to create an enjoyable and satisfying intergroup experience than to change the groups themselves or to create special situations that can meet the specific conditions mentioned above.

Let us now briefly turn to variables related to the individual. In this area of study we can find some
seemingly contradictory results. On the one hand, we know that a person’s attitude and behavior towards “others” is a basic deep-seated characteristic of one’s personality. How a person thinks and feels about “different” people and also acts towards them is learned early in life and frequently reinforced during the socialization process. This attitude is also related to other central traits such as rigidity/flexibility, closeness/openness, tendency for scapegoating, liberalism/conservatism, socioeconomic and educational levels, and so on. Such a personality syndrome does not easily change. If all this is true, what possible effect can intergroup contact have? Still, research indicates that if, as a result of ethnic contact, positive changes do occur, they are equally found among different types of personalities, as well as among those who had initially shown negative attitudes towards the other group. Thus, it seems that the attempt to use contact for policy-oriented programs to improve intergroup relations is, in principle, worthwhile because potentially it may produce changes where they are indeed needed the most.

Another question may arise whether contact can be effective when the individual already had previous experience with “others.” The effects of contact depend to a large extent on the contact situation itself. Thus, if the additional contact is “more of the same,” probably no change will occur. However, if the type of contact is different, change may occur regardless of the subject’s previous intergroup contacts.

Summarizing the above points, one may reach one of two contradictory conclusions. On the one hand, it is quite clear that the conditions needed for contact to promote better intergroup relations cannot be easily met and implemented; even if that is achieved, success cannot be promised automatically. On the other hand, when the contact situation was carefully designed and carried out according to the facilitating principles already known, positive changes have been found both in research and in practice. At any rate, other alternatives for producing better intergroup relations are at present not very promising. Thus, in spite of the difficulties involved, if societal changes in this area are desired, intergroup contact still seems to be a promising avenue.

TECHNIQUES FOR CHANGE

An enormous amount of research and information has been accumulated during the last half a century, both on ethnic and racial relations in general and on intergroup contact in particular (Amit, 1969, 1976; Hewstone & Brown, 1986; Miller & Brewer, 1984). It seems, therefore, surprising that so little has been converted into action-oriented programs. Only lately some major shift can be detected whereby attempts are made to convert theories and findings into practical tools. This effort is especially salient in desegregated schools and the many intervention programs produced in this area, but also in other areas such as preparing diplomats to interact positively with the foreign population they are assigned to, improving police and civilian interactions, peace negotiators (including third-party interventions) in different national and international conflict situations and many more areas of intergroup encounters.

Most of these programs are geared toward youth and ethnic integration in the schools. They basically try to create an interactive situation with optimal conditions for producing positive change in intergroup attitudes and relations. These programs utilize the principles mentioned above for promoting such a change. Many of them are accompanied by solid research indicating that changes can indeed be produced through these interventions. Still, more programs are needed to encompass broader strata of the population and we need to accumulate more knowledge as to how to successfully implement them with real life groups and organizations.

CONCLUSIONS

The following points summarize most of the research in this area as well as much of what we hear in the news and observe in everyday behavior:

1. Ethnic conflicts and prejudice are a major basis for hatred, discrimination, and genocide. In an era of mass destruction possibilities, reduction of these phenomena should get the highest priority.
2. If one desires positive change in intergroup relations and prejudice without relying solely on possible economic or major political changes, intergroup contact is still the most promising avenue psychology and social sciences can offer.
3. However, contact leading to a decrease in prejudice and an increase in harmony is only an option or possibility, not a “guaranteed” remedy.
4. Only when we take into consideration essential conditions pertaining to the contact situation, is there a good chance to achieve the desired goals.

5. Many real-life situations do not afford these essential conditions. Therefore, we must create specific circumstances involving special programs, techniques, and interventions to achieve positive changes.

6. It is necessary to define a priori the aims and outcomes of such interventions because different outcomes may require specific and differing inputs.

7. Similarly, as intergroup relations and social settings in different societies probably involve different elements, one should be quite hesitant when making generalizations from one situation or culture to the other.

8. The development of interventions may be difficult, time-consuming, and therefore expensive. It will probably require prolonged training of the intervening agents and meticulous preparation of the target population and its organization.

9. In spite of all the difficulties involved, dealing with these problems effectively will probably prove to be less expensive as well as socially more constructive than dealing with them superficially or ignoring them completely. Thus, priority should be given to an intensive effort and further developments, and the sooner the better.

REFERENCES


