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Extended contact

Jenny L. Paterson, Lindsey Cameron & Rhiannon N. Turner (2017)

The SAGE Encyclopaedia of Political Behavior

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From wars and genocide to stereotypes and prejudice, the world is full of examples of group based hostilities and biases. To counter these negative intergroup attitudes and behaviors, social psychologists have long since encouraged members of opposing groups to engage in face-to-face interactions with one another under optimal conditions, for example cooperating with one another to achieve shared goals. Decades of research have highlighted the positive impact of such intergroup contact on intergroup relations. The power of intergroup contact is exemplified by a relatively recent empirical development, referred to as extended contact. According to this approach, simply knowing or observing an in-group member who has a close relationship with an out-group member can be sufficient to improve intergroup relations. In this way, contact has a ripple effect, going beyond those directly involved in the interaction and affecting the attitudes and behaviors of onlookers.

In the nearly 20 years since its formulation, the extended-contact hypothesis has received impressive empirical support. It has been shown to improve both explicit (conscious) and implicit (unconscious) attitudes, increase feelings of trust, improve behavioral intentions, and lead to more positive interactions between group members. It has also been shown to reduce prejudice in many intergroup contexts, for example between groups differing on the basis of ethnicity, religion, immigrant status, weight, age, sexuality, mental health, and physical health. It has been used as a prejudice-reduction technique in a multitude of settings varying from seemingly meaningless groups created in the laboratory to

warring ethnic and religious groups in Northern Ireland, Cyprus, and Rwanda. Extended contact has also been shown to be effective at changing intergroup relations not only among adults but also among schoolage children.

Crucially, extended contact has been found to be most effective in situations where direct contact is limited. Specifically, observing in-group and out-group members positively interacting with one another through various types of media has been shown to reduce prejudice. For example, this vicarious extended contact has been successfully utilized to improve intergroup relations using radio programs in Rwanda; TV shows such as Sesame Street; and reading books, including the Harry Potter novels. Indeed, one of the strengths of extended contact is that it allows individuals to benefit from the positive outcomes of contact in contexts characterized by high levels of segregation and intergroup conflict where direct contact is not easily achievable or advisable.

So how does simply knowing about someone else's relationship have such positive effects? In proposing the extended-contact hypothesis, Stephen C. Wright and colleagues suggested several processes that have since received substantial empirical support. First, the idea of intergroup contact can be anxiety provoking, which can undermine or deter people from engaging in such contact. But just watching others provides a positive example of contact, which reduces this intergroup anxiety, in turn generating more positive perceptions of intergroup interactions and out-groups more generally. Second, compared with face-to-face contact, during extended contact, the group memberships of those involved are more likely to remain salient. This is important because these group members are then seen to represent the typical intergroup behaviors and attitudes of their group. By interacting positively with one another, this conveys positive in-group and out-group norms that are accepting and encouraging of intergroup contact, which in turn predicts more positive intergroup perceptions. Last, extended contact is also thought to lead to what is termed

inclusion of the other in the self. This mechanism leads individuals to see the out-group member, and the outgroup more generally, as part of the self, which, in turn, encourages the individual to treat the out-group more like the self (i.e., positively) and therefore promotes more positive intergroup attitudes and behaviors.

Research has also identified factors that increase the efficacy of extended contact: it is more likely to change attitudes and behavior if the observed intergroup relationship is perceived as positive, if the observer strongly identifies with the in-group, and the observed group members are viewed as being typical of their respective groups.

Despite its significant benefits, extended contact has several limitations. First, research suggests that extended contact does not work as well for minority group members as it does for majority group members. Second, the effect of extended contact tends to be weaker than that of face-to-face contact in improving intergroup relations, in which attitudes are based on firsthand rather than secondhand experiences. Third, because the effect sizes are generally smaller, some have argued that extended contact is too weak to have a meaningful or longlasting impact on intergroup relations outside of the laboratory. However, proponents of extended contact argue that it should not be viewed as an alternative to direct contact but instead as a highly practical and cost-effective prejudice-reduction tool in contexts in which direct contact is difficult or as a preparatory intervention to increase the likelihood and quality of future direct contact.

Further Readings

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