

# Indirect and Mediated Intergroup Contact

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Intergroup contact occurs when members of one social group enter into communication (broadly defined) with members of another group. For current purposes, *social groups* are large-scale groups with which people identify: Groups based on physical characteristics such as skin color, national identities, gender or sexuality, religion, age, or health or disability status might all qualify. Temporary, idiosyncratic, or small groups (e.g., work groups) would not qualify, although at times some of the processes outlined in this entry might extend to smaller group contexts. *Ingroups* are groups with which a given person identifies, and *outgroups* are the parallel groups (within the same sphere e.g., religion) with which one does not identify. If you are Jewish, then you identify with the Jewish religion and other Jews (your ingroup). Muslims, Christians, Buddhists, and any other religious group are potential (although not all always relevant) outgroups. Identification refers both to a sense of “belonging” to a group, and to an investment and affective connection to the group and to other members of the group.

Research on contact has focused extensively on whether such contact offers a pathway to reduce intergroup tension, lessen prejudice, and increase positive intergroup relations, including relations between groups defined by communication variables (e.g., people with hearing impairments). It is this that is the heart of “contact theory.” We now know definitively that contact between members of different social groups *is* an effective way to reduce conflict and increase positive attitudes between groups (Brown & Hewstone, 2005). Meta-analysis has demonstrated that this effect is robust (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). Allport’s (1954) early recommendations for effective intergroup contact suggested that it should occur in situations of relatively equal status, with groups working cooperatively toward some shared goal; that it should be pleasant; that it be supported by relevant local institutions; and that it should have some long-term prospect for developing relationships. These factors appear to facilitate good intergroup contact, but (perhaps with the exception of it being “pleasant”) they do not appear to be essential. Cross-group friendships are a potent driver of reduced prejudice (Davies, Tropp, Aron, Pettigrew, & Wright, 2011). Other entries in this encyclopedia review the essential literature on intergroup contact in detail.

Despite the positive effects of intergroup contact, it is not without problems. At least five issues can make direct face-to-face contact a less than ideal solution to intergroup prejudice:

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- groups may be physically segregated from one another, either as a historical artifact, by legislation, or due to other barriers (distance, physical barriers such as oceans or mountains);
- groups may exist in a situation of extreme conflict such that fears of violence overshadow attempts at contact;
- groups may exist in a situation of distrust, such that attempts to bring groups together result in communication that is unpleasant;
- even in situations not infused with distrust or conflict, group differences may be associated with anxiety (“How will ‘they’ behave?” “Will I say something stupid?”);
- within groups, individuals who attempt contact with outgroups are sometimes treated as “traitors” or as people who are attempting to pass and join the outgroup.

In all of these situations, contact either is difficult to logistically organize, or may be counterproductive. Negative contact (anxiety-ridden, high in conflict) does not reduce prejudice or improve intergroup attitudes, and may worsen the intergroup environment (Barlow et al., 2012). In such situations, it is reasonable to seek alternatives to direct contact.

### **Forms of indirect and mediated contact**

Recent research in this area has explored a number of alternatives to direct contact, and these are the focus of the current entry. Indirect contact most broadly is defined by what it is not: It is contact between members of different groups that is *not* face-to-face, physically co-present, real-time interaction. An excellent and extended review is provided by Vezzali, Hewstone, Capozza, Giovannini, and Wölfer (2014). Indirect contact covers a broad array of possibilities, which can be subdivided in the following manner (although the literature lacks solid and consistent definitions or labels, and understandably differentiates at different levels of abstraction for different purposes).

#### *Vicarious contact*

Vicarious contact occurs when we observe contact between an ingroup and an outgroup member but do not participate in it. Observing contact allows for the possibility of learning how contact occurs, and (via perspective-taking or empathy-related processes) “experiencing” contact *through* the people who are actually engaged in it. As the name implies, theoretical constructs related to vicarious (social) learning may be operational here. Wright, Aron, McLaughlin-Volpe, and Ropp (1997) show that observing positive contact between an ingroup and an outgroup member results in similar outcomes to having actually engaged in contact, while having the advantages of not experiencing the anxiety that might accompany actual contact.

### *Extended contact*

Extended contact occurs when we know *about* an ingroup member who has contact with an outgroup member, but we are not ourselves a part of those interactions (Wright et al., 1997). It may be helpful to also include in this definition that the contact is not directly observed (so as to distinguish this from vicarious contact). The ingroup member might be a friend, a stranger, or a celebrity. Theoretical processes related to *norms* become important here, in that the knowledge of intergroup contact may reshape ideas of what is possible between the ingroup and outgroup. Experimental, quasi-experimental, and correlational studies have provided empirical evidence that people knowing about intergroup friendships show less prejudice than those who do not, even while controlling for direct contact with outgroup members. Extended contact explains increased tolerance among people who live in more diverse neighborhoods, independent of whether they personally interact with any of their surrounding diversity. It also explains why knowing about contact between our ancestors and members of an outgroup can improve intergroup attitudes.

### *Mediated contact*

Contact is mediated when some of the contact process occurs via a technologically mediated channel. Vicarious and extended contact can be mediated, as can traditional direct contact, resulting in possibilities such as the following:

- *Computer-mediated contact*: interacting with an outgroup member via computer or computer-like device (e.g., email, texting, computer conferencing) (Walther, 2009). Contact over the Internet is far less costly in terms of time, travel, and accommodation than direct contact, and also avoids real dangers that might be inherent in contact in situations of overt conflict.
- *Parasocial contact*: observing a member (or members) of an outgroup via a mediated channel, such as watching a television program featuring outgroup members (Schiappa, Gregg, & Hewes, 2006). Allport himself (1954, pp. 200–202) noted the importance of the mass media in prejudice. Schiappa et al. (2006) point out that people's parasocial contact with (some) outgroups may be much greater than their actual, or even extended contact with outgroup members; these researchers found support for contact-like effects from parasocial contact in correlational and experimental designs.
- *Mediated vicarious contact*: when viewers observe an interaction between an ingroup and outgroup member via a mediated channel. Joyce and Harwood (2014) note that in viewing *intergroup* relationships (as opposed to just outgroup characters), viewers can model and learn appropriate intergroup behaviors from the perspective of the ingroup member. As such, exposure to a quality intergroup *relationship* in the media should typically be more powerful in influencing attitudes than simply exposure to a positive portrayal of an outgroup member (i.e., parasocial contact). In the sense used here, therefore, mediated vicarious contact is a (potentially more powerful) subset of parasocial contact.

### *Imagined contact*

Recently, the literature on contact has begun to examine the potential for mental visualizations or simulations of contact to operate in similar ways to “real” contact. A meta-analysis demonstrates conclusively that imagined contact can indeed be effective (Miles & Crisp, 2014). Imagined contact is effective when it is positive, when participants are encouraged to elaborate on their mental imagery, and also when it is relatively easy for the participant to engage in the task (Miles & Crisp, 2014).

As should be clear from this discussion, indirect contact overcomes problems with direct contact by distributing contact across space or time, or by removing the individual from actual contact. Harwood (2010) suggested arraying forms of contact in a two-dimensional space defined by *involvement of self in contact* (the extent to which I am immediately involved and participating) and *richness of the self–outgroup experience* (the number of perceptual cues and availability of feedback in a contact experience). This “contact space” scheme offers productive ideas for where and when specific moderators and mediators would be effective.

## **Mediators**

A subset of mediators that work in direct contact have also been shown to operate with indirect contact. In particular, *anxiety* serves to reinforce stereotypes and negates prosocial effects of contact, and reduced anxiety is a mediator in positive effects of direct contact (Voci & Hewstone, 2003) as well as imagined (Miles & Crisp, 2014), extended (Paolini, Hewstone, Cairns, & Voci, 2004), and mediated contact (Pagotto & Voci, 2013). *Empathy* mediates contact effects by shifting levels of categorization and placing outgroup members and the self in the same category (Gaertner, Dovidio, & Houlette, 2010), as well as by increasing *trust* (Tam, Hewstone, Kenworthy, & Cairns, 2009). Indeed, trust is a mediator of the effects of extended, imagined, and media contact (Pagotto & Voci, 2013). *Self-disclosure* has positive mediating effects (Soliz, Ribarsky, Harrigan, & Tye-Williams, 2010), providing a route to accurate knowledge of the outgroup partner. *Accommodative processes* also mediate direct contact (Harwood, Hewstone, Paolini, & Voci, 2005) and imagined contact (Chen, Joyce, Harwood, & Xiang, 2016). *Inclusion of other in the self* operates as a mediator: Contact can cause outgroup targets, and ultimately the outgroup as a whole, to become incorporated into the self-concept, which leads to more positive outgroup attitudes. The same process occurs in imagined contact and extended contact (Wright et al., 1997). Chen et al. (2016) show that specific communicative mediators operate better for specific outcome variables (e.g., in imagined contact *humor* mediates effects of positive contact on perceptions of outgroup *sociability* but not perceptions of outgroup *trustworthiness*).

A complementary set of mediators is particularly important in indirect contact, and clarifies indirect contact’s *advantages* over direct contact. *Anxiety* appears again here, in that anxiety is globally lower in indirect contact. Therefore, indirect forms of contact should lead to lower anxiety than direct contact, and that reduced anxiety (which presumably is more pleasant than anxious interaction) should lead to more positive intergroup attitudes. *Norms* are also important: When we hear about or witness *other*

ingroup members engaged in intergroup contact (extended contact; vicarious contact) it shifts our understanding of the appropriateness of intergroup contact, and thus our attitudes (Gómez, Tropp, & Fernández, 2011). *Hyperpersonal processes* (Walther, 1996) are important in computer-mediated settings; the editing, pausing before responding, and anonymity of computer-mediated communication (CMC) can lead to idealization of partners, which should lead to positive outcomes from CMC-related contact, and perhaps other forms of contact that allow similar processes (e.g., imagined or extended contact). Indeed, being able to self-edit should lead to concretely more pleasant contact, again presumably leading to more positive contact experiences overall. Finally, feelings of “*elevation*” from media content might make viewers feel more connected to humanity as a whole, and reduce intergroup biases (Oliver et al., 2015).

## Moderators

As with the previous section, I first discuss moderators that have been studied across many forms of contact, and then those that are particularly relevant for indirect contact. Perhaps the most studied moderator of contact effects is *group salience or typicality*. The effects of contact generalize most strongly to perceptions of groups as a whole when participants are aware of group memberships and group members are perceived as typical of their groups (Brown & Hewstone, 2005). In the simplest sense, contact with another person will not change attitudes about their group if their group is invisible (including it being intentionally concealed). This point is particularly relevant to groups that rely on disclosure of some form to become visible (e.g., gay people, certain religious groups). Even with groups that are clearly visible, however, the extent to which a group membership is psychologically salient to the participants affects generalization. Abstract-level knowledge that a conversation partner is Hindu, for instance, does not substantially influence attitudes about Hindus in a situation where religion is unimportant or not on the participants’ “radar.” These effects extend to indirect contact, including media exposure (Joyce & Harwood, 2014) and imagined contact (Harwood et al., 2015). The effects of contact are also moderated by *group status*: Contact effects are larger for majority and dominant groups (Tropp & Pettigrew, 2005); effects on minorities are smaller and sometimes counterproductive. This majority–minority differential extends to imagined contact, although the effects of extended contact may be equally strong for majority and minority groups (Gómez et al., 2011). Experiences of *prior* contact moderate the effects of *present* contact, including extended contact. Extended contact has stronger effects for those with fewer direct contact experiences; the same applies with parasocial and vicarious mediated contact (Ramasubramanian, 2007). *Individual difference* variables influence the effectiveness of contact. Contact, including indirect contact, has stronger effects for those higher in authoritarianism and social dominance orientation.

Specific to indirect contact, social cognitive theory suggests that we are more likely to imitate and symbolically learn from a model’s behavior if we identify with or are attracted to the model. In the case of vicarious media contact, identification with ingroup characters enhances the effects of exposure to intergroup interaction (Joyce & Harwood, 2014). Beyond the media, extended contact via more *intimate*

ingroup relationships (e.g., family) is more strongly related to outgroup trust than extended contacts via less intimate ingroupers (e.g., neighbors). A combination of social cognitive theory and contact theory suggests other ways in which indirect contact should be more effective. Witnessing people being rewarded for engaging in intergroup contact, witnessing punishments for avoiding contact, seeing respected ingroup members engaging in intergroup contact, and the like, should all encourage more and more successful intergroup encounters.

## Outcomes

Most contact theory research examines attitudes toward the outgroup as the main dependent variable. However, research also examines desire for future communication with the outgroup, a particularly important outcome for indirect contact as it suggests a desire to move *from* indirect *to* direct contact (Harwood et al., 2015). Indeed, we still know relatively little about why people might actively seek out direct or indirect intergroup contact, including what makes intergroup media, for instance, desirable to viewers (Joyce & Harwood, 2015). Other outcomes include physiological responses, attitude strength and implicit associations with outgroups, including from mediated contact. Some variables that have been primarily examined as mediators are also valuable outcomes in their own right (e.g., trust, forgiveness, reconciliation). Perceived outgroup heterogeneity is also an important outcome of contact (Soliz & Harwood, 2003): seeing the outgroup as “not all the same” is a positive outcome for intergroup relations. Contact has *secondary transfer* effects, whereby positive effects on attitudes toward one group generalize to other groups, particularly groups similar to the target group.

## Additional considerations

### *Negative contact*

Poorly designed or executed contact has negative effects. This is essential to understanding real-world contact applications and theoretical models of the effect. The negative effects of negative contact can be stronger than the positive effects of positive contact (Barlow et al., 2012). Media portrayals of minorities are negative (Mastro, 2010), and consequences of exposure to such portrayals are also negative (Dixon, 2008), consistent with a negative vicarious contact model. Media literacy might ameliorate such effects (Ramasubramanian, 2007), as might presenting a negative outgroup target as *atypical* of the outgroup as a whole, or presenting the outgroup member as someone who the rest of the outgroup does not approve of. We cannot expect positive effects from exposure to negative media models (Tukachinsky, Mastro, & Yarchi, 2015).

### *New codes and channels of communication*

Other contexts or pathways of intergroup contact deserve consideration, including musical contact. Music’s lack of explicit semantic content might be an advantage in

achieving contact that is enjoyable with a low potential for conflict, and highly positive emotional content (Harwood, 2015). Other potentially valuable forms of contact beyond traditional social interaction might include playing cooperative video games together (Eastin, Appiah, & Cicchirillo, 2009), and other cooperative joint activities such as hobbies, volunteer activities, or educational projects.

### *Connections between types of contact*

Attention should be paid to interactions *between* types of contact. In particular, one form of indirect contact might open the door for others, or for direct contact (Harwood, 2010); extended cross-group friendships, for instance, can lead to *real* friendships. More work should also include different types of contact in single studies, to compare overall effect sizes and the relative power of specific mediators and moderators.

### *Different groups*

Finally, more work should examine variation among specific group memberships in changing contact's effects. Contact effects vary by group (e.g., stronger effects for contact with gay people than elderly people: Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006), and we know little about why. Attention to sociological, historical, and psychological factors will be important here; of specific interest for the current review would be increased understandings of why specific forms of indirect contact might be particularly effective for certain groups, but less effective for others.

SEE ALSO: Intergroup Communication, Overview; Intergroup Conflict and Reconciliation; Intergroup Contact Theory; Intergroup Media; Interracial Communication, Critical Approaches; Prejudice and Discrimination

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