Imagining harmonious intergroup relations

In order to ensure harmony in multicultural societies, it is essential that interventions are developed to tackle intergroup prejudice and discrimination. This article examines three types of intergroup contact that help to improve intergroup relations. Encouraging friendships between members of different groups should be especially effective in multicultural settings. In segregated settings, however, indirect forms of contact, such as learning about the contact experiences of others, or even imagining an intergroup encounter, may be useful.

How can we best encourage positive relationships between members of different social groups? Are different interventions useful in different social contexts?

Cross-group friendship
Theorists have argued that intergroup contact can have long-term close relationships rather than initial acquaintance should be particularly effective in reducing prejudice (Prejudice, 1998). Interactions between friends tend to be pleasant and comfortable, so it makes sense that cross-group friendships would have an especially positive impact on attitudes towards outgroup members. Analysing a large sample from across Europe, Pettigrew (1997) found that participants with outgroup friends reported significantly less prejudice, whereas the effects of neighbour and co-worker contact were considerably weaker. My colleagues and I were interested in an additional possible mechanism, self-disclosure: the voluntary presentation of information of a personal nature to another person. And disclosure features prominently in theories of friendship development, which argue that close relationships develop as a result of an escalation of the breadth and intimacy of the interactions that two individuals reciprocally disclose to one another (Altman & Taylor, 1973). Studies show that when people disclose, we not only feel greater attraction towards them, but we also disclose more in return, leading to mutual intergroup attraction (Berg & Wright-Buckley, 1988). In parallel to research on personal relationships, we wondered whether self-disclosure might be an important component of intergroup friendships. We investigated the processes underlying the relationship between cross-group friendships and outgroup attitudes in the context of relations between the South Asian and white communities in the U.K (Turner et al., 2007b, Study 1). White primary school children completed a questionnaire regarding their attitudes towards, and closeness of friendships with, attitude towards, South Asians. We also asked children how anxious they felt at the thought of interacting with South Asian children, and how much they intended to disclose to South Asian children. Not surprisingly, our findings pointed to the importance of cross-group friendships. Self-disclosure among friends is thought to help reduce intergroup anxiety. However, the relationship between cross-group friends and self-disclosure was also mediated by self-disclosure: the more South Asian friends children had, the greater their intention to disclose to outgroup members, in turn leading to more positive their attitude towards South Asians generally. Our later studies replicated this finding using a comprehensive measure of self-disclosure, which incorporated recall as well as intentions to disclose, and to and from the outgroup member.

So why is self-disclosure associated with more positive outgroup attitudes? We conducted a questionnaire study among white British undergraduates regarding their experiences with analgesic response, and found that three mechanisms play a role (Turner et al., 2007b, Study 4). First, self-disclosure was associated with greater empathy towards the outgroup, presumably because it is likely to involve learning about the innermost thoughts, hopes and fears of an outgroup member. The more empathy expressed towards South Asians, the more positively South Asians were perceived in general. Second, self-disclosure increased the perceived importance of cross-group friendships. Self-disclosure among friends is thought to enhance potential efficacy, that is, people learn new information which increases the resources, perspectives, and identities available to them, and these things are important to us when we help to achieve personal goals (Aron et al., 2001). This is especially likely among cross-group friends, because they can draw on one another’s social group experience and perspective. We found that participants who perceived cross-group friendships as important had a more positive attitude towards South Asians, and in turn were more likely to help us to achieve personal goals (Van Dick et al., 2004). Third, the more people the participants knew who were disclosed to by outgroup members, the more outgroup attitudes improved. Trust develops over time as a result of experiences that show a person’s behaviour is predictable and dependable (Kerr et al., 1999). The more we learn about someone through their disclosures, the more certain we are that we can predict their future behaviour in critical, integrity-threatening situations, and associated with more positive outgroup attitudes. This is because self-disclosure implies a trust and confidence in the recipient, and people trust and like those who trust them (Perry & Mirels, 1981).

Despite the clear benefits of cross-group friendships, it has one significant practical limitation: It cannot only be useful when the opportunity for contact exists. Unfortunately, there are many examples where intergroup relations afford few such opportunities. Take Northern Ireland, for example, according to the Office for National Statistics, many Catholic and Protestant communities in Belfast have a very low percentage of contact with members of the other community, and only 5 per cent of Northern Irish children attend mixed Catholic/Protestant schools. There is also evidence that even in diverse and multicultural communities where people do have the opportunity for cross-group friends, they tend to form friendships primarily with ingroup members (e.g. Aboud & Sankar, 2007). At first glance, this may seem like another example of the group boundary hypothesis. But research on indirect forms of contact – extended and imagined – may provide a solution.

Extended contact
Extended contact is the idea that mere knowledge about ingroup members have friends in the outgroup will reduce intergroup prejudice. Wright et al. (1997)
found that the more ingroup members at people knew who have outgroup friends, the more positive are their attitudes towards that outgroup in general. This consistent success has been developed as an educational intervention to encourage intergroup tolerance. Cameron et al. (2000) developed stories involving friendships between British and refugee children, which primary school children read over several consecutive weeks. The researchers found this to be effective at generating more positive attitudes towards refugees.

We invited 120 participants to complete an extended context in a questionnaire study among South Asian and white secondary school students (Turner et al., 2007). Participants were asked to report how many outgroup friends they knew with any outgroup members, how many outgroup friends they knew personally and how many outgroup members they knew with anyone who has an outgroup friend. That is, it may be that no outgroup friends exist even within one’s wider social network. Our recent research suggests, however, that even imagining intergroup contact might improve intergroup attitudes.

Cross-group friendship is more effective at reducing prejudice than less intimate forms of contact

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Imagined contact

Imagined contact can be defined as the ‘mental simulation of social interaction with a member or members of an outgroup category’ (Crip and Turner, 2009, p. 234); and it should have benefits for intergroup relations for two reasons. First, mental imagery has been found to elicit similar emotional and motivational responses as the real experience (Daddis et al., 1997), and neuropsychological studies have shown that it shares the same neurological basis as perception and employs similar neurological mechanisms (Kosslyn et al., 2001). Accordingly, imagining oneself meeting with an outgroup member should automatically activate thoughts and feelings similar to those experienced in real-life intergroup interactions. Second, observing a positive relationship between members of the ingroup and an outgroup should lead participants to realise that they have nothing to fear from the outgroup, and make them less anxious about the prospect of future face-to-face encounters (Wright et al., 1997).

Work on extended contact shows that actual experience of contact with outgroups is not the only way that contact can benefit intergroup relations. The importance of this idea for policy makers and educators seeking to develop interventions to reduce prejudice cannot be overstated because it suggests that contact may be a far more powerful and flexible means of improving intergroup relations than previously thought. But under extended contact could suffer the same limitation as actual contact. In highly segregated settings one simply might not know anyone who has an outgroup friend: that is, it may be that no outgroup friends exist even within one’s wider social network. Our recent research suggests, however, that even imagining intergroup contact might improve intergroup attitudes.

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know who had outgroup friends, the less anxious they were at the prospect of contact, and in turn, the more positive their outgroup attitude. There are two reasons for this. First, participants are able to observe intergroup contact from a ‘safe distance’, and learn about outgroup members without the anxiety inherent in initial direct intergroup encounters. Second, observing a positive relationship between members of the ingroup and an outgroup should lead participants to realise that they have nothing to fear from the outgroup, and make them less anxious about the prospect of future face-to-face encounters (Wright et al., 1997).

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