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Hewstone, M., & Hughes, J. (2015). Reconciliation in Northern Ireland: The Value of Intergroup contact. *BJPsych International*, 12(3), 65-67.
<http://www.rcpsych.ac.uk/usefulresources/publications/journals/internationalinfo/archive.aspx>

Published in:
BJPsych International

Document Version:
Peer reviewed version

Queen's University Belfast - Research Portal:
[Link to publication record in Queen's University Belfast Research Portal](#)

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Reconciliation in Northern Ireland: The Value of Intergroup contact

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Acknowledgements. We gratefully acknowledge Atlantic Philanthropies for funding this research.

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Abstract

Northern Ireland is still a country riven by segregation, caught between peace and reconciliation. Extensive survey research shows that intergroup contact has a key role to play in achieving reconciliation, whether through generic contact, cross-group friends (most effective) or indirect forms of contact. Segregation is most profound in education, but we show the benefits of contact in all mixed schools. A recent evaluation of a new Shared Education Programme (SEP), that provides children with the opportunity to study with and meet pupils from the other community, reveals reliable effects via promoting contact. The Northern Ireland Assembly's support for SEP is based on sound psychological principles and robust research evidence. [109 words]

We must never forget those who have died or been injured, and their families. But we can best honour them through a fresh start, in which we firmly dedicate ourselves to the achievement of reconciliation, tolerance, and mutual trust (Article 2 of The Belfast [*Good Friday*] Agreement, signed April 10, 1998).

The Belfast Agreement of 1998 marked the beginning of a comparatively peaceful period in Northern Ireland's troubled history after three decades of sectarian violence between groups associated with the main Catholic and Protestant communities. Since 1969, over 3,600 people have been killed in "The Troubles", and more than half of the population knows someone who has been injured or killed as a direct result of sectarianism. In the seventeen years since its signing, violent conflict has reduced significantly and life in the region has gained a normalcy for residents that could not have been imagined during the worst years of the conflict. However, although the killing has largely ceased, Northern Ireland remains a deeply divided society and nowhere is this more apparent than in education. Northern Ireland still has to move beyond 'peace' (or the absence of war) to 'reconciliation' (when members of previously hostile groups come to mutual acceptance based on trust and respect). Emphasis has long been placed on promoting intergroup contact between Catholics and Protestants. We highlight the importance of this mixing, which has demonstrable impact on attitudes, trust and even forgiveness towards the other community. We then focus specifically on mixing in educational settings, which we see as fundamental for reconciliation.

Intergroup contact

We first explore the evidence in support of the prejudice-reducing effects of

direct, face-to-face intergroup contact, and then turn to extended contact (an indirect form of contact). We consider the impact of contact on outgroup *attitudes*, *trust* and *forgiveness*.

Direct contact

Given that extensive segregation still pervades all aspects of Northern Irish society (see Hewstone et al., 2005) positive contact with members of the other community should provide a means to reducing intergroup anxiety (anxiety about mixing with the outgroup), overcoming stereotypes, and promoting more positive outgroup attitudes. We have demonstrated this in numerous studies, using both cross-sectional and longitudinal survey designs, with both university students and members of the general public as respondents (e.g., Paolini et al., 2004; Tausch et al., 2010). We have also shown longitudinally, using a large sample of respondents drawn at random from four areas of Belfast, that those who have more cross-group friendships at time 1 will be more likely to trust outgroup members one year later than will those with fewer or no friendships (Kenworthy et al., in press); there was no evidence that those high in initial trust were more likely to seek out cross-group friendships.

If generic contact can reduce prejudice, then it is unsurprising that having cross-group *friends* is particularly effective. Paolini et al. (2004) found that having cross-group friends was associated with reduced intergroup anxiety in samples of both students (Study 1) and adults in the general population (Study 2); contact had its effect on attitudes, in part, via reduced anxiety. Kenworthy et al. (in press, Study 3) also showed that cross-group friendship in a large random sample predicted intergroup emotions and trust via more intimate self-disclosure (sharing personal information about oneself).

Our research has also shown that intergroup contact is associated with greater forgiveness, even among respondents from a national sample who had personally been affected by intergroup violence (Voci et al., 2015), and that forgiveness is related to health outcomes (e.g., mild psychiatric morbidity; Myers et al., 2009).

Extended contact

Direct contact can only improve intergroup relations if people have the opportunity for direct, face-to-face contact. If people do not live in the same neighborhood, attend the same school, or occupy the same workplace as outgroup members, they are unlikely to come into contact with them, let alone develop friendships with them. Hence the value of *extended contact*, an indirect form of contact that refers to the knowledge that an individual has of an ingroup member's direct contact with outgroup members (e.g., whether a Catholic knows fellow Catholics who have Protestant friends, or *vice versa*). Paolini et al. (2004) asked their participants (Catholic and Protestant students in Study 1, and members of the general population in Study 2) to report the number of ingroup friends they had who had cross-group friends. Extended cross-group friendship was associated with lower levels of outgroup prejudice (controlling for direct contact), a relationship that was due to a significant reduction in intergroup anxiety.

It might be thought that cross-group friendships will be relatively rare, thus limiting the potential for extended contact. However, Tausch et al. (2011) examined the effects of extended contact via different types of ingroup contacts (neighbours, work colleagues, friends, and family members). As expected, extended contact via more intimate ingroup relationships (i.e., friends and family) was more strongly related to outgroup trust than was extended contact via less intimate ingroup relations (i.e., neighbors and work colleagues). But we also found that within each level of

intimacy, extended contact was related to outgroup trust only at high levels of rated closeness to ingroup contacts.

Finally, we have found that the negative relationship between extended cross-group friendship and prejudice is consistently stronger for participants with few direct cross-group friends or who live in segregated rather than mixed neighbourhoods (Christ et al., 2010, Study 2). Christ et al. found that extended contact at time 1 increased participants' inclination to help outgroup members one year later, and this effect of extended contact was amplified for participants who had little experience of direct contact with outgroup members.

Education

We cannot identify school segregation as a cause of sectarianism, but the mere fact of separate education allows prejudice and stereotypes to flourish. Yet both communities support this school system, although in surveys the majority of the population claim they would support integrated education or would, at least, like to see some mixing between pupils from different schools. How is this best done?

Segregated vs integrated education

It is estimated that around 94% of primary and post-primary pupils from the main Catholic and Protestant communities are educated in schools that are predominantly 'own' religion. Dating back to the late 1970s, and until recently, the only schools-based means of promoting contact has been via integrated schools (of which there are today 62, across primary and secondary sectors, accounting for around 5% of overall provision). Research has typically found that integrated education promotes more harmonious relations (Stringer et al., 2009). But do schools

have to be 'integrated schools' to promote reconciliation, or does simply attending a standard state school that is mixed do some good?

We have begun to answer this question with a 5-year longitudinal survey of children attending Catholic, Protestant or integrated schools (Hughes et al., 2013). So far, we have reported only on the data from wave 1, based on 51 schools that agreed to take part, and a final sample of 3565 students (2422 Catholics, mean age = 12.36; 1143 Protestants, mean age = 12.34). We found, first, that children attending integrated schools generally had more contact and warmer outgroup attitudes than children in Protestant and Catholic schools. In addition, children attending Protestant schools scored higher on the contact and attitude measures than children attending Catholic schools. In exploring possible reasons for these results, we found that it seems to be the *mix* of the student body that is the most important factor in promoting more positive cross-group relations rather than the specific type of school attended. Future analyses with additional waves of data will provide a more rigorous analysis of whether attitudes change over time, and how.

Shared education

Launched in 2007 the Shared Education Programme (SEP) seeks to offer Catholic and Protestant pupils from the different school sectors the opportunity for sustained, curriculum-based contact that can help bring about a more cohesive society (Hughes et al., 2012). (<http://www.schoolsworkingtogether.co.uk/>).

Rather than emphasizing reconciliation objectives, SEP encourages participating schools to devise projects that target other shared educational priorities. In practice, this often means that collaborating schools will agree to offer non-compulsory subject choices at one or other school, and that all children wishing to take these subjects for national exam-based courses will attend the relevant school for

classes. As SEP does not require structural change in the school system, it has the advantage of appealing to parents who desire to educate their children within a particular faith tradition, but may also wish for their children to have some experience of mixing with the other community. SEP offers an alternative for those who are happy for their children to mix with others at school, but who also cherish and want to protect a uniquely separate school type.

Within SEP, contact occurs over repeated occasions, across a school year, and provides a direct contact experience for those directly involved, and an indirect contact experience for those who themselves do not participate, but who have friends that do. Does it work? Hughes et al. (2012) reported an initial evaluation of the impact of participation in SEP based on 577 students from 14 schools in Northern Ireland between the ages of 12 and 18 (264 Catholics, 313 Protestants; 162 participants involved in SEP, 415 students not). We measured whether a range of outcomes (out-group attitudes, positive action tendencies and out-group trust) were impacted via, first, intergroup contact (cross-group friendships) and, second, intergroup anxiety. We found that being in a school that is involved in SEP promoted more positive outgroup orientations by increasing outgroup friendships and reducing intergroup anxiety. These results remained significant even after controlling for respondents' religious community, age, gender and whether or not they were involved in other collaborative activities.

Conclusion

Intergroup contact has a key role to play in promoting reconciliation in Northern Ireland. This contact will be most effective in the form of close friendships with members of the other community, but indirect forms of contact are also effective. Segregation in education will sustain division in society unless interventions such as

SEP become widespread, providing each child growing up the opportunity to meet pupils from the other community. The Northern Ireland Assembly has now passed a motion in support of prioritizing shared education (Northern Ireland Executive, 2011). This policy is based on sound psychological principles and robust research evidence.

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