

# Improving Intergroup Relations

*Building on the Legacy  
of Thomas F. Pettigrew*

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# The Role of Trust in Intergroup Contact

## Its Significance and Implications for Improving Relations between Groups

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To date, the most influential statements on intergroup contact theory have placed a special emphasis on conditions of the contact situation, stressing that certain optimal conditions are necessary to reduce prejudice and promote positive intergroup relations (Allport, 1954; Williams, 1947; see also Pettigrew, 1998; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2005). This emphasis grew largely from the view that intergroup relations are characterized by open hostility, conflict, and segregation (see Brameld, 1946; Myrdal, 1944). Hence, to set the stage for positive relations between groups, optimal conditions such as cooperation, equal status, common goals, and authority sanction must be established firmly and explicitly within the contact situation.

However, research on intergroup contact has experienced a renaissance in recent years, with a virtual explosion of studies being conducted from a range of research directions (see Brown & Hewstone, 2005 for a recent review). Recent theorizing suggests that it may not be sufficient to focus simply on conditions imposed within the contact situation in order to improve intergroup relations (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). Rather, emerging perspectives have emphasized our need to understand how conditions of the contact situation translate into the development of meaningful relationships across group boundaries.

At the forefront of this work, Thomas Pettigrew (1997a; 1997b; 1998) has encouraged us to return to a focus on affective processes, both in terms of the kinds of contact that are most likely to improve intergroup attitudes, and the kinds of positive outcomes we can expect from such contact (see also Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006; in press; Tropp & Pettigrew, 2005a). In a seminal paper, Pettigrew (1997a) presented compelling evidence that the affective ties generated by close, cross-group friendships can be especially effective in promoting positive intergroup attitudes. With survey responses from seven European samples, Pettigrew (1997a) found that intergroup contact in the form of cross-group friendships was consistently and negatively associated with a range of prejudice measures. Moreover, the positive effects of cross-group friendships were particularly strong for prejudice measures based on affective responses, such as feelings of sympathy and admiration for the outgroup. By contrast, less intimate contact with outgroup members, such as with coworkers or neighbors, yielded considerably smaller effects.

Such findings have fueled a great deal of interest in the role of cross-group friendships as a means of improving intergroup relations (see also Vonofakou et al., this volume). Many recent studies have found that having friendships with outgroup members relates to significantly lower levels of intergroup prejudice (Levin, van Laar, & Sidanius, 2003; Page-Gould, Mendoza-Denton, & Tropp, 2007; Paolini, Hewstone, Cairns, & Voci, 2004; Wright, Aron, McLaughlin-Volpe, & Ropp, 1997). Complementing Pettigrew's (1997a) findings, cross-group friendships have also been shown to relate more strongly to reduced prejudice than more distant forms of contact (Herek & Capitanio, 1996), and particularly when affective dimensions of prejudice such as feelings and emotions toward outgroup members are involved (Tropp & Pettigrew, 2005a).

Although theorists have long acknowledged the general importance of closeness between groups (Amir, 1976; Cook & Sellitz, 1955; Williams, 1947), few have attempted to integrate the significance of this factor with more traditional views regarding optimal conditions of the contact situation. Pettigrew (1998) takes important steps in this direction by proposing the condition of *friendship potential*, which he defines as the ability of the contact situation to provide participants with opportunities to become friends. Friendship potential typically involves extensive and repeated contact across a range of social contexts, which over time would encourage greater degrees of shared experience, self-disclosure, and other friendship-building processes (Pettigrew, 1997; see also Miller, 2002).

At the same time, Pettigrew and others note that in addition to focusing on positive features of the contact situation, greater attention must be granted to negative forces that are likely to undermine contact's effects (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). Contact with outgroup members can provoke substantial anxiety (Stephan & Stephan, 1985), as people are unsure of how they will be perceived and evaluated by outgroup members (Devine & Vasquez, 1998; Vorauer, Main, & O'Connell, 1998). In turn, anxieties about cross-group interactions can make intergroup contact less likely to occur (Plant & Devine, 2003; Stephan & Stephan, 1985), thereby precluding the potential for positive, generalizable outcomes to emerge from contact (Dovidio, Gaertner, Kawakami, & Hodson, 2002). Nonetheless, other recent work suggests that close contact can reduce intergroup anxiety (Levin et al., 2003; Tropp, 2003), and anxiety mediates the relationships between intergroup contact and prejudice, such that greater reductions in prejudice are achieved to the extent that anxiety is reduced through contact (Paolini et al., 2004; Pettigrew & Tropp, in press).

Taking these perspectives into account, we must pay close attention to how we conceptualize optimal conditions for intergroup contact. Indeed, beyond focusing on *situational* conditions that are conducive to developing close intergroup relationships, these patterns of findings compel us to consider *psychological* conditions that may be necessary for people to willingly develop and nurture meaningful relationships across group boundaries. It appears that much of this willingness hinges on the concept of *trust*, and the extent to which contact can affect people's general readiness to trust members of other groups. While optimal conditions of the situation typically facilitate positive contact experiences (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006), we must consider the special kinds of contact experiences that will be most likely to encourage feelings of trust to develop between members of different groups.

### Defining Trust in Intergroup Relationships

The concept of trust has long been recognized as a crucial component of psychological functioning and a primary motivation that people have as they navigate their social relationships (see Fiske, 2003). Growing from one's life experiences, trust may be defined as a social bond that is characterized by feelings of security and confidence in others' good intentions and goodwill. As such, trust

implies an absence of perceived threat (Stephan & Stephan, 2000), in that one feels that others genuinely care about one's welfare and have one's best interests at heart (Tyler, 2001).

Unfortunately, intergroup relationships are often characterized by distrust, corresponding with feelings of suspicion and a lack of confidence in others' good intentions (see Dovidio et al., 2002; Insko & Schopler, 1998; Kramer & Messick, 1998). People generally have negative expectations regarding how they will be viewed by outgroup members (Krueger, 1996; Vorauer et al., 1998), which can hinder the potential for intergroup contact to promote positive relations between groups (Frey & Tropp, 2006). Moreover, distrust can easily grow from histories of social experiences and violations of trust (Lindsfold, 1986), which is especially likely when intergroup relationships involve differences in power or status (Kramer & Messick, 1998). As such, understanding the role of distrust may be particularly crucial in examining intergroup relationships from the perspective of minority status groups, whose contact experiences are often marked by prejudice, devaluation, and discrimination (Tropp, 2006).

### Distrust in Minority-Majority Relations

Indeed, a growing body of work suggests that, due to the devaluation they face, members of racial minority groups are particularly likely to experience racial distrust in intergroup contexts (Cohen & Steele, 2002; Tropp, 2006). This lack of trust can have a significant impact on racial minority group members' attitudes and behaviors in a range of intergroup contexts (Whaley, 2001), such as having lower occupational aspirations (Terrell, Terrell, & Miller, 1993), more negative views of White counselors in clinical settings (Watkins & Terrell, 1988), less positive expectations for academic experiences with White mentors (Grant-Thompson & Atkinson, 1997), and less confidence in the ability of diversity programs to improve intergroup relations (Ervin, 2001).

Viewing intergroup relations through the lens of trust may help us to understand why intergroup contact effects typically vary for members of minority and majority status groups (see Tropp & Pettigrew, 2005b). Minority and majority group members often have markedly different perceptions of their intergroup relationships (Dovidio et al., 2002; Sigelman & Welch, 1993) and how much progress has been made toward racial equality (Eibach & Ehrlinger, 2006). For example, Black Americans perceive significantly more racial discrimination

against their group relative to White Americans (National Conference for Community and Justice, 2000) at the same time as most White Americans believe Blacks in their communities are treated as well as Whites (Gallup Organization, 2001). Black Americans also tend to see racial tensions as a bigger problem in our society relative to Whites, and they tend to be more pessimistic about the potential for American race relations to improve in the future (Gallup Organization, 2001; National Conference for Community and Justice, 2000). In turn, members of racial minority and majority groups often perceive the same contact situations in different ways (Cohen, 1982; Robinson & Preston, 1976); in particular, members of racial minority groups may view the majority with vigilance and suspicion until they feel confident that majority group members are worthy of their trust (see Brown & Dobbins, 2004; Cohen & Steele, 2002).

Perhaps not surprisingly, then, the positive effects of intergroup contact tend to be weaker among members of racial minority groups than among members of the racial majority (Sigelman & Welch, 1993; Tropp, 2007; Tropp & Pettigrew, 2005b). In some of our recent work, we used data from our meta-analytic study of intergroup contact effects (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006) to examine patterns of contact-prejudice relationships among members of racial minority and majority groups. Overall, the mean relationship between contact and prejudice was significantly weaker in our racial minority samples (mean  $r = -.18$ ) than in our racial majority samples (mean  $r = -.24$ ),  $Q_B(1) = 9.15, p < .01$ . Regression analysis also showed that this effect emerged even after controlling for variables associated with research design, the type and quality of measures used to assess contact and prejudice, sample size, and whether participants were able to choose to engage in the contact. Moreover, these effects were consistent even for those samples where optimal conditions had been implemented within the contact situation (Tropp & Pettigrew, 2005b).

Further research has considered how positive contact effects may be inhibited among members of racial and ethnic minority groups, due to their experiences with prejudice and devaluation. In a separate study (Tropp, 2007), intergroup contact effects were examined using survey responses from nationally representative samples of Black and White Americans. To assess contact and prejudice, respondents indicated whether they do or do not currently have contact with the racial outgroup, along with reporting their feelings toward outgroup members in general. Replicating Tropp and Pettigrew (2005b), results showed that relationship between contact and prejudice tends to be weaker among Black respondents ( $r = .078$ ) than among White

respondents ( $r = .223$ ), and these patterns persist even after controlling for a range of demographic indicators (age, gender, region, level of education, family income, political ideology, and religiosity). Additionally, analyses revealed that perceptions of racial discrimination moderated these effects of contact in different ways for members of these groups. Among both Black and White respondents who perceived little discrimination against their racial group, interracial contact predicted significantly more positive feelings toward the other racial group. However, among those who perceived a great deal of racial discrimination, contact still predicted more positive interracial attitudes among White respondents, yet contact no longer predicted more positive interracial attitudes among Black respondents. It is also important to note that over half of the Black respondents in this sample reported a great deal of racial discrimination, indicating its significance in terms of how racial minority group members are likely to view and interpret relations with members of the racial majority group.

Additionally, experimental evidence reveals that expressions of prejudice from a member of the racial outgroup can affect how racial minority group members feel about intergroup contact (Tropp, 2003). In one study, racial minority participants (Asian Americans and Latinos) learned that they were randomly assigned to interact with a White participant, ostensibly as part of a study on communication styles. Participants then overheard one of two scripted dialogues between a confederate participant and the experimenter, in which this confederate did or did not make a prejudiced comment in relation to the participant's racial group. Following these procedures, participants completed questionnaires including measures of hostility and anxiety, as well as feelings about interacting with the White partner and with Whites in general. Results from this study revealed that participants exposed to prejudice reported significantly greater levels of hostility and anxiety, and tended to have less positive feelings about interacting with both their partner and with Whites in general, as compared to those who were not exposed to a prejudiced comment. Furthermore, correlational analyses revealed that chronic perceptions of discrimination predicted stronger feelings of hostility and anxiety, and less positive feelings about interacting with their White partner, even after controlling for exposure to prejudice within the experimental setting. Together, these findings indicate that exposure to even a single instance of prejudice from the racial outgroup can have profound, negative effects on racial minority group members' feelings about intergroup contact, which may be exacerbated further by ongoing

perceptions of racial prejudice and discrimination. Thus, with good reason, minority group members' responses to contact with the racial majority are likely to be tainted by prior histories of prejudice and discrimination, thereby plaguing the intergroup relationship with continued suspicion and distrust.

### **Intergroup Contact and the Promotion of Intergroup Trust**

Such issues involving distrust need to be taken into account as we consider different strategies to encourage positive relations between groups. In line with more traditional perspectives on intergroup contact, many have stressed that conditions of equal status and institutional support must, therefore, include substantial representations of both groups, and authorities who explicitly value diversity (Jones, Lynch, Tenglund, & Gaertner, 2000; Khmelkov & Hallinan, 1999; Schofield & Eurich-Fulcer, 2001), as their absence can perpetuate distrust (Brewer, von Hippel, & Gooden, 1999; Kramer & Messick, 1998; Purdie-Vaughns, Steele, Davies, & Randall-Crosby, 2007).

Though select situational features can surely help to reduce suspicion and distrust within a given intergroup context, we must work to create broader shifts in how people view and interpret their intergroup relationships (Frey & Tropp, 2006), in order to promote the kinds of psychological conditions that allow for trust to develop across group boundaries. Here is where Pettigrew's (1997a; 1998) focus on close cross-group friendships appears to be most critical. Optimal situational conditions can help to establish norms regarding how groups should interact with each other, which can in turn facilitate the development of meaningful, trusting relationships between individual members of different groups. However, it is the intimacy of those forged relationships that serves as the cornerstone for promoting a broader willingness to trust across group boundaries and more fundamental shifts in how people view relations between their groups.

Complementing this view, recent work has emphasized that close cross-group relationships can be highly effective in reducing intergroup prejudice and changing the nature of the intergroup relationship (Levin et al., 2003; Paolini et al., 2004; Pettigrew, 1997a; van Laar et al., this volume; Wright et al., 1997). New theoretical perspectives suggest that close cross-group relationships will be effective in reducing prejudice to the extent that they encourage us to empathize with outgroup members (Finlay & Stephan, 2000; Hewstone, Cairns,



Voci, Hamberger, & Niens, 2006; Pettigrew & Tropp, in press) and propel us to include outgroup members in our selves (see Aron et al., 2004 for a recent review). According to these perspectives, close cross-group relationships compel us to become more generous in interpreting outgroup members' intentions and behaviors, such that we begin to grant them the same kinds of positive associations that we typically reserve for members of our own groups (Aron et al., 2004; Wright, Aron, & Tropp, 2002). More broadly, close relationships with individual outgroup members also promote changes in perceived relations between groups, as the psychological connectedness between ingroup and outgroup members contributes to dissolving intergroup boundaries (Aron & McLaughlin-Volpe, 2001).

As such, the benefits of close, cross-group friendships are likely to extend far beyond the initial context of intergroup contact. Through the development of cross-group friendships, people may become more inclined to trust not only the individual outgroup members they know, but to demonstrate a broader willingness to trust outgroup members as their views of relations between the groups begin to shift. Indeed, research suggests that close cross-group relationships correspond with a stronger motivation to improve intergroup relations (Sigelman & Welch, 1993), and a greater tendency to have diverse social networks later in life (Ellison & Powers, 1994). Research has also shown that, among Black Americans, those who have close White friends are more likely to see the motivations of Whites in a positive light as they grow older (Powers & Ellison, 1995).

This final result is particularly striking as it suggests that, even in the face of negative intergroup experiences and histories of conflict between groups, cross-group friendships may still help to cultivate a certain willingness to trust. In line with this view, Hewstone et al., (2006) have shown among Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland that contact with outgroup friends corresponds with a greater willingness to forgive and trust the outgroup, even among those who had personally suffered due to the conflict.

Similar patterns of findings are observed in research with members of racial minority groups who have been subjected to prejudice and discrimination by the racial majority. Extending the analyses of Tropp (2003), supplementary correlations revealed that cross-group friendships corresponded with more positive feelings toward future intergroup contact among Asian and Latino participants, and even among those who had been exposed to an experimental manipulation of prejudice. Further analysis of the national survey data (Tropp, 2007) also reveals that cross-group friendships may counteract some of

the negative effects of discrimination when predicting feelings of intergroup closeness among Black Americans. In this study, those respondents who reported having contact also indicated whether they have contact with an outgroup member "as a good friend." Among Black respondents, having a White friend predicted greater feelings of closeness to Whites in general, even after controlling for the demographic indicators,  $\beta = .11$ ,  $F_{\text{change}}(1, 610) = 7.63$ ,  $p < .01$ . Moreover, although perceived discrimination predicted less intergroup closeness among Black respondents who reported no White friends,  $\beta = -.26$ ,  $p < .01$ , perceived discrimination did not significantly predict less intergroup closeness among those who reported having a White friend,  $\beta = -.06$ ,  $p = .22$ .

Taken together, these findings suggest that while prejudice and discrimination typically define relations between racial minority and majority groups (see Feagin, 1991; Tropp, 2006), such factors may play less prominent roles in predicting general feelings toward the racial majority when minority group members have interracial friendships. These cross-group friendships may offer alternate, positive sources of information that inform minority group members' feelings toward the racial majority, thereby diminishing the extent to which their attitudes would necessarily be formed in relation to prejudice and discrimination against their groups (see Alexander, Brewer, & Livingston, 2005; Monteith & Spicer, 2000). As such, rather than automatically approaching intergroup relations from a position of distrust, cross-group friendships may encourage minority group members to envision the potential of achieving positive relations between the groups.

Such far-reaching, positive effects of cross-group friendships have even been observed among people who are most concerned about being rejected due to their racial group membership. In a recent study by Page-Gould et al. (2007), Latino and White students interacted with either a same- or cross-race friendship partner three times over a period of three weeks, during which self-report and physiological indicators of stress and anxiety were assessed. Among participants assigned to a cross-race partner, those high in race-based rejection sensitivity initially experienced high levels of anxiety during the first cross-race meeting. However, their anxious responses were attenuated in subsequent cross-race meetings, such that they were comparable to those observed among participants initially low in race-based rejection sensitivity. Thus, even among those group members who are most apprehensive about becoming targets of prejudice and discrimination, cross-group friendships hold the potential to minimize

discomfort in intergroup contact and foster more positive intergroup relationships.

### Contact, Trust, and Improving Intergroup Relations: A Call for Cautious Optimism

Although the research presented in this chapter emphasizes the many benefits to be gained from cross-group friendships, we must be careful to acknowledge potential limitations regarding the positive effects we hope to achieve through such relationships (see Hewstone, 2003 for a related view). Encouraging people to trust outgroup members unconditionally would probably be both unrealistic and maladaptive in contexts where histories of relations have been rife with tension and conflict (see Kramer & Messick, 1998) or where outgroup members fail to demonstrate that they are worthy of trust (see Cohen & Steele, 2002). Moreover, strategies designed to enhance intimacy and trust between groups without addressing structural inequalities can inadvertently sustain the dominant group's privileged status and undermine efforts toward social change (Hopkins & Kahani-Hopkins, 2006; Jackman & Crane, 1986; Wright & Lubensky, 2006). Thus, seeking the development of cross-group friendships may be seen in terms of promoting a willingness to trust outgroup members, rather than allowing a dismissal of the possibility that trusting relationships could develop across group boundaries.

Additionally, even when cross-group friendships are forged, group members may still maintain a degree of healthy skepticism in relations with unfamiliar members of the other group (see Cohen & Steele, 2002; Ervin, 2001; Tropp, 2006). For example, Tropp and Bianchi (2006) examined predictors of interest in intergroup contact among members of racial minority and majority groups. In one study, Black participants completed surveys concerning their interest in intergroup contact, in which they reported on their cross-race friendships, perceptions of racial discrimination, the extent to which they value diversity, and the extent to which they believe Whites generally value diversity. Preliminary results showed that Black participants' interest in contact was significantly associated with greater numbers of White friends,  $r(67) = .59, p < .001$ , weaker perceptions of racial discrimination,  $r(67) = -.29, p < .05$ , and stronger beliefs that Whites generally value diversity,  $r(66) = .34, p < .01$ . However, even after controlling for cross-group friendships and perceived discrimination, Black participants' interest in contact was further predicted by the extent to which they

believed Whites generally value diversity,  $\beta = .28$ ,  $t = 3.12$ ,  $p < .01$ . Thus, while cross-group friendships can predict some interest in intergroup contact, minority group members may still be attuned to the perceived values and intentions of members of the racial majority group.

An additional study yielded virtually identical patterns of findings, while also examining whether broader social norms in support of diversity would further predict minority group members' feelings about contact with the racial majority. Once again, perceiving that Whites value diversity predicted greater interest in contact among racial minority participants, even after controlling for cross-group friendships and perceived discrimination,  $\beta = .40$ ,  $t = 3.71$ ,  $p < .01$ ; however, perceiving broader norms in support of diversity did not contribute further to predicting their interest in contact,  $\beta = -.18$ ,  $t = -1.72$ ,  $p = .09$ . Extending findings from the previous study, these results suggest that broad social norms may not necessarily contribute to reducing suspicion between groups; rather, group members' histories of prior intergroup experiences, and their beliefs about the values and intentions of outgroup members, may be the most central predictors of their interest in contact with members of other groups.

### Conclusions

Beyond contact theory's traditional focus on implementing conditions within the contact situation, we must enhance our understanding of psychological conditions that may be necessary for close relationships and a willingness to trust to emerge across group boundaries. Recognition of this shift in emphasis raises a number of issues for us to consider as we attempt to design effective strategies to improve relations between groups. Strategies should seek to enhance an underlying sense of trust in intergroup relationships, such that members of each group can truly feel confident in the goodwill and good intentions of the other. At the same time, we must recognize that these feelings of trust must be earned, as group members are understandably cautious when histories of relations between groups have been marked by tension and conflict. As such, building trust across group boundaries may involve an incremental process, whereby the accrual of positive intergroup experiences, such as through cross-group friendships, can encourage us to consider alternate interpretations and attributions as we reflect more broadly on our relations with outgroup members. Close cross-group relationships may also help us to maintain a modicum of trust even as we face negative experiences with

certain outgroup members, rather than allowing potential steps toward positive intergroup relations to unravel completely. Thus, as we look toward future work on intergroup contact, we must attend to both strengths and obstacles involved in group members' attempts to develop close, trusting relationships across group boundaries, as these kinds of relationships hold the potential for effecting broader changes in the nature and structure of relations between groups.

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