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Improving intergroup relations

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Understanding the psychological processes that shape intergroup relations and sometimes fuel bias and conflict can help inform interventions to improve intergroup relations. This article examines psychological processes of social perception and cognition that are integral to intergroup relations and discusses how these forces can be redirected to improve intergroup relations, often through the experience of positive intergroup contact. We further consider how members of socially advantaged and disadvantaged groups may respond differently to interventions, and how a focus primarily on promoting positive intergroup attitudes may fall short of ameliorating structural inequality between groups. We identify current conceptual and practical challenges and suggest directions for future research.

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Introduction

Relations between groups are often tense, competitive, and characterized by open conflict, more so than relations between individuals [1]. Beginning early in childhood [2], when people think in terms of their group memberships ('us' and 'them'), they feel more positively, are more empathic, and behave more cooperatively toward others who are members of their own group than of other groups [3^{••},4]. Attending to group identities motivates people to establish or affirm their group's higher status [5], such as making social comparisons that favor their group or engaging in discrimination that materially advantages their group. Such discrimination often results from preferential positivity toward one's own group — 'ingroup favoritism' — rather than from outright hostility toward the outgroup [6[•]]. Yet, even small preferences for the ingroup, which may often be expressed subtly, can produce profoundly inequitable group-based disparities through repeated

expression over time [7]. Intergroup biases are intensified when people believe that the groups are in direct competition, resources are limited, and the outcomes are zero-sum between the groups [8]. Together these mechanisms contribute to escalating intergroup conflict and social injustice.

However, understanding the psychological processes that contribute to intergroup bias and conflict can guide interventions to improve intergroup relations. We address this issue by discussing, first, the roles of social perception and cognition in interventions and intergroup contact; second, how members of socially advantaged and disadvantaged groups respond differently to interventions; and third, how a focus on fostering positive intergroup attitudes may fall short of ameliorating structural inequality between groups.

Social categorization

The process of social categorization, while fundamental to human perception, cognition, and social functioning, is flexible [9]. Thus, even though it may be difficult to alter the basic cognitive and motivational principles that form the foundation for intergroup bias, it is possible to manage and redirect these processes to improve intergroup relations.

One approach for altering the organization of the social world from 'us' and 'them' involves decategorization. Decategorization interventions attempt to shift the way people think from an intergroup to an interpersonal level, encouraging members of different groups to regard one another primarily as distinct individuals, and to relate in interpersonal ('me' and 'you') rather than group-based ('we' versus 'they') terms [3^{••}]. Decategorization may be achieved by personalization, in which individuals are instructed or induced to focus on the unique qualities of another person [10], or by cross-cutting categorization, in which the relevance of the original categorization is reduced by forming subgroups composed of members from the former subgroups [11]. However, decategorization is difficult to maintain because group-based processing is easier and more efficient than individual-based processing [12] and human societies are structured around social categories [13]. Another limitation is that, if people think of others only as individuals, the benefits of building more positive relations with them will not generalize to other outgroup members because the associative link between them and the group is severed [14].

An alternative approach, recategorization, also aims to alter the ways individuals perceive others but instead by

encouraging people to think about their membership in a common superordinate group ('we') rather than as members of different groups ('us' versus 'them'). Recategorization of this type may be achieved by drawing attention to existing shared group memberships (e.g., a nation) or social categories (e.g., students), or by introducing factors such as common goals that produce positive intergroup connection and interdependence. The core idea behind this approach, as articulated in the common ingroup identity model [15**], is that a salient shared identity harnesses the forces of ingroup bias that produce more positive beliefs, feelings and behaviors usually reserved for ingroup members, but now extends or redirects these forces toward former outgroup members because of their recategorized ingroup status [16*].

Empirical evidence in support of the model has demonstrated the robustness of these effects across different types of groups, including both laboratory and existing groups, across different national contexts, and for addressing diverse types of intergroup relations [15**]. For instance, interventions emphasizing common connections between members of a host country and immigrants have successfully improved attitudes toward and support for various immigrant groups in Italy, Norway, and the US [17,18]. Moreover, emphasizing shared group membership facilitates more effective communication across groups [19] and can counteract even automatically activated and often unconscious biases [16*].

One limitation of this approach is that attempting to establish or emphasize inclusive identities may threaten group members' need for positive distinctiveness and thus intensify bias in an attempt to re-establish positive differentiation [20]. This defensive response is less likely to occur, however, when existing identities are not overly valued [21], when recategorization is initiated by ingroup members or a neutral source rather than members of the outgroup [22], or when the common identity and subgroup identities are compatible and integrated into a dual identity (e.g., African American) [15**]. Another limitation is that when groups contend over the meaning of the superordinate identity, they may project characteristics of their subgroup onto the common group, such that members of the other subgroup come to be seen as deviants from a valued group prototype [23]. Such ingroup projection can result in exacerbated bias and competition, but it is less likely to occur when superordinate identities are construed in ways that acknowledge the group's complexity [24].

Intergroup contact

Although interventions that alter the way people think about groups can be implemented in a variety of ways, integrating them in the context of intergroup contact offers significant promise for improving intergroup relations. Largely guided by contact theory [25], laboratory

and field work across a broad range of contexts has demonstrated the robust, positive effects that contact can have for improving intergroup attitudes and behaviors [26,27*] — especially when contact is structured to emphasize equal status, cooperation, common goals, and the support of relevant authorities, or when it involves developing a friendship with a member of the other group [28**]. Besides improving attitudes, having such positive intergroup contact can also reduce the negative impact and escalation of subsequent intergroup conflict [29]. Practically, opportunities for interacting with outgroup members are most readily available in diverse, desegregated environments. Although mere diversity can intensify intergroup tensions [30], when diverse environments facilitate intergroup contact they improve intergroup attitudes [31], consequently creating more tolerant contextual norms that further improve intergroup relations [32*].

Often, however, the implementation of direct face-to-face contact is constrained by the intergroup divide it is aimed to address. Indirect forms of contact are thus also critically important, both practically and theoretically, for improving intergroup relations (see Brown and Paterson, this issue). Consistent with the extended contact hypothesis [33], intergroup bias can be reduced by knowing that a fellow ingroup member has a close, positive relationship with an outgroup member (extended contact), as well as by observing positive cross-group interactions, either directly or through media portrayals (vicarious contact) [34]. Furthermore, even the mental simulation of positive intergroup contact (imagined contact) has been shown to improve behaviors and, to some extent, attitudes toward a wide range of outgroups [35].

The effects of positive intergroup contact, both direct and indirect, occur in part because of more personalized connections with outgroup members, such as by enhancing empathy and reducing anxiety [36], as well as by helping the interactants recognize common group identity in terms of shared identities (e.g., national identity) or experiences [37]. Thus, positive intergroup contact can operate, among other processes, through decategorization or recategorization to improve intergroup relations.

Group perspectives and intergroup relations

Intergroup research also reveals an asymmetry in the effectiveness of group contact and common group identity on the attitudes of members of advantaged and disadvantaged groups. In general, positive contact more strongly and consistently improves the attitudes of members of advantaged groups toward disadvantaged groups than the attitudes of members of disadvantaged groups toward advantaged groups [38]. Research focusing on the dynamics in dyadic intergroup interactions [28**] suggests an explanation for this difference.

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