



Explaining the paradoxical effects of intergroup contact: Paternalistic relations and system justification in domestic labour in South Africa



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ABSTRACT

Recent research has shown that contact with the historically advantaged can have paradoxical effects on the political attitudes of the historically disadvantaged, reducing outgroup prejudice but also reducing the motivation to acknowledge and challenge social inequalities. These effects have been attributed primarily to the role of intergroup contact in decreasing the salience of intergroup differences, encouraging common identification, and creating warm feelings. This paper explores a related but distinct process through which contact may have paradoxical consequences, focusing on its capacity to act as a vehicle for the transmission of systems-justifying ideologies. The paper presents a qualitative study of domestic labour relations in post-apartheid South Africa. Analysis of interviews with domestic workers and employers demonstrates how intergroup contact in this context was typically organised and defined in terms of paternalistic values, beliefs and practices. Interview accounts were designed to resolve the moral and political tensions associated with participation in the historically racist institution of domestic labour by (re)constituting everyday relations between 'maids' and 'madams' in the language of caring, helping and reciprocal exchange.

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Since Allport (1954) formulated the 'contact hypothesis', the idea that intergroup contact improves intergroup relations has received extensive empirical support. The 500 plus studies summarised in Pettigrew and Tropp's (2006) meta-analysis confirmed that contact reduces prejudice and is particularly effective under optimal conditions of equal status, common goals, cooperation and institutional support. Longitudinal studies have suggested that the direction of the effect is from contact to prejudice reduction (Eller & Abrams, 2003, 2004; Binder et al., 2009; Levin, van Laar, & Sidanius, 2003; Swart, Christ, Hewstone, & Voci, 2011). Moreover, considerable progress has been made in identifying the cognitive and affective processes through which contact reduces prejudice, including re-categorization, anxiety reduction and empathy promotion (Brown & Hewstone, 2005; Paolini, Hewstone, Voci, Harwood, & Cairns, 2006; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2008). The contact 'hypothesis', in short, has graduated to the status of a fully-fledged theory (Hewstone & Swart, 2011), and it is now accepted as one of psychology's most important contributions to promoting social change in historically divided societies.

Recently however, several researchers have complicated this optimistic message. Although conceding that contact is generally successful in reducing the prejudices of the historically advantaged, they have warned of its 'paradoxical' effects on the political attitudes of historically disadvantaged groups. In a South African survey, for example, Dixon, Durrheim, and Tredoux (2007) reported that black respondents who had more positive contact with whites were less inclined to support

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race-targeted policies designed to overcome the legacy of apartheid, including affirmative action, educational desegregation and land restitution. Similarly, in a series of laboratory and field studies, Saguy et al. reported that positive contact with dominant group members inflates perceptions of intergroup fairness among disadvantaged group members, creating 'false expectations' of equal treatment (e.g. Saguy & Chernyak-Hai, 2012; Saguy, Tausch, Dovidio, & Pratto, 2009). Other researchers have reported that contact with dominant groups decreases the willingness of members of different subordinate groups to form common political identities or to mobilise together to challenge social inequalities (e.g. Cakal, Hewstone, Schwär, & Heath, 2011; Glasford & Calcagno, 2012).

This kind of evidence has sparked a debate about the limits of prejudice reduction interventions such as the contact hypothesis. The project of prejudice reduction, critics argue, presupposes that getting advantaged group members to like other groups more is the sine qua non for improving intergroup relations. According to Dixon, Levine, Reicher, and Durrheim (2012), Wright and Baray (2012) and Reicher (2007), however, such interventions may also inhibit a driver of social change that is equally, if not more important in some social contexts. To borrow Cakal et al.'s (2011) phrase, prejudice reduction may produce a 'sedative effect' on the collective action orientation of the disadvantaged in historically unequal societies, diminishing their willingness to recognise inequality, to form a sense of injustice, and to do something about it.

1. Explaining the paradox of contact

What is it about intergroup contact that produces this kind of effect? Although this is a relatively new line of investigation, researchers have identified some of the cognitive and motivational processes involved. To begin with, intergroup contact can powerfully affect how subordinate group members categorise themselves and others and this can, in turn, increase members' acceptance of injustice. The Common Ingroup Identity Model (Gaertner & Dovidio, 2000; Gaertner & Dovidio, 2009) proposes that harmonious contact encourages members of different groups to view themselves as part a superordinate ingroup. This process of re-categorization diminishes the salience of intergroup boundaries and differences, promoting a sense of common values and interests. For this reason, it also deflects attention away from intergroup inequalities and decreases subordinate group members' motivation to challenge them (Dovidio, Gaertner, & Saguy, 2008; Jaško & Kossowska, 2013; Saguy et al., 2009). After all, identifying strongly with the ingroup and making intergroup comparisons are often prerequisites for collective action (Simon & Klandermans, 2001).

The paradoxical effects of contact may also arise through a related set of social psychological processes. If members of disadvantaged groups have largely positive experiences of interacting with members of advantaged groups in their day-to-day lives, then they also tend to have less sense of being personally-targeted for discrimination. Generalising from such experiences, they may underrate the degree to which their group as a whole suffers from discrimination (Dixon, Durrheim, et al., 2010). Similarly, positive intergroup contact tends to foster positive intergroup emotions, encouraging the formation of warm feelings such as trust, loyalty and affection. This is, of course, the main point of the contact hypothesis. Whatever other social and psychological benefits it may incur, however, there is growing evidence that this process tends to shift the political attitudes of the disadvantaged in a reactionary direction. Holding warm feelings about others makes it more difficult to view them as beneficiaries of discrimination, blunting the motivation to challenge the hierarchical system from which they benefit.

The literature on intergroup relations suggests a further route to understanding the paradoxical effects of contact, which may occur both in the absence of superordinate categorization and in the presence of explicit status differences between groups. Social Identity Theory holds that status differences only provoke direct collective action when group boundaries are viewed as impermeable and when the existing status hierarchy as unstable and illegitimate (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Yet intergroup contact in historically unequal societies is often organised in ways that reify group differences and render the political order stable and legitimate. In some contact situations, for example, issues of injustice, inequality and intergroup conflict are simply kept off the agenda, particularly by members of advantaged groups (e.g. Maoz, 2011; Saguy and Dovidio, 2013). In others, contact validates the very stereotypes on which status differences are founded, affording participants the opportunity to display behaviours that confirm the superiority of one group over another (Wright & Baray, 2012). Perhaps most important, intergroup contact may facilitate a broader process of 'system justification' (Jost & Banaji, 1994; Jost, Banaji, & Nosek, 2004) on which we focus for the rest of this article.

2. Contact and system justification

System justification theory explains how, when and why members of disadvantaged groups "justify the way things are, so that the existing social arrangements are perceived as fair and legitimate, perhaps even natural and inevitable" (Jost, 2001, p. 95). Although the relationship between contact and system justification is largely unexplored, a small (but suggestive) literature indicates that the two processes may be sometimes intertwined (Jost, Stern, & Kalkstein, 2012). Cheung, Noel, and Hardin (2011) showed, for example, that interpersonal ties with members of dominant groups increased system-justifying attitudes among members of subordinate groups. Even such trivial ties as sharing a birthday exercised this effect. Tausch, Saguy, Singh, Bryson, and Siddiqui (2012) similarly showed that Latinos' friendship with Whites predicted their aspirations for individual mobility and that this relation was mediated by a belief that everyone has a fair chance of 'getting ahead' in American society. Most recently, Sengupta and Sibley (2013) found that contact with European New Zealanders predicted reactionary political attitudes amongst Maori New Zealanders. Revealingly, this relationship was mediated by a belief that

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