Positive and negative contact and attitudes towards the religious out-group: Testing the contact hypothesis in conflict and non-conflict regions of Indonesia and the Philippines

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the relationship between interreligious contact and negative attitudes towards the religious out-group. It uses unique survey data collected by the authors among Christian and Muslim students in Maluku and Yogyakarta (Indonesia) and Mindanao and Metro Manila (the Philippines). Even after taking self-selection effects into account, interreligious friendships reduce negative attitudes towards the religious out-group. However, casual interreligious contact increases negative out-group attitudes. Also individuals who experienced interreligious violence have more negative out-group attitudes than those without such experience. The experience of interreligious violence has no influence on the effect of interreligious friendships but it further deteriorates the relationship between casual interreligious contact and out-group attitudes. Perceived group threat is an important mechanism explaining the effects of both positive and negative interreligious contact. [125].

1. Introduction

There has been a resurgence of religion-related conflict and religiously motivated intolerance and violence in nearly all parts of the world (PEW Research Center, 2012). For example, in the city of Ambon, Indonesia, an outbreak of sectarian violence between Christians and Muslims between 1999 and 2002 has caused the death of at least 5000 people and displaced close to 700,000 of others. Religion-related conflicts in Syria, Iraq, the West Bank, Sudan, Nigeria, and Southern Philippines are but a few other examples. Finding ways to reduce acts of religiously motivated intolerance and violence is thus of critical importance. One influential idea is to increase contact between members of religious groups, which is hypothesized to induce positive attitudes towards the religious out-group (Allport, 1954).

Although empirical research has occasionally yielded discrepant results, in general there is ample evidence that intergroup contact improves attitudes towards both specific individuals involved in contact and the out-group as a whole (Lee et al., 2004; McLaren, 2003; Pettigrew and Tropp, 2006; Powers and Ellison, 1995; Rydgren et al., 2013; Sigelman and Welch, 1993; Savelkoul et al., 2011). One explanation for the positive contact effect is that intergroup contact enables individuals to learn more about the out-group. It is argued that when learning about the out-group occurs through regular interactions

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with out-group members (such as out-group neighbors, colleagues, and friends), the acquired information is likely to be accurate and largely favorable in content (Powers and Ellison, 1995; Sigelman and Welch, 1993).

Recent meta-analytic evidence suggests that, although increased knowledge about the out-group does explain some of the relationship between intergroup contact and out-group attitudes, it is of minor importance (Pettigrew and Tropp, 2008). Two other mechanisms: empathy with the out-group and the reduction of intergroup threat and anxiety are far more important.

There has been also some evidence for the conditional effects of intergroup contact. Allport's original conditions for the positive contact effect - equal status, common goals, cooperation, and authority support — facilitate the contact effect, though they are not necessary conditions. Intergroup friendships are likely to encompass most of Allport's conditions and are particularly helpful for reducing negative attitudes towards the out-group (Davies et al., 2011; Pettigrew and Tropp, 2006; Pettigrew et al., 2011). However, previous research on the contact hypothesis to date has been limited in at least three ways.

First, most empirical studies in recent years have been conducted in Western countries, in the United States particularly, and have focused on racial or ethnic target groups (Pettigrew, 2008). For instance, among 515 studies on the intergroup contact hypothesis reviewed by Pettigrew and Tropp (2006), 71 percent of the studies focused solely on the United States and 51 percent focused on ethnic and racial groups. Thus, little is known regarding whether the same patterns equally hold in different social and religious contexts.

Second, previous empirical research has concentrated predominantly on factors that maximize the potential for contact to reduce prejudice and promote positive intergroup outcomes: negative contact experiences are absent in most research designs (Pettigrew, 2008; Pettigrew and Tropp, 2006). However, as argued by Pettigrew and Tropp (2006: 767), "factors that curb contact's ability to reduce prejudice are now the most problematic theoretically, yet the least understood. These negative factors deserve to become a major focus of future contact research." However, very few studies thus far have considered negative contact effects, as information on such contact experience is rarely available in the data (Bekhuis et al., 2011; Pettigrew et al., 2011).

The exceptions are a few recent studies among ethnic and racial groups in Australia (Barlow et al., 2012; Paolini et al., 2010), United States (Barlow et al., 2012; Paolini et al., 2010; Stephan et al., 2002), Germany (Koopmans and Veit, 2014) and the Netherlands (Bekhuis et al., 2011). However, only two of these studies have examined positive versus negative contact as predictors of negative out-group attitudes simultaneously (Barlow et al., 2012; Bekhuis et al., 2011) and none of them have considered factors explaining the relationship between positive and negative intergroup contact and out-group attitudes.

Third, although meta-analytic evidence, including results from experimental and longitudinal studies, shows that intergroup contact reduces intergroup prejudice, these studies suggest that self-selection processes are also important (e.g., Levin et al., 2003; Sidanius et al., 2004). Individuals with initially tolerant attitudes are more likely to engage in intergroup contact, while less tolerant individuals are more likely to avoid such contact. If this interpretation is accurate, the positive association between intergroup contact and out-group attitudes reported in most cross-sectional research (partly) reflects a self-selection effect. According to Pettigrew (2008), addressing self-selection processes in testing the contact hypothesis should be a central focus in future research on intergroup contact.

Our research contributes to the existing literature on the contact hypothesis by addressing these three imitations. First, it moves beyond positive contact to consider extremely negative encounters, namely experiences of interreligious violence. In addition, this research is the first to comprehensively examine mediators and moderators of the effects of positive and negative intergroup contact simultaneously. Specifically, it studies the mediating role of perceived group threat and moderating role of negative interreligious contact in the contact-attitudes relationship.

Second, it provides further evidence for the causal relationship between interreligious friendships and negative out-group attitudes. Specifically, in the absence of longitudinal data, we propose the treatment effect model (Guo and Fraser, 2010) to examine the issue of selectivity that has limited much of the previous research on the contact hypothesis.

Third, it focuses on a particularly relevant, yet understudied context, that is, ethnically and religiously diverse regions in Indonesia and the Philippines, where social cleavages are religion-based. Although many conflicts in the world occur along religious lines, there is little evidence about consequences of intergroup contact among religious groups nor in contexts where intergroup relations are influenced by intergroup discrimination and conflict. Noteworthy exceptions are studies of Protestants and Catholics in Northern Ireland (Hewstone et al., 2006; Paolini et al., 2004), Jews and Palestinian-Arabs in Israel (Maoz, 2000, 2011), Muslims and Christians in Indonesia (Kanas et al., 2015), and Muslims and Hindus in Bangladesh (Islam and Hewstone, 1993) and India (Tausch, Hewstone, and Roy, 2009). While these studies provide a more rigorous test of the contact hypothesis, they all exclusively focus on positive contact experience. This is a serious limitation given the prevalence of negative contact experience in these settings, thus limiting our understanding of the role of intergroup contact in problematic settings.

This study provides answers to the following research questions:

1. Does positive interreligious contact reduce, while negative interreligious contact induce negative attitudes towards the religious out-group?
2. Does the perception of group threat provide a valid mechanism for both positive and negative effects of interreligious contact?
3. Does positive interreligious contact reduce negative out-group attitudes when intergroup relations are tense and both groups experienced extreme conflict and violence?