



Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Computers in Human Behavior

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/comphumbeh

Structured and unstructured intergroup contact in the digital age

Yair Amichai-Hamburger*, Béatrice S. Hasler, Tal Shani-Sherman

The Research Center for Internet Psychology, Sammy Ofer School of Communication Interdisciplinary Center (IDC), Herzliya, Israel

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Available online xxxx

Keywords:
Intergroup conflicts
Online Contact Hypothesis
Online conflict resolution

ABSTRACT

Intergroup conflicts are a major scourge across the world, leading to death, injury and pain as well as a huge societal and economic impact. One of the leading theories advocated for conflict resolution and prevention is the Contact Hypothesis (Allport, 1954). According to this theory, contact under certain conditions will create a positive intergroup encounter, which in turn, will reduce prejudice and discrimination, and bring about an improvement in intergroup relations. Although the Internet has become an accessible and pivotal medium of communication there are surprisingly few projects that make use of its potential for bridging between groups in conflict. This article explains how the Internet's unique qualities may help overcome the major obstacles inherent in the Contact Hypothesis. In doing so, it differentiates between structured and unstructured online intergroup contact, and provides an analysis of some of the leading online intergroup contact platforms, both past and present. The paper concludes with suggestions for future research in this field.

© 2015 Published by Elsevier Ltd.

1. Introduction

Intergroup conflict is one of the most serious challenges facing the world today. Hostile disputes between opposing ethnic, religious, and political factions have led to battles, genocide, terrorism, and human rights violations (Woolf & Hulsizer, 2004), claiming thousands of lives each year. Even in the absence of aggression, post-conflict societies are characterized by continued distrust, hatred and blame (Cairns & Darby, 1998; Hewstone et al., 2014).

Counteracting the causes of intergroup conflict is complex, and is most effective when carried out on several spheres, ranging from the societal level, through the intergroup and individual levels (USAID, 2013). Changes in the societal sphere usually occur through efforts of policy makers and mass media. These frequently include legislation, the creation of economic opportunities, shaping of the media and educational systems, and redesigning the structure and function of institutions and work organizations. On the intergroup and individual level, many social psychologists have attempted to understand the multi-layered phenomenon of intergroup conflict, and to provide solutions to end it.

This paper addresses the critical psychological components of intergroup bias, which are responsible for the emergence and perpetuation of intergroup conflict. It will describe the Contact Hypothesis (Allport, 1954), one of the leading theories advocated for the resolution and prevention of intergroup conflict. Since its origin in

the 1950s, the contact theory has received considerable empirical support in a variety of contexts (for a review, see Al Ramiah & Hewstone, 2013). However, there are several obstacles inherent in the Contact Hypothesis that may hinder the creation of positive intergroup encounters, especially if such contact interventions are limited to face-to-face (FtF) meetings (Amichai-Hamburger, 2008a,b). This paper will explain how online interactions between members of opposing groups may overcome these hindrances. Our focus is on the unique characteristics that the Internet provides in facilitating positive intergroup encounters, in particular on the most widely used Internet applications for establishing and conducting intergroup contact, including Facebook, email, and (anonymous) chat. The paper concludes with a description of selected online intergroup contact projects, and looks forward to newly emerging modes of intergroup contact in the digital age.

2. Intergroup conflict and bias

People have a tendency to exhibit stereotypes, prejudice and discrimination, which respectively reflect their cognitive, affective, and behavioral reaction toward people from other groups (Fiske, 1998).

2.1. Psychological components of intergroup bias

2.1.1. Cognitive components

People generally believe that their ingroup is a heterogeneous group, whereas the outgroup is perceived as relatively homogenous

* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: yairah@idc.ac.il (Y. Amichai-Hamburger).

(Linville, Fischer, & Salovey, 1989). This kind of reasoning leads to a tendency to stereotype members of the outgroup, and to generalize that they are all, for example, hostile, liars, or lazy. In addition, outgroup members are often perceived as being different from one's ingroup (Dion, 1973; Wilson & Kayatani, 1968). This "us versus them" perception serves to enhance the stereotypical, oftentimes negative perception of outgroup members regarding a variety of traits, physical characteristics, and expected behavior. Frequently, stereotyping occurs automatically and unintentionally (Devine, 1989). Conscious effort and training are required in order to overcome the activation of stereotypes within intergroup encounters (Kawakami, Dovidio, Moll, Hermsen, & Russin, 2000; Sassenberg & Moskowitz, 2005).

2.1.2. Affective components

Intergroup relations are often characterized by the perception that the outgroup poses an actual or imagined threat to ingroup interests or survival. Intergroup anxiety may be augmented when there are negative stereotypes and prejudice toward the outgroup, and a history of protracted conflict (Stephan & Stephan, 1984). Prejudice against members of the outgroup can simultaneously increase positive affect, sympathy, and trust toward other members of the ingroup. People consequently show greater attachment to, and preference for, their ingroup than toward the outgroup (Brewer, 1999; Otten & Moskowitz, 2000). Since people are mostly unaware of their attitudes, attempting to change outgroup prejudices poses particular challenges (Amichai-Hamburger, 2008a,b).

2.1.3. Behavioral components

Intergroup bias is behaviorally manifested in overt or covert discrimination against the outgroup. This may occur intentionally or unintentionally. People are generally more helpful toward ingroup members than toward outgroup members (Dovidio et al., 1997), and work harder for their ingroup in the presence of an outgroup (Worchel, Rothgerber, Day, Hart, & Butemeyer, 1998). Furthermore, there is a strong tendency for people to treat outgroup members in line with their preconceived perceptions of them, while disregarding the way in which they actually behave. This is likely to cause outgroup members to respond in accordance with their expected, stereotypical behavior, which in turn provides confirming evidence that the initial negative stereotypes held against them were correct. This self-fulfilling prophecy creates a closed cycle of negative conduct from which it is hard to break out (Word, Zanna, & Cooper, 1974).

3. The Contact Hypothesis

The Contact Hypothesis (Allport, 1954) has been described as one of the most successful ideas in the history of social psychology (Brown, 2000). The work by Allport (1954) and later Stephan and Stephan (1984), demonstrated that mere contact between groups is insufficient, and that a set of key conditions, specified by the Contact Hypothesis, needs to be in place in order to reduce intergroup bias and improve the relations between rival groups. According to the Contact Hypothesis, in order for intergroup contact to be successful, members from both groups must reflect an equal social status and to collaborate on a task, which is of significant importance for both groups. In order to succeed, this task must be carried out in a context that allows both sides to learn about each other, and this joint venture must have the support of the relevant authorities from both sides.

Allport's (1954) formulation of the Contact Hypothesis has proved extremely influential and has inspired considerable research that tested and extended its basic principles (Brown & Hewstone, 2005). Research has shown that contact between

groups usually reduces intergroup bias (prejudice, stereotypes, and discrimination) through cognitive, affective, and behavioral mediators, mainly by enhancing knowledge and empathy toward the outgroup and by reducing anxiety about the intergroup contact itself (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006).

However, the creation of a positive, beneficial intergroup contact constitutes a demanding and challenging task, which may not always prove feasible. Cross-group interactions can potentially lead to negative outcomes, such as increased prejudice (Pettigrew, 2008), and lowered expectations regarding the possibility of positive social change (Saguy, Dovidio, & Pratto, 2008). In addition, Amichai-Hamburger and McKenna (2006) suggest that the traditional conditions for FtF contact (as laid down by Allport and others), create obstacles, which lessen the feasibility and the efficacy of the intergroup contact. These pertain to the practicality of organizing such a contact, significant levels of anxiety among participants, and the challenge of generalization from the contact to the groups as a whole.

3.1. Possible impediments to effective face-to-face intergroup contact

3.1.1. Practicality

Organizing a meeting between members of different groups may be hard to achieve due to geographical, financial and logistical limitations. Even when members of both groups receive logistical and financial support from their respective authorities, they may well encounter practical obstacles. In many cases, it may be challenging to establish mutually convenient locations for those who live far from one another or in segregated areas. In addition, the conditions stipulated by the contact hypothesis for a contact to be successful, such as equal status, cooperation toward superordinate goals and institutional support are not easy to attain. Moreover, organized FtF encounters, in some cases may be difficult or dangerous to arrange – particularly in areas of protracted, violent conflict. These practical issues may also result in the reduction or cessation of successful intergroup contacts, which as well as lowering the potential for future achievements, may also weaken present successes. This, because once the contact project is finished and participants return to their familiar environments, the effects of a successful contact may diminish, and this may well harm the ability of group members to generalize from the contact itself.

3.1.2. Anxiety

Intergroup anxiety is the result of the anticipation of negative reactions during the intergroup encounter (Stephan & Stephan, 1996; Stephan & Stephan, 2001). When an individual is anxious, he or she is more likely to use heuristics, and since intergroup contacts may well produce significant levels of anxiety in the individual or individuals involved, they are more likely to apply stereotypes to the outgroup (Bodenhausen, 1990; Bodenhausen & Wyer, 1985), and less likely to learn or feel empathy toward outgroup members (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). Wilder (1993) pointed out that in a state of anxiety, group members are likely to ignore any disconfirming information supplied in the contact context. Under such conditions, when a member of the outgroup behaves in a positive manner that contradicts the expectations of the other side, participants do not alter their opinions and only recall the outgroup as behaving in a manner consistent with their negative perception. In such a case, the contact between these members is unlikely to bring about any change in the group stereotype (Wilder & Shapiro, 1989).

Amichai-Hamburger and McKenna (2006) suggested that the Internet may provide an environment that enables participants to manage these challenges more effectively (see also Amichai-Hamburger, 2008a,b; Amichai-Hamburger & Hayat, 2013; Harwood, Hewstone, Amichai-Hamburger, & Tausch, 2013).

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/6838095>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/6838095>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)