

Unprejudiced and self-focused: When intergroup contact is experienced as being about the ingroup rather than the outgroup

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Abstract

Many problematic responses that occur in intergroup interaction, such as inhibited behavior, restricted disclosure of valuable information, and miscommunication, do not arise from negative attitudes and sometimes are more frequently exhibited by lower-prejudice individuals. Thus it is important to consider how lower-prejudice individuals respond to methods for improving intergroup relations that have been investigated with the prejudiced person in mind. Two studies tested the hypothesis that for lower-prejudice individuals intergroup contact is experienced as being about the ingroup rather than the outgroup, and thus fails to exert its usual effect of paving the way for more positive subsequent intergroup exchanges. As predicted, for individuals seeking to be unbiased an initial exchange with one outgroup member affected feelings about ingroup worthiness, but not reactions to a subsequently encountered outgroup member. The opposite pattern was evident for higher-prejudice individuals, who readily generalized from their experience with one outgroup member to the next.

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Introduction

It may seem axiomatic that higher-prejudice individuals should be the ones to experience and cause the most difficulty during intergroup interaction. However, there are many challenges, such as dealing with concerns about being evaluated in light of negative stereotypes, that individuals face during exchanges with outgroup members regardless of their intergroup attitudes. Moreover, sometimes it is those individuals who are the least biased and most concerned with fair treatment of outgroup members who exhibit the lowest levels of intimacy-building behavior, excessively restrict the disclosure of important information, and have the worst communication problems during everyday intergroup interaction (Crosby & Monin, 2007; Norton, Sommers, Apfelbaum, Pura, & Ariely, 2006; Shelton, Richeson, Salvatore, & Trawalter, 2005; Vorauer, 2005), perhaps because concerns about

evaluation disrupt their behavior (Vorauer & Turpie, 2004). In short, many problems experienced in the context of mundane, everyday intergroup interaction do not arise from negative attitudes.

In view of findings such as these, it is important to consider how lower-prejudice individuals respond to methods for improving intergroup relations that have been developed and investigated (understandably) with the prejudiced person in mind. In particular, the beneficial effects of contact between members of different groups, not just on attitudes but also on the dynamics of intergroup interaction, have long been of interest to researchers and are becoming increasingly clear. For example, in a recent meta-analysis Pettigrew and Tropp (2006) found that intergroup contact typically reduces prejudice. Their findings also indicated that the optimal conditions outlined in Allport's (1954) statement of intergroup contact theory, such as equal status between groups in the situation, are not essential for prejudice reduction and thus should be viewed as facilitating but not necessary conditions.

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However, there are two interrelated reasons to expect that individuals who are positively disposed toward outgroup members might be less apt to benefit from intergroup contact than their higher-prejudice counterparts.

Potential obstacles to the beneficial effects of intergroup contact

First, the salutary effects of contact depend on individuals' willingness to generalize, at an explicit or implicit level, from an experience with one outgroup member to how exchanges with other outgroup members might likely unfold. Linking an outgroup member's behavior to his or her group membership, at least when it is experienced as a conscious, deliberative judgment, could seem to run counter to lower-prejudice individuals' personal values and standards dictating avoidance of category-based inferences (Monteith, Devine, & Zuwerink, 1993).

Second, lower-prejudice individuals may experience intergroup contact as saying more about them than it says about outgroup members. According to a recent information search model of evaluative concerns in intergroup interaction (Vorauer, 2006), members of higher status groups who see their own group's advantaged position as illegitimate look to members of lower status groups as expert judges of moral goodness, particularly if treating outgroup members in an unbiased manner is central to their personal identity. These individuals consider members of lower status groups, those who have endured discrimination and unjust group disadvantage, to be uniquely equipped to provide feedback on personal worthiness and the validity of any feelings of guilt experienced in connection with the privileged position of their own group. Thus, lower-prejudice individuals may be ready to detect signals regarding their own and their ingroup's moral worthiness when engaged in interaction with members of lower status groups. Interpreting an outgroup member's behavior as being about the ingroup may make it difficult to see it as being about the outgroup.

Hypotheses

The overall prediction guiding the present research, then, was that lower-prejudice individuals' reactions to a newly encountered outgroup member would be less sensitive to a previous intergroup interaction experience, as compared to the reactions of their higher-prejudice counterparts. Moreover, if lower-prejudice individuals' insensitivity arises from a preoccupation with self-assessment, their feelings about the worthiness of their ingroup should be affected by the previous contact experience even though their outgroup inferences are not.

In testing whether lower-prejudice individuals' reactions to outgroup members are unresponsive to intergroup contact, the present studies answer the call for research targeted toward understanding when the generally beneficial effects of contact break down (Pettigrew &

Tropp, 2006). They also examine whether this usually reliable means of paving the way for more positive intergroup relations might be relatively ineffective for lower-prejudice individuals, potentially pointing to the need for alternative or complementary approaches in this case.

On some level there is tension between the generalization processes that drive the positive effects of intergroup contact and the kinds of group-based generalizations that are considered problematic on rational grounds and in the context of contemporary social norms (see, e.g., Henderson-King & Nisbett, 1996). Thus, it must be emphasized that the point of this research is *not* to reveal that lower-prejudice individuals' reactions to intergroup contact are in any rational or moral sense inappropriate. Rather, the goal is to demonstrate that the difficulties that they experience in intergroup interaction are unlikely to be remedied through positive intergroup contact experiences alone, because the default interpretive frame that they bring to intergroup exchanges is not conducive to such generalization.

Overview

The two studies designed to test the hypotheses each used a similar paradigm. Participants experienced a positive or negative exchange with an ostensible co-participant in the study who was an ingroup or an outgroup member and then encountered another ostensible co-participant who was an outgroup member. Generalization was tested in terms of whether the valence of the initial exchange affected the positivity of individuals' reactions to the subsequently encountered outgroup member. Implications of the initial exchange for individuals' feelings about their ingroup were assessed in terms of whether the valence of the exchange affected their current private collective self-esteem. The initial intragroup exchange condition was included so that the effects of intergroup contact could be distinguished from those of social interaction in general. If there is no added impact attached to the first encounter having been with an outgroup member there is no evidence that the intergroup nature of the prior exchange mattered at all, and thus no evidence of an intergroup contact effect. Instead, responses can be understood as reflective of the basic carryover effect from one social interaction to the next, whereby a salient initial acceptance or rejection experience guides expectations (e.g., trust) in a subsequent social exchange (see, e.g., Higgins, 1996; Twenge, Baumeister, DeWall, Ciarocco, & Bartels, 2007).

The contact experience occurred in the context of a "speed dating with respect to friendship" paradigm that was highly controlled and involved the written exchange of personal information and interpersonal evaluations. In a number of respects the contact experience was quite potent and thus provided a rather stringent test of the hypotheses. For example, it involved the direct exchange of quite personal information at a one-on-one level, and

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