

THE RACIAL EQUITY  
INITIATIVE INC.



# INTERGROUP CONTACT 101



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# 01

## What is Intergroup Contact Theory?

Intergroup Contact Theory, otherwise known as the contact hypothesis, was proposed by Gordon Allport<sup>1</sup> during the "Jim Crow" era in the United States. Allport suggests that nurturing interpersonal contact between different social groups can reduce conflict and prejudice. But, he added, superficial and stereotypical contact between groups can reinforce prejudice.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, intergroup contact is most effective in reducing prejudice "when [members of] the two groups share similar status, interests, and tasks and when the situation fosters personal, intimate intergroup contact"<sup>3</sup> (p. 751-2).

Allport's original theory suggests that intergroup contact is most effective when four integrated conditions are met: equal group status, common goals, intergroup cooperation, and support from authority. The presence of these features during intergroup relations reduces prejudice and is distinguished from other types of contact where prejudices may be reinforced. For example, interactions between a male doctor and female nurse may not be compatible with intergroup contact theory between males and females since this context reinforces patriarchy or male dominance.



# 02

## Components of Intergroup Contact

There are three vital components to ensuring intergroup contact reduces prejudice: equal group status, common goals and intergroup cooperation, and support from authority, law, and custom.

### EQUAL GROUP STATUS

Equal group status requires that intergroup contact should not have a hierarchical relationship.<sup>1</sup> An example of a hierarchical relationship is that between employers, a dominant group, and employees, a relative subordinate group. This condition is antithetical to successful intergroup contact. In the context of racial integration, it can be especially harmful if the dominant group is White and the subordinate group is Black, as that would reinforce hierarchy by racial lines. To reduce prejudice, intergroup interactions should instead be comprised of different social group members of similar statuses. For example, field studies of public housing interventions where people of different races but similar socioeconomic status engaged in intergroup contact across various housing projects in New York City found more positive intergroup relations between Black and White residents.<sup>3</sup>

## COMMON GOALS AND INTERGROUP CONTACT

Groups involved in intergroup contact interventions should share and engage in active efforts to achieve common goals that are non-competitive in nature.<sup>1</sup> Service-learning offers a clear example. Service participants are required to form a collaborative environment in which they must define common community goals.<sup>5</sup> Once these objectives are established, participants must engage in collaborative service interventions to achieve these goals.<sup>5</sup>

## SUPPORT OF AUTHORITY, LAW, AND CUSTOM

In addition to ensuring that intergroup contact members engage as equals, share common goals, and work collaboratively, intergroup contact must be accompanied by authoritative support from legal entities or organizational structures, or be part of customary practices. This condition fosters positive environmental support for improving prejudicial attitudes. If social group members perceive that authorities support intergroup contact; for example, law, educators/schools, or parents, and these entities establish acceptance norms, group members can interact in more favorable conditions, that support positive change.<sup>1</sup> These structures can model norms that foster intergroup engagement.<sup>6</sup> They should also set expectations for differing groups to hold mutual respect and accept inter-group differences so that intergroup engagement is meaningful.<sup>6</sup> Conversely, environments of codified segregation are key drivers in fostering prejudice.<sup>1</sup> Integrative legislation can play an essential role in creating acceptance norms, such as the Civil Rights Acts in America.<sup>4</sup> Allport's Intergroup Contact Theory has generated thousands of studies, books, and interventions that, when combined, corroborated and improved his work.



# 03

## How Intergroup Contact Works

The mechanisms by which intergroup contact among members of different social groups change prejudicial attitudes involve the changing of cognitive and emotional representations of outgroup members. This impacts the way ingroup members experience not just the person with whom they have contact but entire outgroups and can lead to advanced problem-solving skills. The influence of intergroup contact on perceptions of outgroup members and cognitive development are called transfer effects and are classified as primary, secondary, and tertiary.

### PRIMARY TRANSFER EFFECTS

*Positive contact with outgroup members results in positive feelings toward the entire outgroup*

Primary transfer effects refer to the improvement in attitudes towards an outgroup member that generalizes to their entire outgroup. For example, Black and White children who have strong and positive friendships may not only show a reduction in prejudicial attitudes towards each other, but toward Black people or White people in general. Primary transfer effects are necessary for intergroup contact to foster positive intergroup relations. Cogent evidence shows that primary transfer effects may occur from experiences of direct

(i.e., interpersonal) or indirect intergroup contact. Indirect intergroup contact can entail exposure to the outgroup via media or even one's knowledge that another in-group member has contact with a member of the outgroup. However, since contact with outgroup members may at times not be positive, negative direct or indirect contact with an outgroup member can worsen intergroup attitudes towards that outgroup.

## SECONDARY TRANSFER EFFECTS

*Positive contact with outgroup members results in positive feelings toward other outgroups*

Secondary transfer effects are improvements in attitudes that extend beyond the encountered outgroup to other outgroups not involved in the contact. One study conducted of intergroup contact in eight European countries demonstrated that after positive contact with immigrants, attitudes towards Jewish and homosexual people also improved (Schmid, et al., 2012). The underlying cognitive mechanisms which may explain both primary and secondary effects include empathy, trust, outgroup morality, and perspective taking. Other explanatory processes include ingroup reappraisal, or a reexamination of the ingroup, and deprovincialization, by which one's world view is less centered around the ingroup.

## TERTIARY TRANSFER EFFECTS

*Contact with outgroup members improves one's cognitive flexibility*

Tertiary transfer effects, unlike primary and secondary transfer effects, refer to the process of cognitive liberalization whereby interacting with members of an outgroup can lead to one's cognitive flexibility. In other words, interacting with people from other (e.g., cultural, ethnic) social groups can



expand one's worldview, which may require more complex thinking and promote advanced problem-solving skills, higher productivity, and creativity.

# 04



## The Jigsaw Classroom: Intergroup Contact in Schools

We need classroom interventions to reduce prejudice in schools. From primary to higher education, minority students face various interpersonal and structural obstacles that can make their environments uncomfortable and incompatible with learning. For students, discrimination manifests in interactions between peers, which informs school or campus climates and can impact academic performance, and how minority students view themselves and each other.

Intergroup Contact Theory is the basis for a classroom intervention which aims to address this very issue: the jigsaw classroom. Williams (2004) notes that in addition to reducing prejudice and discrimination among students, the jigsaw classroom instructional method is associated with increased self-esteem and student liking for school, decreased competition, and increased academic achievement for minority youth. The classroom model's aptly named "jigsaw method" is a powerful tool for promoting classroom equity.



## THE JIGSAW CLASSROOM

The jigsaw classroom was developed by Elliot Aronson in 1978. It is a cooperative learning technique that can be implemented in k-12 and higher education institutions to improve intergroup relations. A fundamental precept of this technique is that classroom competition can inhibit student success. Therefore, classroom environments promoting equality can help each student to thrive. In the jigsaw classroom, students are separated into groups of five or six students that contain in-and-out-group members. Each jigsaw group in the classroom will be assigned the same set of content. The classroom method requires the following:

- Each group member is assigned a subtopic that they are responsible for learning and teaching to the rest of the group.
- After learning their material, each member meets with their counterparts (i.e., students responsible for the same portion of the material) from other groups.
- Once in these new “expert groups,” students present their understanding of content and obtain feedback from their counterparts.
- Feedback includes how to best present their material to their jigsaw groups.
- After meeting with expert groups, each student holds expertise regarding a different part of the material they share with the original jigsaw group.
- In sharing with their jigsaw group, each student imparts knowledge on their
- assigned content. In doing so, all students use their jigsaw pieces of knowledge to form a complete understanding of the assignment at hand.

## KEY PROCESSES AND CONDITIONS

At a fundamental level, the jigsaw classroom's effectiveness is that students with a strong understanding of the material can assist those with a weaker understanding to ensure they can present to their jigsaw group. In this way, all students are considered essential to their group. Effective cognitive processes of a jigsaw classroom are cooperation, interdependence, common in-group identity, and re-categorization of the out-group to a new in-group.

Cooperation is one of the four original components of contact theory in that Allport (1954) contended that group members must have equal status and work collaboratively towards a common goal. The jigsaw classroom promotes equal status, cooperation, and interdependence as each student is perceived and treated as an expert in their content. In other words, the group's success is contingent on the work they achieve together. To that end, individual success is at odds with the group's common goal, making collaboration inevitable. This component of intergroup contact theory is first achieved in the collaboration required of students when they share information and get feedback on their thoughts from expert group members. Interdependence is again established in jigsaw groups when students depend on their peers to teach them the other parts of the material they are not knowledgeable about.

The cooperation and interdependence of jigsaw students create a common in-group identity whereby each student is treated as an integral group member responsible for the group's success. Creating a common identity reduces prejudice as individuals' cognitive portrayals of "us" and "them" are likely to develop into a more inclusive "we."



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