



## What works in social integration?: Intergroup contact

### Diversity does not equal contact

Robert Putnam suggested that diversity may drive down 'out-group' trust<sup>1</sup> but an authoritative overview of research findings from many studies refutes this claim.<sup>2</sup>

A purposely-designed survey of White-British and ethnic-minority respondents in England examined the relationship between neighborhood ethnic diversity and three different types of trust: out-group, in-group and neighborhood trust, as well as intergroup attitudes.<sup>3</sup> We tested these relationships while accounting for intergroup contact and perceived intergroup threat, and controlling for deprivation.

While for the White British majority we did observe some negative effects (similar to those reported by Putnam), for the ethnic minority sample, living in neighborhoods with greater numbers of majority group members did not adversely affect trust and intergroup attitudes. For the White British majority intergroup contact played a crucial role: Living in more diverse neighborhoods was associated with greater frequency of positive intergroup contact with ethnic minority members, such that most of the negative direct effects of diversity (both actual and perceived) were cancelled out once these positive contact experiences were accounted for.

This recent research underlines that diversity and contact are not equivalent; that diversity is typically related to increased contact; and that contact promotes greater out-group trust across a variety of ethnic, faith and other social groups.

### Contact has effects at the neighbourhood level as well as the individual level

The literature on contact is vast (comprising over 500 studies), from which there is significant evidence for the negative association between contact and prejudice. However, research to date

has focused on the interpersonal level (face-to-face contact between members of different groups), which leaves open whether contact can have wider societal impact.

One way to study this wider impact is to ask whether there is any added benefit of living in an area (e.g., a neighbourhood) in which other members of one's own group interact positively with members of the outgroup, over and above one's own individual level of contact with the outgroup. Is it the case that a person living in an area with a higher mean level of positive intergroup contact is likely to be less prejudiced than a person with the same personal experience of positive contact, but who lives in an area where there is less intergroup contact?

Recent research has provided consistent evidence that this is, in fact, the case.<sup>4</sup> The effect of contact at the neighbourhood level is greater than the effect of contact at the individual level.

The evidence also showed that living in an area in which people have, on average, more positive contact is associated with more tolerant social norms within this context, and these norms were associated with more tolerant outgroup attitudes, over and above the effect of individual contact experiences.

### Contact can be positive or negative, and we need to address the combined impact of both types of contact

Those who advocate greater contact between members of different groups based their argument entirely on the evidence that more positive contact is associated with less prejudice. But living, working or going to school in more diverse environments does not only lead to more positive contact than life in more homogenous settings. The level of negative contact will also tend to be higher in more mixed settings. In short, diversity provides

opportunities for both positive and negative experiences with outgroup members.

The importance of negative, as well as positive, contact has only recently been acknowledged, however; and a potential threat is posed by evidence that negative contact has stronger effects.<sup>5</sup>

However, this threat is mitigated by two findings: (1) positive contact is about three times as frequent as negative contact; and (2) positive contact seems to serve as a buffer against the effects of negative contact. We have found evidence for these effects in a recent national-level study in the UK, carried out for the Social Integration Commission ('Social integration: A wake-up call; available at <http://socialintegrationcommission.org.uk/index.php/publications>).

### The missing dimension of social networks

As noted above, most research on contact has derived from studies of interpersonal contact, between individual members of two different groups. But people also have social networks, and finding that the impact of contact also diffuses through those networks is important in showing the multiplier effect of positive intergroup contact (because one person's contact has the potential to influence multiple others).

By studying social networks we can, for example, study the quantity and quality of social ties among all the students in a school classroom). Research can then reveal: (1) the power of reciprocal cross-group friendships (A claims B is an outgroup friend, and B reciprocally nominates A as an outgroup friend); (2) that not only does direct contact reduce prejudice, but indirect or extended contact does too (levels of prejudice are affected not only by one's own outgroup friends, but also by whether one's friends have outgroup friends in their network).

A large-scale study of majority and minority children in three European countries elicited social networks via students' nominations of their five best friends in a class setting, and investigated the impact of the objective diversity of the school. There were clear positive effects of direct contact on outgroup attitudes, for both majority

and minority students, and having an ingroup friend in one's network who had an outgroup friend was related to lower levels of prejudice.

### Conclusion

- Diversity does not inevitably have a negative impact on out-group trust. Positive experience of out-group contact cancels out negative effects of diversity.
- Intergroup contact has an effect at the contextual (e.g., neighbourhood) level, and not only between individuals. This can multiply its positive impact, via social norms, across many people simultaneously.
- Mixed settings are likely to provide examples of not only positive but also negative contact. Although there is evidence that negative contact has stronger effects, it is much less frequent than positive contact, and positive contact can buffer against the effects of negative contact.
- Studies of contact within social networks show that the impact of contact diffuses through those networks, allowing one person's contact to influence multiple others. People's level of prejudice is not only influenced by their direct contact (e.g., whether they have own outgroup friends), but also via extended contact (whether their friends have outgroup friends in their network).

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3. Schmid, K., Al Ramiah, A., & Hewstone, M. (2014). 'Neighborhood ethnic diversity and trust: The role of intergroup contact and perceived threat'. *Psychological Science* 25, 665-674.

4. Christ, O., Schmid, K., Lolliot, S., Swart, H., Stolle, D., Tausch, N., Al Ramiah, A., Wagner, A., Vertovec, S., & Hewstone, M. (2014) 'Contextual effect of positive intergroup contact on outgroup prejudice'. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 111, 3996-4000.

5. Barlow, F. K., Paolini, S., Pedersen, A., Hornsey, M. J., Radke, H. R. M., Harwood, J. and Sibley, C. G. (2012) 'The contact caveat: Negative contact predicts increased prejudice more than positive contact predicts reduced prejudice'. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 38, 1629-1643.

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