

Getting to know you
Excerpts from Chapter 1 of
Online Learning and Community Cohesion: School Links
by
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The emergence of intergroup conflict

The meaning of “prosocial” may vary depending on the social groups with which one identifies. The general idea is that individuals behave in ways that are helpful to other individuals or to society, but what does that mean if there are (as there always are) multiple societies? The altruism of patriots who become warriors in service to their own society leads them to behave in ways that are threatening or destructive to members of other societies—in the extreme case, to war. Bowles (2008) has analyzed this pattern both anthropologically and with computer simulations and concludes that the evolution and history of humanity has resulted in the survival of groups that are “either tolerant and selfish, with little warfare, or parochial and altruistic with frequent and lethal encounters with other groups” (p. 326). Both groups benefit from the prosocial behaviors of members, but the latter also profit from antipathy toward other groups—the in-group-out-group phenomenon that we have focused on with respect to SIDE and the contact theory. As Bowles puts it:

Thus, in ancestral humans, evolutionary pressures favoured cooperative institutions among group members as well as conflict with other groups. These were complemented by individual dispositions of solidarity and generosity towards one’s own, and suspicion and hostility towards others. This potent combination of group and

individual attributes is as characteristic of the contemporary welfare state in a system of heavily armed and competing nations — in short, modern nationalism — as it was among our ancestors. (p. 327)

Although Bowles assures us that it does not have to be this way for modern humans, this does seem to be a rather pessimistic view of what might be achieved when we ask teachers to participate in contact programs. On the other hand, Postmes, Spears and Lea (1998) remind us that it is the **type** of contact, both in terms of its duration and its purpose, that can make Internet-enabled programs work.

The contact hypothesis

Vernon Allport (1954) proposed the “Contact Hypothesis” which asserted that more frequent contact between members of different groups may diminish the extent to which members of those groups subscribe to prejudicial views of the other group. Ellison and Powers (1994) claimed that the contact hypothesis remained one of the “most durable ideas in the sociology of racial and ethnic relations.”

The contact hypothesis has been seen as a way to reduce the intergroup bias that frequently occurs because people identify themselves not only as individuals but as members of a social group. This in group, according to Tajfel and Turner Social Categorization Theory (SCT, 1979, 1986) sets itself apart from outgroups on the basis of clear social categories, such as culture, race or religion.

Allport’s work suggested that it was not contact per se between different groups that was likely to lead to a reduction in prejudice but that particular conditions surrounding the contact

should be met. After nearly half a century of research on the theory, Pettigrew (1998) and Pettigrew & Tropp (2006) reviewed the literature and posed some significant refinements that would add to the robustness of contact as a means of reducing prejudice. Allport originally proposed that contact between groups would reduce prejudice toward members of the “other” group if four conditions were met:

- equal status of the groups within the contact situation;
- common goals
- intergroup cooperation, and
- support from authorities, law, or custom.

Pettigrew showed that the early research supported the hypothesis when all of these conditions were met and that less positive results were obtained when only some of the conditions were met. In some instances where prejudice increased, Pettigrew shows that the conditions were not met.

Pettigrew’s analysis of the contact theory included attention to limitations or problems in the research like the overdependence on cross-sectional research, a tendency of researchers to postulate new conditions for success of the hypothesis, the difficulties of generalizing effects beyond the immediate situation and others. More importantly, he outlines change process that may be involved in intergroup contact:

- learning about the outgroup
- changing behavior
- generating affective ties

- reappraising the in group

However, prejudice reduction is about more than having individuals become comfortable with others from a different group; it is not even enough to aim for reduced tensions between the groups involved in a particular situation. Ultimately, the objective is to have people become less prejudiced in general—to view members of a variety of different groups as equals and potential colleagues or friends. To this end, Pettigrew defined three ways that prejudice reduction might generalize

- from one situation to different situations for members of the same out group,
- from an out group individual to all members of the out group, and
- from the immediate out group to other out groups.

Research summarized by Hasler and Amichai-Hamburger (2013) suggests that the Internet has the “ability to break down barriers between members of rival groups” (p. 220) and specifically identifies a number of features of the Internet which make it such a powerful medium in this type of work. These features include the Internet’s capacity for “tailoring and tweaking various features... to create optimal conditions,” (Hasler & Amichai-Hamburger, 2013, p. 220) the use of shared three dimensional virtual environments in which participants interact as avatars (Lee, 2009) and the capacity of the Internet to handle both voice and visual interaction.

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