

Memo on Intergroup Contact in Contexts of Conflict
for
Israel Under the Shadow of Conflict:
A reappraisal of current processes and of future repercussions

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Social psychological theory and research has proposed numerous strategies to promote more positive and peaceful relations between groups. One of the most widely studied strategies involves intergroup contact – that is, fostering meaningful interactions between members of different groups (see Allport, 1954; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2011). Intergroup contact has typically been examined in the absence of protracted intergroup conflict, or long after fervent intergroup conflict has dissipated, once members of different groups may be more willing to engage in processes of reconciliation (see Wagner & Hewstone, 2012). This memo will articulate some of the challenges associated with the application of intergroup contact in contexts of protracted conflict and discuss ways in which might be a more relevant approach in post-violent conflict settings. First, I will first summarize social psychological perspectives on intergroup contact for those who may be less familiar with this literature; then, I will discuss possible limitations of this work in cases of protracted conflict, while reflecting on this work in response to many speakers’ comments at the workshop meeting.

Background on Intergroup Contact Theory and Research

Early perspectives assumed that contact between groups held the potential either to heighten or reduce intergroup tensions (Allport, 1954; Williams, 1947). Thus, rather than assume that any or all forms of contact would be beneficial for intergroup relations, researchers have highlighted conditions and processes of contact that are especially likely to facilitate positive relations between groups. Here, it is important to clarify that social psychologists typically define contact as ‘face-to-face interactions’ between members of different groups, rather than as proportional measures of group size or other proxy measures for contact (see Pettigrew & Tropp, 2011 for an extended discussion).

Optimal conditions. A great deal of social psychological research has focused on the importance of establishing optimal conditions within the contact situation (Allport, 1954). These conditions typically include establishing equal status between groups when they interact with each other, encouraging cooperative interdependence, and fostering support for cooperative, equal status contact through institutional authorities, laws, and customs. Decades of research indicate that greater contact between groups typically reduces intergroup prejudice, and particularly when conditions of equal status, cooperation, and institutional support exist in the contact situation (see Pettigrew & Tropp, 2011 for a review).

Emotional processes. Other research has focused on how emotional processes can enhance or inhibit the potentially positive effects of contact. For example, people can feel threatened by the presence of other groups in their social environments (e.g., Pettigrew, Wagner, & Christ, 2010; Stephan, Ybarra, & Morrison, 2009), and they often experience a great deal of uncertainty and anxiety about navigating relations across group boundaries (Stephan, Stephan, & Gudykunst, 1999). Feelings of threat and anxiety may in turn lead people to avoid intergroup contact (Plant & Devine, 2003), or may provoke intergroup hostility and prejudice (e.g., Lee, McCauley, Moghaddam, & Worchel, 2004). At the same time, positive contact with members of

other groups can contribute to diminishing feelings of intergroup anxiety and threat, and in turn nurture positive intergroup attitudes and a greater willingness to engage in further intergroup contact. For example, with a nationally representative sample of Germans, Pettigrew et al. (2010) observed that larger proportions of foreigners simultaneously enhanced perceptions of intergroup threat and opportunities for intergroup contact, the former predicting greater intergroup prejudice, and the latter predicting lower intergroup prejudice. Other work by Paolini et al. (2004) has shown that friendly contact between Protestants and Catholics in Northern Ireland can predict lower anxiety between members of these communities, which in turn predicts lower inter-community prejudice. Meta-analytic research corroborates these findings (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2008), showing that anxiety and threat reduction mediates the relationship between intergroup contact and prejudice reduction, accounting for almost a third of contact's effects on prejudice. Overall, then, greater positive intergroup contact typically reduces people's feelings of threat and anxiety toward the outgroup, and reduced threat and anxiety typically predict lower levels of intergroup prejudice.

Examining Contact Effects in Conflict Settings

Although decades of research suggest that positive outcomes may be achieved through intergroup contact, relatively little of this work has focused on the effects of intergroup contact in historical contexts of conflict (see Maoz & Ron, 2016). It is likely that contact processes would differ considerably in contexts of protracted conflicts as compared to in other contexts.

Potential limitations of intergroup contact in conflict settings. Clearly, there are a number of challenges associated with the facilitation and enactment of positive contact in conflict settings (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2011; Wagner & Hewstone, 2012). Conflict itself – and particularly violent conflict – likely involves the experience of intergroup threat (Stephan et al., 2009), as well as varied forms of negative intergroup experiences, ranging from exposure to intergroup hostility and aggression to displacement, violations of rights, and loss of life (Esses & Vernon, 2008; Maoz, 2011). Consistent with Daphne Canetti's work, exposure to prolonged, violent conflicts tends to enhance the salience and experience of intergroup threat, which is likely to make positive outcomes from contact more difficult to achieve (see Stephan et al., 2009; Wagner & Hewstone, 2012). Relatedly, negative contact experiences tend to make group differences especially salient, thereby exacerbating the degree to which negative contact experiences will generalize into negative attitudes toward the outgroup as a whole (Paolini, Harwood, & Rubin, 2010). Additionally, factors associated with conflicts such as competing narratives, well-entrenched societal beliefs, and psychological and security needs (see Bar-Tal, 2013; O'Brien & Tropp, 2015) pose serious challenges to the successful implementation of intergroup contact strategies; indeed, as Galia Golan mentioned in relation to the Israeli-Palestinian context, many Israelis hold the belief that peace with Arabs will not hold, and come to the conclusion that "security is more important than peace."

Potential optimism for intergroup contact in conflict settings. Nonetheless, a number of studies show some cause for (at least modest) optimism regarding the effects of intergroup contact in conflict settings, particular after acute periods of violence have passed. Nearly twenty years following the fall of apartheid, White South Africans' positive contact with Black South Africans (e.g., friendly, equal status, cooperative) predicts their greater support for policies that would promote the interests and welfare of Black South Africans (Dixon et al., 2010); consistent with Amal Jamal's analysis, these results suggest that contact between groups may be one mechanism through which members of high-power groups can become motivated to change intergroup dynamics toward greater social equality. Findings from the last decade also reveal

that positive contact is associated with a greater willingness to forgive among ethnic communities in Bosnia-Herzegovina (Cehajic, Brown, & Castano, 2008), greater trust toward Palestinians among Jewish Israelis (Maoz & McCauley, 2011), and with greater forgiveness and trust among religious communities in Northern Ireland (Hewstone, Cairns, Voci, Hamberger, & Niens, 2006; Tam, Hewstone, Kenworthy, & Cairns, 2009). Studies with Blacks and Whites in South African, and with Protestants and Catholics in Northern Ireland, also show that positive contact with the other community predicts not only greater trust, but also more positive beliefs about the other community's intentions in working toward peace, and one's own involvement in reconciliation efforts; these encouraging effects of contact are observed even after taking into account negative intergroup experiences such as having personally suffered due to the conflict and being exposed to conflict-related violence in one's neighborhood growing up (Tropp, Hawi, O'Brien, Gheorgiu, Zetes, & Butz, under review).

At the same time, some research suggests that prior positive contact can facilitate reconciliation following conflict. Surveys of Bosniaks, Croats, and Serbs in the former Yugoslavia indicate that positive contact experiences with members of the other groups before the breakout of intergroup violence predicted greater readiness for reconciliation following the violence (Biro et al., 2004). Additionally, more recent work in Northern Ireland and Cyprus demonstrates that extensive prior positive contact can buffer against the effects of current negative contact between members of different groups in conflict (Paolini et al., 2014).

Contextual Dimensions of Contact Effects in Conflict Settings

Nonetheless, due to the broader social and historical contexts in which conflict occurs – and the distrust, hostility, and negative experiences they can breed – members of conflicting groups often remain quick to identify potential threats and continue to feel threatened by each other (Riek, Mania, & Gaertner, 2006). As Oren Barak noted, “Israelis don't trust diplomacy” such that what might be considered as “options are offense or defense.” Conflict tends to be rooted in negative interdependence between groups, whereby the resources, identity, and well-being of one group are (actually or perceived to be) threatened by the presence or actions of another group (Deutsch, 1949; Stephan et al., 2009). Such conditions of competition and threat are in direct contrast to the optimal conditions of cooperation and common goals proposed for achieving positive outcomes from intergroup contact. Reducing threat and anxiety between groups are key mechanisms through which positive contact can lead to prejudice reduction (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2008; 2011), whereas the presence of competition and threat can bolster support for intergroup violence and perpetuate an ethos of conflict (Bar-Tal, 2007; Tausch, 2009). Perhaps, then, it is understandable why voluntary patterns of segregation between groups often persist even in post-conflict settings (e.g., Alexander & Tredoux, 2010; Tredoux & Dixon, 2009), as members of different groups have grown accustomed to distrusting each other and remain wary of engaging in cross-group contact with the goals of enhancing trust and the possibility of reconciliation. Even when people from conflicting groups are positively inclined toward contact, threats to one's safety must also be considered, as people may be putting themselves at risk by attempting to travel between communities (Institute for Conflict Research, 2005).

Here, institutional norms, authorities and community leaders can potentially play important roles. Group norms and leaders are instrumental in defining relations between groups and helping group members learn whether and how they should engage with members of other groups (Abrams & Hogg, 1988). In many cases, community norms and authority figures can facilitate positive intergroup outcomes by supporting friendly, cooperative relations between

groups when members of different groups interact directly with each other (e.g., Pettigrew, 1998), as well as through more indirect channels (e.g., Wright, Aron, McLaughlin-Volpe, & Ropp, 1997). Yet when long-standing conflicts exist between groups, it becomes a greater challenge for authority figures and community leaders to openly support such efforts, as they are compelled to represent the interests and identities of their own groups, and this often takes precedence over supporting cross-community relations (e.g., Bekerman, 2009). Moreover, these tendencies are often reinforced by media coverage of cross-community relations: as noted by Elias Levy Benarroch and confirmed by Gadi Wolfsfeld, there is a “contradiction” between the needs of news outlets and the demands of peace processes, such that there tends to be “more coverage of conflict than peace.” Further, if and when authority figures and community leaders do reach out across group boundaries, their status and legitimacy as respected authorities and leaders may then be questioned by members of the groups they represent, which can ultimately reduce their influence (Hogg, 2001). Thus, a key challenge involves how leaders can promote positive relations across groups, and have these efforts acknowledged and supported, while also maintaining status and legitimacy within their own groups.

An additional challenge involves the establishment of equal status between groups who have experienced protracted conflict. According to traditional perspectives in intergroup contact theory (e.g., Allport, 1954; Pettigrew, 1998), equal status might be established during contact by providing members of each group with equal opportunities to participate, offer opinions, and/or receive access to available resources; thus, each group would have equal involvement and power to shape the course and nature of their interactions with each other. But, the notion of equal status can be defined in various ways, and status relations may be understood and experienced differently among groups approaching each other from opposing sides of a conflict. Even when attempts are made to establish equal status, groups may subjectively experience the contact in different ways in relation to the prevailing status and power relations between groups in the larger society (Saguy, Tropp, & Hawi, 2012). Additionally, groups that experience power asymmetries prior to contact may inadvertently enact power asymmetries during contact; for example, Jewish Israeli facilitators of dialogues between Jewish and Arab participants have shown tendencies to dominate, and Jewish participants tend to be more engaged in discussions of coexistence, relative to their Arab counterparts (Maoz, 2004). Moreover, opposing groups commonly construe the conflict, its history, and each other in ways that allow their own group to be seen in a more positive light; for instance, both Hutus and Tutsis in Burundi have attributed less responsibility to their own group for the instigation and consequences of violent ethnic conflict, instead attributing greater responsibility to members of the other group (Bilali, Tropp, & Dasgupta, 2012). Religious communities like Protestants and Catholics in Northern Ireland, as well as right-wing and left-wing political groups in Chile, have also been shown to engage in competitive victimhood – whereby members of one community seek to establish that their group has suffered more than members of another community; such biased perceptions of victimization predict conflict escalation rather than its peaceful resolution (Noor, Brown, & Prentice, 2008). Indeed, the very social forces and psychological processes that enable group conflicts to become entrenched and protracted serve as a lens through which group members perceive others and interpret events, in ways that reinforce and perpetuate intergroup conflict, rather than fostering alternate perspectives and prospects for peace (Bar-Tal, 2007; 2013).

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