Kim, S. (2025). Intergroup Friendship as a Means of Prejudice Reduction. *Critical Debates in Humanities, Science and Global Justice*, *5*(1), 144–155.
https://doi.org/10.68709/001c.128379

PERSPECTIVES

Intergroup Friendship as a Means of Prejudice Reduction

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https://doi.org/10.68709/001c.128379

Critical Debates in Humanities, Science and Global Justice

Vol. 5, Issue 1, 2025

Prejudice is one of the most pervasive issues in society that stymies productive dialogue and attempts at collaboration. In a day of increasingly divisive groups, the importance of actively mitigating prejudice has become clear. This literature review draws on empirical studies and theoretical frameworks to examine how intergroup friendships can reduce prejudice and facilitate cooperation between groups. Key findings indicate that intergroup friendships transform attitudes through two main mechanisms—increasing contact opportunities via Contact Theory and by altering existing group norms. This paper explores specific circumstances and individual differences that influence how effective these friendships are. Additionally, the paper discusses shortcomings in existing research and suggests real-world implications for fostering successful intergroup friendships.

Introduction

Society today is more globalized and diverse than ever before. Frequent interaction between members of distinct groups—whether based on race, ethnicity, or any number of identities—has brought with it triumphs as well as challenges. At the root of these challenges is prejudice, or preconceived negative beliefs held by members of a group, termed the "ingroup," about members of another group deemed the "outgroup" (American Psychological Association, 2018). Prejudice contributes to growing polarization and creates an atmosphere of hostility and distrust. Since the twentieth century, social psychologists have extensively studied intergroup conflict and identified many methods to combat prejudice. Forming meaningful relationships, specifically intergroup friendships, has emerged as one of the most impactful ways to improve intergroup attitudes. Friendships are vital for support and stability and play a large role in shaping one's social identity, feeling of belonging, and mental and physical well-being (Z. Abrams, 2023; American Psychological Association, 2018; The British Psychological Society, 2021). This literature review focuses on intergroup friendships, or friendships between members of two distinct groups, because of their extraordinary capacity to improve attitudes and facilitate larger reconciliation.

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Specific intrinsic qualities of friendship make intergroup friendship more effective at reducing prejudice than other types of interaction (Davies et al., 2011; Pettigrew, 1997). For instance, reciprocal self-disclosure—a key tenet of friendship—facilitates mutual trust, empathy, and forgiveness between groups (Davies et al., 2011; Pettigrew et al., 2007; Turner et al., 2007; Voci & Hewstone, 2003). Owing to this, the power of intergroup friendship lies in its ability to transform attitudes towards the entire outgroup, extending beyond just individual outgroup friends. A prime example comes from a longitudinal study of college students, which found that at graduation, students who had experienced more outgroup friendships in their sophomore and junior years displayed less outgroup-related anxiety and less bias towards the ingroup (Levin et al., 2003). With that being said, intergroup friendship directly increases perceptions of diversity within the outgroup, and as distinctive qualities of the outgroup friend are learned, group identities decrease in relevance (Dovidio et al., 2017; Voci & Hewstone, 2003). Thus, as intergroup friendships evolve, the tendency to attribute positive traits of specific friends to the entire outgroup may lessen over time. Nevertheless, intergroup friendship has a tremendous capacity to forge genuine relationships and build bridges between groups. Intergroup friendship improves attitudes through two key mechanisms: Contact Theory, or spending time around the outgroup friend, and intergroup norms, or changing the group culture surrounding intergroup interaction. This literature review explores these two routes and how they work in tandem to promote understanding and cooperation between groups.

Discussion

Contact Theory

One of the primary ways that intergroup friendship reduces bias is by necessitating consistent, long-term contact opportunities with a member of the outgroup. The Contact Hypothesis, first introduced in the 1954 book titled *The Nature of Prejudice*, proposes that contact and interaction between groups reduce prejudice by altering how the other group is emotionally and cognitively perceived (Allport, 1954). Due to its effectiveness and practicality, the Contact Hypothesis has become a predominant approach for facilitating intergroup reconciliation, and a large body of supporting evidence has effectively transitioned it to Contact Theory (Allport, 1954; Dovidio et al., 2017; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). Intergroup Contact Theory has been shown to decrease many forms of prejudice across not only racial and ethnic groups, but also groups based on factors such as age, disability, and sexual orientation (Pettigrew et al., 2007; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). While some have pointed out that highly-prejudiced individuals may avoid contact to begin with, and thus have greater prejudice than individuals with contact, there is generally a larger causality path from contact to reduced prejudice than vice versa (Dovidio et al., 2017).

Research has shifted over time from focusing on the effects of Contact Theory to dissecting the processes through which prejudice is reduced (Dovidio et al., 2017; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2008). Studies have found that heightened perspective-taking, empathy, and decreased anxiety play a larger role in reducing prejudice than greater knowledge of the outgroup (which could potentially disprove stereotypes; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2008; Tropp & Pettigrew, 2005). In addition to reducing outgroup fear and affective prejudice, intergroup contact also works by altering social categorization, or how one conceptualizes and groups other people (Dovidio et al., 2017). Close contact over time causes decategorization, during which differences in group membership fade away and become irrelevant. Members of the outgroup are perceived as distinct individuals whose actions and characteristics are not applicable to the rest of the outgroup (Dovidio et al., 2017). Contact also prompts recategorization, wherein cooperation allows the outgroup to merge with one's self-concept and be perceived as expressing a shared identity (Dovidio et al., 2017). In other words, intergroup friendship allows the outgroup to be considered in conjunction with oneself rather than in an "us versus them" framework, which goes hand in hand with increased empathy (Dovidio et al., 2017).

Four specific conditions maximize the efficacy and benefits of Contact Theory. Specifically, the contact is most effective in the presence of perceived (a) equal status, (b) cooperation, (c) shared goals, and (d) authority support (Allport, 1954). These four conditions are highly related to one another and are beneficial, but not strictly necessary, for reducing prejudice (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). Intergroup friendship takes Contact Theory to the next level, requiring individuals to go beyond the bare minimum of acting agreeably, and actively seek to befriend and get to know others. In doing so, intergroup friendship necessitates many of these conditions and thereby significantly enhances the effects of Contact Theory (Davies et al., 2011).

There are also several circumstances under which Contact Theory is less effective. Contact with a member who is deemed atypical or not representative of the outgroup will minimally impact general attitudes toward the outgroup (Dovidio et al., 2017). Additionally, unstructured, negative contact experiences cause group identities and labels to become more salient (Paolini et al., 2010). In high-conflict societies, such negative contact experiences can be common, leading to increased intergroup anxiety and worsened attitudes (Dovidio et al., 2017; Paolini et al., 2010). Furthermore, Shared Reality Theory postulates that individuals establish common beliefs as a way to form interpersonal connections (Echterhoff et al., 2009). As such, preconceived stereotypes can alter behavior in friendships and contact situations (Sinclair et al., 2005). In a study by Sinclair and colleagues (2005), minority group members who were informed that the other party held stereotypic beliefs self-evaluated and acted consistently with these stereotypes if given a high motive for social connection. Participants lacking a strong

motive for connection did not exhibit more stereotype-consistent behavior. Thus, individuals seeking to befriend the outgroup may subtly adjust their behaviors and attitudes during intergroup interactions.

In today's globalized world, additional approaches to Contact Theory beyond traditional face-to-face interaction have been identified, which carry potential benefits for intergroup friendships (Dovidio et al., 2017). One of the most important alternative methods of contact is Indirect Contact, which proposes that prejudice can be reduced by simply knowing that another ingroup member is friends with an individual from the outgroup (Dovidio et al., 2017; Pettigrew et al., 2007; Wright et al., 1997). Indirect Contact is similarly effective to direct contact and can be utilized for wide-scale prejudice reduction, where even one example of intergroup friendship can positively impact an entire group (Dovidio et al., 2017; Pettigrew et al., 2007). Similarly, Vicarious Contact proposes that exposure to how others behave in contact situations can affect an individual's own behavior toward the outgroup (Dovidio et al., 2017). Vicarious Contact builds on Social Learning Theory, which states that individuals pick up socially acceptable behaviors from observing and imitating how others act (Dovidio et al., 2017). Individuals process face-to-face communication with the media in a similar fashion to direct contact, and frequent exposure to the outgroup through media, such as television shows, can lead to increased understanding and reduced prejudice (Schiappa et al., 2005). Therefore, media depicting intergroup friendships may be a practical way to induce exposure to the outgroup and encourage camaraderie if other contact opportunities are not available (Schiappa et al., 2005). Other modernized types of contact include Imagined Contact, which involves mentally envisioning interacting positively with an outgroup, and Virtual Contact, which is meeting with members of the outgroup online (Crisp & Turner, 2009; Dovidio et al., 2017). Though less effective than direct contact, Imagined Contact is a valuable initial step toward reducing anxiety and instilling open-mindedness for real-life interaction opportunities (Crisp & Turner, 2009; Lemmer & Wagner, 2015). Due to geographical and logistical barriers, meeting with an outgroup friend online or through video conferencing platforms can facilitate a safe, accessible space.

While Contact Theory allows intergroup friendship to be highly successful at reducing prejudice, it is important to note that individual differences alter how each person experiences these effects (Bergsieker et al., 2010; Dovidio et al., 2007). Most literature on Contact Theory has emphasized the improvement of attitudes in majority groups; nevertheless, contact benefits minority groups as well by improving perceptions and reducing stereotype threat (D. Abrams et al., 2006; Dovidio et al., 2007). Importantly, majority and minority groups tend to have different desires and motives during contact situations, which can influence the dynamics of intergroup friendships (Bergsieker et al., 2010; Dovidio et al., 2007). In contact settings, the majority group generally wants to be well-regarded and will try to identify with the minority group, drawing similarities to display their shared humanity. On

the other hand, the minority group wants to feel respected and have their different experiences heard and reaffirmed (Bergsieker et al., 2010; Dovidio et al., 2007). Because of this, intergroup friendships often carry a complex set of dynamics that require greater attention than other types of relationships.

Group Norms

The second major way that intergroup friendship improves attitudes is by reshaping the group norms that govern intergroup conduct. This normative interpretation offers a fresh take on how intergroup friendship reduces bias and aligns with the Social Consensus Theory, which states that society is built on shared values and cooperation (Nickerson, 2024). More specifically, intergroup friendships can drastically transform a group's perceived descriptive norms, or assumptions about what others value and how most others behave in a situation (Dovidio et al., 2007; Kwan et al., 2015). The perceived descriptive norms of a group form the basis for cultural values and greatly influence an individual's preferences, beliefs, and behaviors (Kwan et al., 2015; Zou et al., 2009). Consequently, if positive intergroup interaction becomes the norm, others are more likely to cooperate with the outgroup regardless of their initial beliefs. Especially if there are vague norms surrounding intergroup contact, instances of intergroup friendship can become highly salient (Pettigrew et al., 2007; Wright et al., 1997). These exemplars can reshape biases and set productive norms for future interaction.

Intergroup friendships often occur within social networks and can be examined as a group phenomenon rather than on an isolated, individual basis (Dovidio et al., 2007; Pettigrew et al., 2007). Due to descriptive norms, individuals who perceive intergroup friendship as common within their social circle are more likely to engage in such friendships themselves. For instance, a study by Pettigrew and colleagues (2007) used phone surveys to assess prejudice towards foreigners in Germany through a normative lens. They found that if an individual had a foreigner friend, they were also likely to have German friends who had foreigner friends. Above all else, being part of a social group that values intergroup interaction has the most potent effects for reducing prejudice (Pettigrew et al., 2007). The existence of open-minded intergroup norms, or having friends with favorable opinions of the outgroup, allows for direct and Indirect Contact to occur simultaneously, as outlined by Contact Theory (Dovidio et al., 2017; Pettigrew et al., 2007). Pettigrew and colleagues (2007) found that across many conditions, Germans who had both indirect and direct contact with foreigners exhibited the lowest prejudice, and were less biased than Germans with direct contact only. Intergroup friendship reduces prejudice not only for those directly involved but also impacts surrounding social groups via Indirect Contact and the spread of inclusive norms.

This normative interpretation offers encouragement that even if Contact Theory fails to reduce prejudice, the friendship can still succeed by reshaping the intergroup norm. Indeed, a field experiment by Paluck (2009) in Rwanda used soap opera messages discussing topics like violence and intermarriage to

investigate how attitudes and perceived descriptive norms could be changed, as measured through interpersonal discussion and observation. Interestingly, a year of listening to these messages led participants to exhibit different social norms, but did not lead to revisions in personal attitudes. Thus, using social norms to reduce prejudice may yield more viable results than trying to change firmly established beliefs (Paluck, 2009).

How closely a person conforms to the descriptive norms of a group is dependent on individual circumstances. Optimal Distinctiveness Theory posits that when individuals feel that their ingroup status is under threat, they adopt a Need for Assimilation and show a preference for perceived descriptive norms. Alternatively, those told they are very similar to the ingroup may experience a Need for Distinctiveness and intentionally distance themselves from perceived descriptive norms (Brewer, 1991; Pickett & Brewer, 2001; Sinclair et al., 2005). Individual personality and ideological beliefs, such as Right Wing Authoritarianism (RWA) and Social Dominance Orientation (SDO), have also been shown to predict group attitudes and prejudice (Duckitt et al., 2002; Whitley, 1999). Individuals who score higher in Right Wing Authoritarianism are more likely to obey authority figures and conform to the established norms (Osborne et al., 2023). Groups high in Right Wing Authoritarianism believe that society is inherently hostile and may promote norms depicting the outgroup as a competitive threat (Duckitt et al., 2002; Osborne et al., 2023; Whitley, 1999). Meanwhile, groups high in Social Dominance Orientation, or the belief in social hierarchy rather than egalitarianism, may normalize viewing the outgroup as inferior (Duckitt et al., 2002; Whitley, 1999). In either case, it is worth noting that group norms regarding the outgroup are often rooted in complexity and far from plainly positive, neutral, or negative attitudes.

In addition to individual traits, broader societal and regional contexts also significantly impact behavior and attitudes toward other groups. A study by Duckitt and colleagues (2002) surveyed college students in the United States and South Africa about their personal beliefs and traits. They concluded that in situations where prejudice contradicted social norms, individuals high in social conformity reported reduced prejudice. The opposite could occur as well; in regions where prejudice is normalized, social conformity may increase prejudice (Duckitt et al., 2002). Along this train of logic, having a larger circle of *in*group friends can actually exacerbate intergroup bias and anxiety (Duckitt et al., 2002; Levin et al., 2003). Exclusionary groups of like-minded friends may reinforce each other's opinions and perpetuate negative norms about the outgroup (Levin et al., 2003; Mackie & Cooper, 1984). Accordingly, there is a negative correlation between ingroup and outgroup friends: individuals with fewer ingroup friends are more likely to form intergroup connections (Levin et al., 2003). A longitudinal study by Levin et al. (2003) found that freshmen college students with higher ingroup bias had more friends belonging to the ingroup and fewer outgroup ties in subsequent years, as measured through surveys. It is likely that the more an

individual buys into a group's culture and norms, the less likely they are to branch out and form friendships with those who hold different beliefs. How willing individuals are to branch out is also highly dependent on the surrounding social environment. For example, college students who reported that the campus had more intergroup tension and discrimination tended to have more friends from the ingroup relative to those from the outgroup, especially among Black students (Levin et al., 2003). Creating a positive and inclusive environment can directly increase the prevalence of intergroup friendships and harness the numerous benefits that they offer.

Lastly, efforts to combat prejudice should target both overt and subliminal forms, commonly referred to as explicit and implicit attitudes (Turner et al., 2007). Intergroup friendships change explicit and implicit attitudes through different mechanisms. An individual may consciously align their explicit attitudes with descriptive norms in order to fit in with the surrounding culture (Dovidio et al., 2017). Meanwhile, an individual's implicit attitudes, which are more difficult to alter, may be shaped instead by the Mere Exposure Effect, where individuals subconsciously prefer norms that they regularly encounter (Kwan et al., 2015). Regarding Contact Theory, explicit attitudes are more dependent on the quality of intergroup contact and the intentional processes such as self-disclosure and cooperation involved. On the other hand, implicit attitudes are less influenced by each one-off interaction, and more dependent on the quantity of contact over time (Dovidio et al., 2017; Turner et al., 2007). Frequent contact with the outgroup over time can improve implicit attitudes due to the Mere Exposure Effect, regardless of how fruitful the contact situations are (Turner et al., 2007). Intergroup friendship involves meaningful, frequent contact over a sustained interval of time, and is therefore well-equipped to reduce both overt and underlying prejudice with its scope and depth.

Gaps in Research & Future Directions

Despite widespread support for prejudice-reduction research, several notable limitations exist within the literature. First off, Contact Theory is often observed under unrealistic conditions which may overestimate the prevalence and benefits of positive contact. Outside of the laboratory, negative contact experiences may be more emotionally salient than positive ones, leading to heightened—rather than reduced—prejudice (Paolini et al., 2010). For many individuals, genuine contact experiences with the outgroup can be short-lived and far in between. Opportunities to interact with the outgroup can also be impeded by segregation in public spaces or pervasive trends of self-segregation (Crisp & Turner, 2009; McKeown & Dixon, 2017). For instance, McKeown & Dixon (2017) note that similar groups of people often choose to sit together even when given opportunities to intermingle. One of the paramount criticisms of Contact Theory is that promoting harmony itself does not inherently increase social equality and may even have debilitating effects on social justice attitudes (Dovidio et al., 2017;

McKeown & Dixon, 2017). By improving understanding with the majority group, Contact Theory may deter minority group members from demanding reforms and change (Dovidio et al., 2017; McKeown & Dixon, 2017).

Several methodological limitations also persist in prejudice-reduction research. The paucity of longitudinal studies makes it difficult to gauge the long-term effects and extent of attitude change. Additionally, studies often rely on self-reported surveys to measure prejudice reduction. However, attitudes do not always align with behavior, and an individual claiming to hold less biased beliefs may still exhibit subconsciously prejudiced behaviors (Liska, 1974). Traditionally, research on intergroup relations has taken a reductive vantage point and neglected to account for the intersection of multiple group identities such as race and gender, as well as groups like biracial individuals (Dovidio et al., 2017). Given the diversity of modern-day society, future research should address nuances in bias not just between distinct groups but also at more individualized levels. Like most social science literature, prejudice-related research has largely been conducted in Westernized societies which are not representative of the global population. Future research should explore how differences in convention and perception affect prejudice-reduction interventions in various non-Western cultures.

Conclusion

Overall, intergroup friendship is a highly effective way to reduce prejudice and works through both Contact Theory and by changing perceived descriptive norms. Intergroup friendship entails consistent and enriching contact opportunities that build trust and empathy between groups. Additionally, intergroup friendship reshapes values by establishing inclusive descriptive norms. These relationships set positive examples for future interaction and have tremendous potential for forging a path toward a more cooperative, harmonious society. In education, promoting intergroup friendships from a young age can expand children's empathy and foster long-lasting, inclusive attitudes. Encouraging students to step outside of their traditional social circles is vital to allowing these bonds to form in the first place. If neighborhoods or schools lack diversity from other groups, forming friendships beyond these homogeneous pockets, such as through sports teams of religious affiliations, is crucial. Books and media that feature friendship between groups can also be beneficial. Policies that provide institutional support for these friendships are instrumental in allowing them to develop and thrive. For example, college campuses should implement programs for students from diverse backgrounds to meet and befriend others. Likewise, cultural exchange programs and travel initiatives can equip young adults with the open-mindedness that the world desperately needs. In everyday life, social settings that attract people from diverse social groups, such as sports leagues, potlucks, and book clubs, are an excellent way to build connections. Remember, though, that genuine friendship requires greater commitment during these interactions than mere politeness and goodwill. Also bear in mind that inclusive social networks, not just standalone intergroup

friendships, are most effective at wide-scale normative change. While forging intergroup friendships requires an investment of time and energy, the extensive benefits and potential to shape a more harmonious future should make intergroup friendship—whether at school, work, in a neighborhood, or any aspect of daily life—a top priority.

Published: January 21, 2025 EST.

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