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Making Advantaged Racial Groups Care About Inequality: Intergroup Contact as a Route to Psychological Investment

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Abstract

Racial inequality remains an objective reality in the United States and around the world, yet members of advantaged racial groups often deny or minimize its existence. Although we have well-developed theories to explain why advantaged racial groups would be motivated to deny or minimize inequality, at present we know relatively little about why Whites and other advantaged racial groups might be willing to acknowledge or care about racial inequality. In this article, we propose that contact between racial groups offers one of the most promising pathways to advance these outcomes. We review established and emerging research literature suggesting that contact contributes to these outcomes by encouraging members of advantaged racial groups to become psychologically invested in the perspectives, experiences, and welfare of members of disadvantaged racial groups. We propose that psychological processes such as building empathy, enhancing personal relevance, and humanizing other people can facilitate the extent to which contact leads to greater psychological investment in other racial groups. We conclude by discussing several factors that may serve as obstacles to psychological investment across racial lines and the relevance of contact and establishing connections between racial groups in light of current social divisions and racial tensions.

Keywords

intergroup contact, race, inequality, empathy, disadvantage, dehumanization, inclusion

Racial inequality persists as a ubiquitous problem, with marked consequences for the people most affected. In the United States, for example, Black Americans earn considerably less and have less access to quality education than White Americans (DeNavas-Walt & Proctor, 2015; Roscigno & Ainsworth-Darnell, 1999). Black and Latino Americans are also significantly less likely to be hired for jobs, compared with White Americans with equal qualifications (Pager, Bonikowski, & Western, 2009), and Blacks are incarcerated at a rate that exceeds 5 times that of Whites (Nellis, 2016).

Nonetheless, statistical evidence of racial inequalities is not automatically acknowledged or accepted; instead, the data themselves, or the origins of inequalities, are often contested. While most Black Americans recognize the discrimination they face, only 36% of White Americans identified racial discrimination as a major factor limiting Blacks' life chances (Pew Research Center, 2016). Moreover, many White Americans believe that bias and discrimination against Whites are at least as prevalent—if not more so—than bias and discrimination against Blacks (Norton & Sommers, 2011).

There are myriad reasons why White Americans (and historically advantaged racial groups more generally) may be inclined to deny the existence of racial inequality (Knowles, Lowery, Chow, & Unzueta, 2014). Explanations range from not seeing the impact of race in their own lived experience (McDermott & Samson, 2005) to feeling threatened and motivated to preserve their own privileged position in a multiracial society (Knowles et al., 2014; Sidanius, Cotterill, Sheehy-Skeffington, Kteily, & Carvacho, 2016). But we know less about why Whites and other advantaged racial groups might be

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willing to acknowledge and, importantly, care about racial inequality. We propose that contact between racial groups offers one of the most promising pathways to achieving these goals.

Intergroup Contact: Fostering Acknowledgment and Action in Response to Inequality

Decades of research including experimental (e.g., Page-Gould, Mendoza-Denton, & Tropp, 2008), longitudinal (e.g., Binder et al., 2009; Swart, Hewstone, Christ, & Voci, 2011), and meta-analytic studies (e.g., Davies, Tropp, Aron, Pettigrew, & Wright, 2011; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006) provide strong evidence that contact between members of different racial and ethnic groups corresponds with reduced prejudice and improved intergroup attitudes. To be maximally effective, this contact should be friendly and intimate (rather than hostile or superficial; cf. Barlow et al., 2012; Pettigrew, 1998), providing group members with opportunities to forge ongoing, meaningful relationships across racial lines in ways that are supported by institutional norms of cooperation and equality (Allport, 1954; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006).

Although research evidence for such effects is substantial, the literature on intergroup contact has been met with a number of critiques in recent years. Some authors have proposed that while contact can usefully encourage positive intergroup attitudes, it may ultimately do little to challenge structural relations between groups (Dixon, Levine, Reicher, & Durrheim, 2012; Wright & Lubensky, 2009). Moreover, studies show that positive intergroup contact can inadvertently inhibit perceptions of racial discrimination and undermine commitment to collective action among members of racial minority groups (e.g., Cakal, Hewstone, Schwär, & Heath, 2011; Tropp, Hawi, Van Laar, & Levin, 2012). Encouragingly, however, emerging research suggests that such "sedative" effects of contact may be tempered, to the extent that members of historically advantaged groups clearly support intergroup equality and challenge the legitimacy of inequality (e.g., Becker, Wright, Lubensky, & Zhou, 2013).

This emerging work is notable not only because it demonstrates that contact need not inhibit collective action intentions among the disadvantaged, but also because it reminds us that intergroup contact can affect much more than how people feel toward members of other racial groups. Contact research has expanded considerably in recent years, showing far-reaching effects and a variety of ways in which contact between racial groups has the potential to cultivate the seeds of societal change, particularly among members of historically advantaged racial groups. For instance, in the South African context, Whites who report close, friendly contact with Blacks report greater support for policies that would enhance educational and economic opportunities for Black South Africans (Dixon et al., 2010). In the United States, longitudinal research shows that greater numbers of interracial friendships predict Whites' greater support for affirmative action over time (Northcutt Bohmert & DeMaris, 2015), and having in-depth conversations with a person of color can enhance Whites' willingness to acknowledge racial privilege (Nordstrom, 2015). In some of our own work (Selvanathan, Techakesari, Tropp, & Barlow, 2017), we have found that Whites' contact with Black Americans predicts greater willingness to take action to challenge racial inequality. Taken together, these research examples illustrate the many ways in which interracial contact is associated with the beliefs, intentions, and behaviors of members of advantaged racial groups beyond contact theory's original emphasis on prejudice reduction and improved intergroup attitudes.

How Contact Can Enhance Psychological Investment in Racial Equality

Still, fundamental issues involve why and how contact may shape concern for racial justice and equality among members of advantaged racial groups. Much of the contact literature has focused on the importance of minimizing concerns about rejection (e.g., Barlow, Louis, & Hewstone, 2009; Richeson & Shelton, 2007) and other forms of anxiety and threat (e.g., Stephan & Stephan, 1985) to facilitate positive cross-group relations. While it is understandable that alleviating anxiety and threat might contribute to lessening prejudice toward racial out-groups, these factors alone cannot account for the additional effort expended by some members of advantaged racial groups to acknowledge racial disparities and promote racial equality. We contend that part of why contact contributes to these outcomes is because it leads members of advantaged racial groups to become *psychologically invested* through their relationships with members of disadvantaged racial groups. Put simply, through contact, members of advantaged racial groups can develop a greater capacity for caring about the perspectives, experiences, and welfare of members of other racial groups.

Clearly, we are not the first to suggest that contact serves to establish meaningful psychological connections between members of different racial groups (see Pettigrew, 1998). The significance of affective ties between groups has been a cornerstone of much recent contact research, both in terms of the kinds of contact that are most likely to improve intergroup attitudes

(Davies et al., 2011) and the kinds of outcomes that can be expected from such contact (Hayward, Tropp, Hornsey, & Barlow, 2017; Tropp & Pettigrew, 2005). Moreover, feeling connected to and accepted by members of other racial groups can enhance internal motivations to control prejudice and foster "an internalized, personal commitment to egalitarianism" (Kunstman, Plant, Zielaskowski, & LaCosse, 2013, p. 443), which in turn can propel engagement in further intergroup contact (Plant, Devine, & Peruche, 2010). Nevertheless, we believe that conceptualizing contact effects in terms of psychological investment offers a useful frame for understanding why some members of advantaged racial groups may engage in only relatively passive forms of interracial acceptance (e.g., prejudice reduction, tolerance, coexistence), whereas others may engage in its more active forms (e.g., social integration, inclusion, collective action). In the paragraphs that follow, we highlight several psychological processes that exemplify how a sense of psychological investment may develop through intergroup contact.

Building empathy

Empathy typically involves taking the perspective of other people (cognitive empathy) or having concern for others and their experiences (affective empathy; see Batson, Eklund, Chermok, Hoyt, & Ortiz, 2007; Stephan & Finlay, 1999). Longitudinal and meta-analytic work indicates that empathy toward other racial groups can be nurtured through intergroup contact, along with showing that greater empathy typically corresponds with lower racial prejudice (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2008; Swart et al., 2011). More broadly, empathy has also been shown to predict intergroup outcomes beyond prejudice reduction. For example, Mallett, Huntsinger, Sinclair, and Swim (2008) found that White students induced to take the perspective of Black students reported taking greater action in response to hate crimes that targeted Blacks on the college campus. In our own research on contact and collective action (Selvanathan et al., 2017), we also assessed the extent to which Whites felt empathy in relation to Black people, tapping into what Black people might feel in response to injustice (Study 2) or feeling empathic concern regarding how Black people are treated (Study 3). Across the studies, we found that Whites who reported greater contact with Black people also felt more empathy regarding what Black people experience; empathy, in turn, predicted greater anger regarding how Black people are treated, and greater anger predicted greater support for and engagement in collective action for racial justice. Thus, feeling empathic concern—that is, caring about Black people and the injustices they experience—may prompt White people to take action to promote racial justice.

Enhancing personal relevance

For members of advantaged racial groups, acknowledging racial injustice and inequality can initially seem to run counter to one's own or one's group interests (see Knowles et al., 2014; Sidanius et al., 2016). But by having meaningful contact with other racial groups, members of the advantaged racial group may come to see the plight and experiences of members of other groups as increasingly relevant to their own lives. Indeed, a growing body of research suggests that forming close relationships with members of other groups can enhance the tendency for people to hold others' experiences and identities within their own circles of inclusion, a process often conceptualized as the "inclusion of other in the self" (e.g., Wright, Aron, & Tropp, 2002). Building a sense of connectedness between oneself and racial out-groups can be achieved through fostering close relationships with out-group members, such as cross-race friendships (Davies et al., 2011; Page-Gould et al., 2008), which can encourage members of the advantaged racial group to express greater concern about the welfare of other racial groups (Wright, Brody, & Aron, 2005). To illustrate, Wright and colleagues (2005) describe a study in which White female undergraduates were paired with a cross-race (Asian American or Latina) or same-race (White) partner, with whom they engaged in a series of friendship-building activities over a period of several weeks. Toward the end of the study, and through a fictitious procedure, participants were asked to "advise" the university on how projected budget cuts should be distributed across different student organizations. White participants paired with either an Asian American or Latina partner recommended significantly smaller cuts to the Asian American or Latinx student organizations, respectively, compared with White participants paired with a White partner.

Humanizing other people

Members of advantaged racial groups also tend to dehumanize members of disadvantaged racial groups (Goff, Eberhardt, Williams, & Jackson, 2008; Kteily, Bruneau, Waytz, & Cotterill, 2015), rather than seeing racial out-groups as fellow human beings with the full depth and complexity of life experience. Dehumanization is often assessed by distinguishing between higher-order emotion and thought processes that are perceived to be uniquely human (e.g., morality, reasoning) and lower-order processes that humans are perceived to share with animals (e.g., instinct, drive), which may

then be attributed to in-group or out-group members (see Haslam, 2006; Leyens, Demoulin, Vaes, Gaunt, & Paladino, 2007). Research in this tradition has shown that people who have more cooperative and friendly contact with out-group members are also more likely to ascribe uniquely human characteristics and emotions to ethnic and cultural out-groups (e.g., Brown, Eller, Leeds, & Stace, 2007; Capozza, Trifiletti, Vezzali, & Favara, 2013). Although the existing work on contact and dehumanization is useful, we would like to see this research extended to include a greater focus on the broader societal implications of humanization and how contact may help to foster greater recognition of the full humanity of racial out-groups. In particular, we contend that contact between racial groups can help to expand moral boundaries, such that racial out-groups—who previously may have been outside advantaged group members' scope of justice—become included within their circle of moral concern (Crimston, Bain, Hornsey, & Bastian, 2016; Opotow, 1996). As summarized by Opotow (1996), for people within our scope of justice, "moral rules and values govern our conduct" such that "we care about their rights and fair treatment"; by contrast, for those outside our scope of justice, "concerns about rights and fairness seem irrelevant," and we instead view those others as "nonentities, undeserving, or expendable" (p. 20). Thus, going beyond extant work on contact and dehumanization, we propose that contact serves as a key process through which racial out-groups become included in the realm of moral concern, which may compel members of advantaged racial groups to care more about the welfare, rights, and fair treatment of disadvantaged racial groups.

Potential Obstacles to Psychological Investment

We of course recognize that the propositions we offer make for a tall order and that many obstacles to these forms of psychological investment are likely to present themselves along the way. Cognitive and motivational processes associated with social categorization induce us to focus principally on the needs, concerns, and welfare of members of our own groups (see Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987). These tendencies are often exacerbated when members of advantaged racial groups perceive themselves to be in competition with other racial groups for status and resources (e.g., Norton & Sommers, 2011) or when they feel threatened by a potential loss in status due to an increasingly diverse society (e.g., Craig & Richeson, 2014). Cultivating meaningful relations and a sense of investment across racial lines becomes all the more challenging because of widespread and persistent patterns of racial segregation (see Massey & Denton, 1993); such structural barriers can both create psychological distance and limit opportunities for contact between groups, thereby keeping the valuable benefits of contact from being realized.

We encourage societies facing these potential obstacles not to simply allow racial groups and segregated communities to continue down the path of fractionalization, but to specify strategies for creating points of connection between racial groups. Along with pursuing policies that promote greater racial integration, we can establish norms that are supportive of intergroup contact, which are reinforced by institutional authorities (Allport, 1954) and influential group leaders (Hogg, 2001), as well as enacted by other people in the media and within our immediate social environments (Mazziotta, Mummendey, & Wright, 2011; Wright, Aron, McLaughlin-Volpe, & Ropp, 1997). We can also remind people of the personal significance that relationships with members of other racial groups have brought to their lives (van Dick et al., 2004) and that we can all be represented, included, and valued as members of diverse, multicultural societies (Plaut, Garnett, Buffardi, & Sanchez-Burks, 2011). Such approaches are crucially important for us to consider in the present day, as we contend with ever-growing racial disparities and a proliferation of racially motivated attacks across the United States and around the world. We believe that contact between racial groups offers a key pathway through these social divisions, with the prospect of easing racial tensions and toward greater social inclusion—one that might lead us, in the words of President Obama,

> to act in ways that show mutual regard, propose policies that safeguard against obvious discrimination, [and] extend ourselves in our personal lives and in our political lives in ways that lead us to see the other person as a human worthy of respect. (quoted in Coates, 2016)

Recommended Reading

Allport, G. W. (1954). (See References). A seminal work introducing the contact hypothesis and describing the utility of intergroup contact in improving intergroup relations.

Dixon, J., Levine, M., Reicher, S., & Durrheim, K. (2012). (See References). An article in which the authors confront the seemingly contradictory goals of prejudice reduction and collective action.

Pettigrew, T. F., & Tropp, L. R. (2011). *When groups meet: The dynamics of intergroup contact*. New York, NY: Psychology Press. A book summarizing the findings from a comprehensive meta-analysis regarding the effects of intergroup contact on prejudice.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

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