

Social context affects the relationship between intergroup contact and prejudice



RESEARCH

‘Equality Revisited: A Cultural Meta-Analysis of Intergroup Contact and Prejudice’

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Background

Allport’s contact hypothesis states that interpersonal interactions with out-group members lead to less prejudice. This has been observed in a number of different sociocultural contexts. Yet critics of contact hypothesis state that previous research often ignored how social contexts shape intergroup interactions, which was one of Allport’s conditions for the effectiveness of contact.

Specifically, the benefits of interpersonal interactions between different groups are likely greater when those groups have equal status in society. Extrapolating to the wider society, greater egalitarianism may increase favourable conditions for harmonious intergroup contact, increasing the beneficial effects. Likewise, hierarchy values may reinforce prejudice when there is inequality between groups and the wider society supports group hierarchies.

The aim of the study was to explicitly test whether the effect of contact on prejudice was stronger in more egalitarian cultures and weaker in more hierarchical cultures.

Main research findings

Across 36 cultures, the relationship between contact and prejudice was stronger in societies that had greater structural equality and even stronger in societies that also endorsed greater egalitarian values.

Similarly, the contact—prejudice relationship was weaker, though still significant, in societies that expressed greater hierarchical values. Societal support for intergroup hierarchy also predicted a weaker link between contact and prejudice, even in equal status interactions.

However, general prejudice of participants, societal prejudice and socioeconomic inequality did not explain cultural differences in the contact—prejudice link.

Taken together, contact appears to produce the greatest reduction in prejudice when intergroup interactions take place in equal status settings, within societies that endorse equality values.

Relevance of findings to New Zealand

New Zealand is a nation that scores relatively high on egalitarianism, hence, these findings show that promoting intergroup interactions in Aotearoa is one way to reduce prejudicial beliefs about other groups.

Despite the pervasiveness of intergroup inequalities, the findings suggest that greater societal egalitarianism is conducive to positive intergroup interactions which in turn may help create more equal structures. Therefore, increasing and improving initiatives to increase intergroup interactions in New Zealand is not only important for combating prejudicial beliefs but also for tackling systemic inequality.

New Zealand like the rest of the world faces significant economic challenges in the future. It is reassuring that economic inequality did not impact negatively on the effectiveness of contact for reducing intergroup prejudice, opening up an important window to overcome the current financial challenges together.

Importantly, these findings highlight that intergroup interactions need to be understood within specific histories and contexts of the groups involved. As the current international situation shows, unequal power relations can undermine the effectiveness of intergroup contact. It is important to remember that cultures are dynamic, hence, intergroup relations are constantly changing and knowing how intergroup interactions evolve over time is an important avenue for future research.