How Can We Improve Relations Between People from Different Countries? A Social Psychological Perspective

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Abstract:

This paper sets the objective to systematize answers to the core question, "How can we improve the relations of people from different countries?" by means of social psychology theoretical resources and empirical research. The paper first investigates the psychological roots of intergroup bias so as to have a conceptual basis for defining the problem. The second part will concentrate on discussing two main intervention methods employed by social psychologists: Contact Theory and the Common Ingroup Identity Model. This involves the analysis of the effectiveness of these strategies, along with the conditions under which they can be applied, and possible risks. Besides these, the paper will examine additional strategies such as perspective-taking and cultural exchange. The last stage of this paper is an attempt to bring together, in one coherent, practical, and thorough intervention plan, the mentioned theoretical references with an indication of the prevalent psychological mechanisms responsible for that and the purpose of being a significant resource for the future of transnational understanding and cooperation.

Keywords: Intergroup Relations; Contact Theory; Common Ingroup Identity; Cross-Cultural Understanding; Prejudice Reduction

1. Introduction

Technology has been moving at a breakneck pace, and economies around the world have been integrating on a global scale, which means that the connections between nations are closer than ever. Multinational corporations, university exchanges, and online communities are just a few examples of where people from different countries are required to work together and live in harmony, which has become a distinguishing feature of our era. However, there is often a difference between this kind of world and the actual one. The road of transnational cooperation is always riddled with issues that come from different cultures, long-standing prejudices, and the use of stereotypes. Take, for example, an international company where the different countries' team members may have such a misunderstanding that the friction could result in a

delay of a project due to the differing work pace, communication, and hierarchical norms. Similarly, in their daily lives, people may also misunderstand and feel distant as a result of the negative stereotypes about the lifestyles of people from other countries, for instance, their activities related to waste disposal or public conduct.

2. The Psychological Roots of Intergroup Bias

The development of intergroup knowledge and prejudice is initially from a basic and effective cognitive mechanism, social categorization. In order to comprehend the social world that is quite complicated, our brains automatically put people in different categories, for example, nationality, race, and so on. This categorization mechanism is by itself neutral and allows us to simplify our information processing. Though, it also introduces a bunch of cognitive side-effects. In his research, the psychologist Yarrow Dunham (2018) notes that with the help of categorization one feels that one has to emphasize the differences between the groups (intergroup differentiation) and at the same time minimize the variety of members within the groups (intragroup homogeneity). We become oblivious to the fact that we assume "our side" and "they" are two entirely different things, and here members in "their" group are all the same. This "us versus them" paradigm is the simplest ground for the seeds of prejudice and stereotypes to grow.

Ingroup bias is the next level that comes into effect when social categorization gets linked to our self-concept. It is a phenomenon that refers to the propensity to see one's own group in a better light and even bring them forth with some sort of advantage, while at the same time probably having less of a positive or simply neutral opinion of the rest of the groups (Dunham, 2018). Moreover, this bias is among the most prominent ones that appear when human behavior in a social context is researched. One of the best illustrations of the "minimal group paradigm" is its classical experiments. In these experiments, the researchers grouped the participants randomly into one of the two groups, based on some insignificant and senseless criteria, such as preference for a particular painter or overestimating and underestimating dots on the screen, and so forth. The outcome was that despite people being aware that the grouping was arbitrary, still, they systematically aided members of their own group in all the resource allocation tasks without any hesitation and at the same time, they discriminated against members of the other group. The study thus dramatically reveals that the onset of ingroup bias is not conditional upon past conflicts, fighting over

resources, or cultural teaching; rather, the very fact of being identified as belonging to a group is enough to evoke it. The research leads to the conclusion that the bias towards one's own group is very strong already by the age of five.

Within the social psychology field, there exist two principal suggestions for the motivation behind ingroup bias. One of them is the social identity theory, according to which a large part of our self-concept comes from the social groups we belong to. As such, we can raise our own self-esteem and, consequently, self-worth by first of all favoring and then improving our own group's status. To put it shortly, which is used by the subject to help the status of the group automatically at the same time lifts up the subject as well. Another point of view is self-positivity transfer, which claims that most people consider themselves as positive and slightly overestimate themselves. As a result, the initial very positive feeling that accompanies the self-image will naturally be "spilt" or transferred towards the group, and hence we will also think highly of the group. It is possible that these two mechanisms are happening simultaneously and jointly providing the strong psychological base for ingroup bias.

When discussing prejudice, one very common, yet misleading, thought process is that these cultural patterns of bias are directly linked to them and to that bias. For example, it entails one to assume that those cultures that are collectivistic and stress the importance of the group's interest are more disposed to the raising of the intergroup bias than those that are individualistic and regard personal freedom as the most important value. Nevertheless, according to a comprehensive review by Hoon-Seok Choi (2025), this concept is rather an oversimplification of the truth. Choi (2025) claims that the research evidence about the connection between single-tonedness and group-being (Ind-Col) and bias is very complicated, refuting, and far from conclusive. Actually, the "seeds" of bias might be present in both individualistic and collectivistic cultures, yet their different characters and even the underlying principles could be at place. For example, certain studies that looked into different nations have revealed that the people from the societies characterized as individualistic (e.g., North America, Western Europe) tend to display a more powerful ingroup favoritism in particular evaluative tasks than those from collectivist cultures (e.g., East Asia).

The above-mentioned findings indicate that the approach to the enhancement of relations between different countries must not rely on the mere characterizations of the cultures. No culture can be taken for granted as either inherently more "exclusive" or "inclusive" than the others. Appropriate interventions call for the intimate acquaintance with the unique personalities of the interactions and

values entrenched in different cultural milieus and, at the same time, they should be able to give recognition to, for instance, that the group conduct in East Asian cultures might be more about the eagerness to achieve an internal "relational harmony" rather than the struggle for "positive distinctiveness" that is one of the main characteristics of Western social identity theory.

3. Analysis of Core Intervention Strategies

Having understood the complicated nature of prejudice, it is possible to assess intervention strategies in a systematic manner to see if they really work. Much research in social psychology over the years has resulted in numerous practical and theoretical models grounded in evidence.

3.1 Strategy One: Contact Theory

Contact Theory is regarded as one of the most ancient and best-validated theories throughout the history of successful reduction of intergroup prejudice. It was systematically explained for the first time by American psychologist Gordon Allport in his major work, The Nature of Prejudice (1954). The main concept of Contact Theory was initially easy to understand: in some cases, and under very specific conditions, the direct and positive interaction between members of different groups may bring out the lowest level of prejudice and help to understand and also to like each other.

Allport (1954) noted that contact of any kind will not always produce positive outcomes. The process will be carried out more effectively if four ideal situations are met and as much as possible is completed in real practice; Equal Status, which refers to members or both groups having an equal footing within the contact situation; Common Goals, which means the groups work towards a common objective that is desirable for both; Intergroup Cooperation, where members are required to work hand in hand rather than compete to get their common goals; and Support of Authorities, Law, or Custom, which posits that the contact is openly supported and facilitated by social authorities such as managers, teachers, or even laws.

One of the most significant ways in which the efficacy of Contact Theory has been validated is by the extensive research conducted over the years. One of the most powerful arguments in favor of this is a comprehensive meta-analysis done by Thomas F. Pettigrew and Linda R. Tropp in 2006. A meta-analysis is a "study of studies" that combines the results of numerous independent research projects statistically to draw more reliable and generalizable conclusions. Their analysis of 515 independent stud-

ies from worldwide that collectively contained more than 250,000 participants produced one main finding. Over 94 % of the studies included in that analysis connected intergroup contact with the reduction of prejudice in a significant way.

Besides correlational evidence, a single essential experiment which showed clear evidence for the causal linkage between prejudice reduction and contact was the research of Morton Deutsch and Mary Evans Collins (1951) in the area of public housing. Back then, public housing projects in the United States were either racially segregated or mixed. Compared to White homemakers living in segregated neighborhoods, the researchers observed that those who were randomly relocated to housing projects with an integrated dwelling developed after some time contact significantly more positive and friendly attitudes towards their Black neighbors. The study's cleverness comes from its employment of random assignment that excluded the possibility of only those individuals low in prejudice choosing to live in integrated households, thus giving the strongest evidence that it was the daily contact of equal status that caused prejudice reduction.

Nevertheless, although it can be very effective, Contact Theory cannot solve all problems at once. Rather, an impatient interaction that fails to achieve the optimal conditions can even produce a backlash and inflame existing prejudices. One such example is the famous "Robbers Cave Experiment" (Sherif et al., 1961). In this study, the scientists divided the boys into two groups that then became enemies and haters as a result of a series of competitions they held. As the direct consequence, the two groups began to demonstrate intense animosity, and stereotype each other negatively. This research shows that the contact at hand that takes place in a competitive rather than a cooperative situation is likely to deteriorate the current status. On the other hand, a notable research by Barlow et al. (2012) has indicated the one-sided influence of negative contact. They have pointed out that only one unpleasant intergroup encounter can raise prejudice to a much greater extent than a friendly one can lower it. Consequently, in order to repair the damage caused by a single negative encounter, one would have to go through many positive ones, maybe even dozens. This is the reason why it is vital to provide a positive quality in all contact situations.

One of the fundamental obstacles to the application of Contact Theory for improving international relations is the necessity to create interaction scenarios that are in line with Allport's four optimal conditions. An example that can be mentioned is the non-governmental organization Medecins Sans Frontieres. In this enterprise, doctors, nurses, and logisticians from different parts of the earth meet and cooperate for the single, most valuable, common

good: the provision of a neutral, independent humanitarian medical aid service. They are forced to work hand in hand in emergency rescue operations where the stakes are high. In the staff, each individual's worth and rank are dependent on their professional abilities and input, not on their nationality or race. The entire organizational culture, as well as its entities, is in support of this spirit of collaboration across borders. Such a setting is really the manifestation of Contact Theory, and thus it can be considered as a pattern for truly deep understanding and the creation of transnational friendships.

3.2 Strategy Two: The Common Ingroup Identity Model

This model, introduced by Samuel Gaertner and John Dovidio (2000), gives us another vantage point with which to understand how to reduce prejudice. It is less concerned with group relations and more with how individuals perceive group boundaries. The main concept of this model is that with the help of members of those once segregated groups (us and them), one can reclassify them as members of a more extensive superordinate group (a new we); thus, the first group boundaries do not stand out any more, hence, the intergroup bias is decreased. Psychological processes dealing with emotions and behavior traits influence the phenomenon of people, who receive positive emotions and cooperative behaviors when identifying the former outgroup as the possession of the new-group theory.

The model has been substantiated by many laboratory studies. A standard experiment is one in which researchers first create two groups among participants to develop some group identity and then apply different methods to motivate them to perceive themselves as one entity. Outcomes of these studies indicate that groups that manage to achieve the "we are one team" perception score, members' ratings of the former outgroup become strikingly more positive. Also, there are many instances in the real world. For example, in an international school, students come from many different countries; therefore, administrators and teachers can downplay the differences of nationality and encourage mixing by promoting the idea of a shared "school community" identity and organizing school-wide events. Equally, pushing a "global citizen" or a "shared human destiny" narrative in response to a polluting climate or a health crisis would be an effort to build a uniting group identity that goes beyond the borders of the nation-states.

On the contrary, the adoption of common ingroup identity as a new norm is also full of contradictions, the greatest of which is the possible occurrence of identity threat and resistance. When the overriding "we" is pushed too far, it may lead some members to feel that their precious and unique original group identity (like national, ethnic, or cultural identity) is being lost or even that they are being threatened. The resistance can in this case be so stiff, especially among some groups of people. For instance, people who are extremely nationalistic and patriotic, instead of being happy, may consider it as treason if they are asked to decrease the impact/importance of their national identity and embrace the world as one group norm or global citizen identity. At the same time, there is a small number of minority groups whose distinctiveness is very much due to historical memory, culture and continuous fight for rights that could be hesitant to "assimilate" their identity into a larger community that might be historically dominant.

To successfully apply this model in a transnational context, the key is to seek balance and inclusion. A good tactic will not be to aim at erasing national or cultural original identities in order to dawn a common one, but just to create a dual identity. Using this model, the person can at the same time identify with both the new and the old group (e.g., "I am both Chinese and a member of this international research team"). Research demonstrates that the dual identity method can utilize the advantages of a common identity, such as enhanced collaboration and liking, while at the same time efficiently alleviating identity threat and resistance by providing room for the original identities to be recognized and respected.

4. Recommendations

By analyzing these two main theories, it becomes evident that each single strategy cannot function as a solution to the whole problem. To accomplish the best possible improvement in transnational relations, the most sensible approach would be to combine, on a case-by-case basis, several different psychological principles so as to engender such a milieu as to maximize positive interaction.

Besides contact and common identity, a number of other significant psychological methods could also be implemented in our plan to provide intervention. Perspective-taking is more than just sympathy; it is a deliberate and conscious attempt to envision and grasp another person's thoughts, feelings, and experiences. In transnational interactions, this can be achieved through conducting in-depth dialogues wherein the participants would share their cultural perspectives on such notions as family, honor, and time, thus learning from each other, the profound rationale of the behaviors. Moreover, implementing the discussions that focus on the common human desires and problems, i.e. the need for one's children to be healthy and the longing

for a safe home, can indeed become a powerful source of empathy, thus shrinking the psychological distance.

One of the excellent vehicles for cultural exchange is contact theory, but the most important factor is the quality of such exchange. The effect of cultural exchanges with only decorative roles is minimal. These exchanges should penetrate all layers of culture to share stories, values, and feelings through those symbols. A more powerful method apart from tasting foreign dishes would be to have the natives of those countries explain the significance of a dish in their festivals or family dinners, for example. Having an Iranian share how Nowruz symbolizes rebirth and hope, or an American explain the tradition of gratitude and family reunion behind Thanksgiving, would allow storytelling to become one of the bridges between different cultures.

Taking into account all of the discussed theories, I would recommend the "International Culinary Collaboration Project" as a multi-stage, integrated intervention program. The first stage will be a Preparation Workshop. Before participants meet face-to-face, an online or face-to-face cultural workshop would be arranged. Such a workshop should include a presentation of cultural backgrounds, communication customs, especially direct vs. indirect styles and the value differences of the countries involved. This stage aims at managing participants' expectations, providing them with the required cultural knowledge, and lessening the anxiety and negative emotions that may be the result of misunderstandings in the initial encounters. The Cooperative Cultural Experience, which represents the project as a whole, is the third stage. Several small groups composed of people from different countries would be the basis of the participants. Each group would be tasked with learning and preparing one representative dish at least from each member's home country within a certain time, and a brief cultural story to go along with it. Finally, there would be a day of the "International Cultural Feast" where all groups would unveil their creations.

Stage three is all about the thorough use of several psychological strategies in the very activity. The design for such a project is, in essence, a natural way for it to integrate the whole range of the models discussed. Specifically, it meets Allport's four optimal conditions for Contact Theory in an exemplary way: a common goal (to successfully host an international feast), cooperation (members must collaborate and learn from each other), equal status (each person is an expert and ambassador of their own culture), and authority support (the project organizers provide clear rules and positive guidance). Moreover, it is agnate with the Common Ingroup Identity Model through the creation of a new positive, task-oriented common identity for the groups, such as the "International Food Exploration Team." Simultaneously, since the core of

the event is the presentation and sharing of the peculiar food cultures, each individual's initial national identity is not disestablished but rather supported and exalted. This way, a dual identity is effectively promoted, and the group members do not feel resistance. Eventually, the project powerfully changes the cultural exchange from mere observing to doing, thus, perspective-taking and profound cultural exchange are facilitated. The cooking of a teammate's national dish incites participants to practice perspective-taking by listening attentively, asking questions, and trying to understand the logic and cultural habits behind the culinary process from their teammate's perspective. The talking of family stories and holiday traditions through the dishes during the final feast, consequently, turns into a vivid and deep empathy practice.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, globalization is going in one direction only: towards more interaction with people from different cultural backgrounds. It becomes painfully evident that knowing how to bridge divides and make connections is a vital skill for every one of us in this era. Social psychological studies show that although intergroup barriers and prejudices are deeply rooted, they are not insurmountable. By scientifically designing the environments for interaction and by systematically applying proven strategies such as contact theory, common ingroup identity, and perspective-taking, we are able to turn conflicts from what they are into mutual understanding and appreciation opportunities. "International Culinary Collaboration Project" epitomizes this very philosophy. It really is a telling example of how the best way to solve transnational issues, perhaps, is not through the making of great political speeches, but rather the launching of one simple sharing act, an equal partnership, and a dinner full of stories and laughter. Recognizing and using these psychological principles not only brings us down the road of cross-cultural communication with more ease on a personal and organizational level, but it also leaves a profound and positive imprint on the present global society that is more peaceful, inclusive, and prosperous.

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