

Effects of contact between minority and majority groups more complex than once believed

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In recent research, Linda Tropp at UMass Amherst, with Tabea Hässler at the University of Zurich and others, examined whether and how contact between groups might help to promote support for social change and in pursuit of greater social equality, among other goals. Credit: UMass Amherst

For more than 50 years, social scientists and practitioners have suggested that having members of different groups interact with each other can be

an effective tool for reducing prejudice. But emerging research points to a more complex and nuanced understanding of the effects of contact between groups, say Linda Tropp at the University of Massachusetts Amherst and Tabea Hässler, leader of a multi-national research team based at the University of Zurich, Switzerland.

As Tropp explains, studies from the last 10 to 15 years suggest that the positive effects of intergroup contact tend to be weaker among members of historically advantaged groups, such as [white people](#) and heterosexuals, compared to the effects typically observed among members of historically disadvantaged groups such as people of color and sexual minorities. There has also been growing concern that contact may effectively reduce prejudice between groups but do little to change existing [social inequalities](#), she adds.

"With our research, we wanted to examine whether and how contact between groups might help to promote support for [social change](#), in pursuit of greater social equality, while also testing whether the effects of contact might vary depending on status relations between the groups and how the relevant variables were measured," she explains. "So, we embarked on this multi-national study, which included researchers from more than twenty countries around the world, who gathered survey responses from 12,997 individuals across 69 countries."

The authors highlight that this comprehensive study "makes substantial advances in our understanding of the relation between intergroup contact and social change." Details appear in *Nature Human Behaviour*.

The researchers found robust evidence, Tropp says, that when members of historically advantaged groups engage in contact with disadvantaged groups, they are more likely to support social change to promote equality. In contrast, when members of historically disadvantaged groups have contact with advantaged groups, they are generally less likely to

support social change to promote equality.

However, the researchers also point out an important exception: "Among both advantaged and disadvantaged groups, contact predicted greater willingness to work in solidarity to achieve greater social equality. Thus, this research may offer a new route to reach social cohesion and social change, such that social harmony would not come at the expense of social justice."

Tropp, Hässler and their colleagues say their results raise two important questions and directions for future research. First, they ask, "How can positive and intimate contact between groups occur without reducing disadvantaged group members' support for social change?" Second, "How can support for social change be increased among disadvantaged group members without requiring negative contact experiences?"

They suggest, "Possible answers to both questions may be that advantaged group members who engage in contact should openly acknowledge structural inequalities and express support for efforts by disadvantaged group members to reduce these inequalities," they conclude.

More information: Tabea Hässler et al, A large-scale test of the link between intergroup contact and support for social change, *Nature Human Behaviour* (2020). [DOI: 10.1038/s41562-019-0815-z](https://doi.org/10.1038/s41562-019-0815-z)

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