

DIRECT AND INDIRECT CONTACT AS PREDICTORS OF POSITIVE ATTITUDES TOWARD OUTGROUP

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ABSTRACT

Social changes, economic difficulties, conflicts and wars in various regions of the world are factors among those that contribute to the movement of people and ethnic groups. As a result, diversity has become a defining feature even in countries traditionally recognized as homogeneous. Furthermore, this contributes to the increasing relevance, interest, and research on intergroup relations. The Contact Theory provides mechanisms for improving intergroup relations. Direct, indirect, and imagined contact, as well as the quality of contact, are presented as important tools for reducing prejudice, stereotypes, and discrimination. However, the effect of contact on positive attitudes toward the outgroup that go beyond tolerance has not been sufficiently tested by researchers. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to predict positive intergroup attitudes based on direct and indirect contact with the outgroup. The study included 184 students of pedagogy, future teachers, at Cyril and Methodius University - Skopje, North Macedonia. According to ethnicity, 54.9% declared themselves as Albanians, and 45.1% as Macedonians. The data show that direct and indirect contact are significant predictors of positive intergroup attitudes. Differences in attitudes towards the outgroup according to the frequency and type of contact are also discussed.

Keywords: Direct contact, positive intergroup attitudes, majority, minority.

INTRODUCTION

Intergroup relations are important for societies but also for individuals. As much as intergroup relations shape the daily life of individuals in society, they are also crucial for the functioning of society and states. When intergroup relations are tense, they often manifest as hostile relations, conflicts and even violent wars. Therefore, research on intergroup relations is mainly focused on studying prejudice, stereotypes, discrimination, racism, and xenophobia.

Contact theory is one of the tools offered by social psychology for alleviating and reducing intergroup tensions. A number of researches have shown its effect in reducing prejudices and increasing tolerance (Schlueter & Scheepers, 2009; Binder et al, 2009; Van Assche et al, 2023, Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006, Maiti et al., 2020), fade stereotypes (Zingora et al., 2020), reducing social distance (Bastian et al., 2012) decrease perception of threat to the group (Brown et al., 2007), and beliefs in conspiracy theories (Jolley, Seger & Meleady, 2023). Intergroup contact also has effects in reducing prejudice even in conflict settings (Maiti et al, 2020). Contact with the outgroup depends on group status. Members of minority group report more contact than the member of majority group (Philips, 2005; Cote & Boucher, 2015)

Allport (1954) points out that contact reduces prejudices and improves intergroup relations when it is carried out under conditions that the groups have the same status, have institutional support and through cooperation are oriented towards achieving a common goal (Pettigrew, 1998). Studies have shown the effect of contact in improving intergroup relations even when these conditions were not fulfilled (Bastian et al. 2012)

Researchers have highlighted the effect of different types of contact on intergroup relations such as direct contact (Maiti et al, 2020), indirect contact (Dovidio et al., 2011; Brown & Paterson, 2016) imagined contact (Stathi et al, 2019; Jolley, Seger & Meleady, 2023).

Testing the effect of the quality and intensity of contact with the outgroup has been shown to be important in improving group relations. Specifically, Maiti et al. (2020) have proven that increasing the intensity of contact enhances its effectiveness in changing attitudes towards the outgroup. The amount of contact with the outgroup is positively related to explicit positive attitudes toward the outgroup and negatively related to explicit negative attitudes toward the outgroup (Vezzali et al., 2023). Jolley et al. (2023) have proven that against the quantity of contact with the external group, which has not been in a significant relationship, the quality of the contact with the immigrant has been in a negative relationship with the beliefs in conspiracy theory, and has a stronger effect on reduction in perceptions of casual or superficial contact (Van Assche et al, 2023). That the quality of the contact has more important effects than the quantity has also been underlined by Stathi et al. (2019). However, the quantity of contact with the outgroup has more effects on explicit attitudes towards the outgroup than the quality of contact (Vezzali et al., 2023), which highlights the importance of both direct and indirect contact in certain circumstances.

Reduction of prejudice leads to tolerance, but the absence of prejudice does not mean the presence of positive attitudes towards the outgroup (Alfieri & Marta, 2011). According to Pittinsky (2005), positive attitudes are a new construct, independent of negative attitudes. Therefore, the aim of this study is to predict positive attitudes toward the outgroup based on direct and indirect contact.

METHODOLOGY

Sample

The research included 184 students of pedagogy, future teachers. From the total number of students included in this study from Cyril and Methodius University - Skopje, 54.9 have declared themselves as Albanians, while 45.1% have declared themselves as Macedonians. The average age of students is 22 years. The students filled out the questionnaire in the areas where they had their lessons, and filling out the questionnaire took about 30 minutes.

Measures

Positive intergroup attitudes were measured with the Allophilia scale (Pittinsky, 2011). The scale contains 17 statements, which include the views, feelings and behavior of students towards members of the outgroup, (e.g, "I feel like I can be myself when I am with Macedonians/Albanians"; "I feel safe when I hang out with Macedonians.") The participants for each statement answered on a scale from 1 "do not agree at all" to 6 "completely agree". The mean score was calculated such that high values indicated high positive attitudes towards the outgroup. The internal consistency of the scale was very good for the whole sample (Cronbach's alpha = .95) and for Albanians sample ($\alpha = .95$) and Macedonian sample ($\alpha = .96$). Direct contact with members of the external group was measured with the question, "How many of your friends are Macedonian/Albanian?", while the answer options were: 1 "none", 2 "some", 3 "a part of them", 4 "the majority".

Students who stated that they have at least one friend who belongs to the out group have the question regarding the type of contact. The frequency and type of contact with members of the out group is measured by five questions: "How often do you contact your friends in the following ways: greet them; write on social networks; free time; joint activities; visit home.

For each type of contact, the participants could choose one of the five options offered from 1 "never" to 5 "every day". The internal consistency of the scale in this sample was good for the whole sample (Cronbach's alpha = .79) and for Albanians sample ($\alpha = .73$) and Macedonian sample ($\alpha = .84$).

Indirect contact with outgroup members was measured with the question "How many friends do you have friends who are Macedonian/Albanian?". The answer options were: 1 "none", 2 "some", 3 "a part of them", 4 "most".

RESULTS

Taken as a whole, students weakly express positive attitudes towards the outgroup ($M = 2.73$, $SD = 1.24$).

To examine whether there were differences in attitudes toward the outgroup between Albanian and Macedonian students, the t-test was used. The data show that there are statistically significant differences in attitudes towards the outgroup between Macedonian students ($M = 3.01$, $SD = 1.32$) and Albanian students ($M = 2.49$, $SD = 1.13$). On average, Macedonian students express more positive attitudes towards the outgroup, in contrast to Albanian students who weakly express positive attitudes towards the outgroup (table 1).

Regarding the contact with the outgroup, students on average express a weak intensity of direct contact with members of the outgroup, respectively that they have some friends ($M = 1.91$, response range 0-4) and there are no statistically significant differences between students Albanian and Macedonian. There are no significant statistical differences between Albanian and Macedonian students even in terms of indirect contact with members of the outgroup. The students as a whole state that on average some of their friends have friends who are members of the outgroup.

Regarding the frequency of contact, only students who have experience with direct contact with members of the outgroup have responded. Students report, on average, several times a week they greet each other with members of the outgroup ($M = 3.80$), while they almost rarely visit home ($M = 2.02$). There are statistically significant differences between Macedonian ($M = 2.80$, $SD = 1.32$) and Albanian ($M = 2.27$, $SD = 1.21$) students only in terms of spending free time together (e.g. drinking coffee together). Specifically, Macedonian students declare that on average several times a month they spend their free time together with Albanian friends, while Albanian students declare that they rarely spend free time with Macedonian friends.

Positive attitudes towards the outgroup are positively related to direct contact ($r = .314$; $p < .01$) and indirect contact ($r = .341$; $p < .01$).

Table 1. Means of the variables included in the study

Variable		Ethnicity						t
		Total		Macedonian		Albanian		
		N	Mean (SD)	N	Mean (SD)	N	Mean (SD)	
Attitudes	1-6	182	2.73 (1.24)	81	3.01 (1.32)	101	2.49 (1.13)	-2.95 .004
Direct contact	1-4	183	1.91 (.81)	83	1.90 (.86)	100	1.92 (.77)	.135 .893
Indirect contact	1-4	184	2.41 (.86)	83	2.52 (.99)	100	2.33 (.74)	-1.50 .135
<i>Intensity of contact</i>								
Greeting*	1-5	124	3.80 (1.15)	54	4.00 (1.20)	70	3.64 (1.09)	-1.73 .086
Correspondence	1-5	123	2.72 (1.10)	53	2.89 (1.21)	70	2.60 (.99)	-1.43 .154
Common activity	1-5	124	2.26 (1.18)	53	2.23 (1.20)	71	2.28 (1.17)	.257 .798
Free time	1-5	125	2.50 (1.29)	54	2.80 (1.32)	71	2.27 (1.21)	-2.31 .022
Home visit	1-5	124	2.02 (1.21)	54	2.17 (1.22)	70	1.91 (1.19)	-1.15 .215

*students who have had direct contact

A multiple linear regression (table 2.) was calculated to predict positive attitude toward outgroup based on direct and indirect contact. A significant regression equation was found ($R^2 = .15$, $F(2,12) = 10.816$, $p < .000$). The results indicated that both, indirect contact ($\beta = .25$, $p < .01$) as and direct contact ($\beta = .21$, $p < .05$) were significant predictors of positive attitudes toward the outgroup.

Table 2. Prediction of positive attitudes toward outgroup based on direct and indirect contact

	B	SE	beta	t	Sig.
(Constant)	.972	.459		2.117	.036
Direct contact	.432	.189	.210	2.763	.024
Indirect contact	.388	.140	.255	2.278	.007

To verify whether there is a difference in attitudes towards the outgroup according to the frequency of contact with the outgroup, one way ANOVA was used for each type of contact in particular. The data show that there are no statistically significant differences between students' intergroup attitudes and the contact which is only in the form of greeting with participants of the outgroup $F(3,117)=1.64$, $p=.184$, nor the contact which is in form of joint activities $F(4,117)=1.59$, $p=.182$,

But there is a small, but statistically significant difference of positive attitudes towards the outgroup and contact with friends of the outgroup, which is expressed in the form of writing on social networks $F(4,116) = 3.269$, $p < .05$. Post hoc difference with Turkey HSD, shows that the intergroup attitudes of students who have never written on social networks with outgroup friends ($M=2.26$; $SD=1.36$) significantly differ from students who write on social networks every day with an outgroup friend ($M=4.19$; $SD=1.44$). In other words, students who used social networks every day with outgroup friends have more positive attitudes towards the outgroup than students who never wrote with outgroup friends.

An important statistical difference also exists between positive attitudes towards the outgroup and contact with friends expressed in the form of spending free time (e.g. walking, or going to coffee together) $F(4,118) = 3.664, p < .05$. Post hoc difference with Turkey HSD, shows that the intergroup attitudes of students who have never spent their free time together with outgroup friends ($M=2.40; SD=1.05$) significantly differ from students who spend their free time freely together by walking or drinking coffee together every day with an outgroup friend ($M=3.98; SD=1.71$). In other words, students who spent free time together every day with outgroup friends have more positive attitudes towards the outgroup than students who never spent free time with outgroup friends.

There is a statistically significant difference of positive attitudes towards the outgroup and contact with friends of the outgroup expressed through home visits of friends who are members of the outgroup $F(4,117) = 7.284, p < .001$. Post hoc difference with Turkey HSD, shows that the intergroup attitudes of students who have never visited the home of a friend who is a member of the external group ($M=2.34; SD=1.04$) statistically differ from the attitudes of students who rarely ($M=3.43; SD=1.20$) visit friends/members of the external group at home, as well as with those students who visit friends several times a month ($M = 3.90, SD = 1.54$). In other words, students who have gone very rarely or several times a month for home visits to friends/members of the outgroup have more positive attitudes towards the outgroup than students who have never gone for home visits of the friend who belongs to the outgroup.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Positive attitudes towards the outgroup are at a low level, an expected phenomenon especially when in the recent past ethnic groups have conflicting histories, as was the past of Albanians and Macedonians in North Macedonia.

Unlike other studies, where members of the majority group express a higher level of contact with the outgroup than the minority group (Phillips, 2005; Cote & Boucher, 2015), in our study no such differences were found. Contact with the outgroup was generally low, and the same between ethnic groups of students. This data indicates cautious ratios between the students of the two groups. When we add to this data the low indirect contact between Albanian and Macedonian students, and no differences between the two groups, we get the reflection of ethnic segregation. Considering the tense past between the two groups, there is a clear mutual hesitation to establish intergroup relations.

Direct and indirect contact are presented as significant predictors of positive attitudes towards the outgroup. This data coincides with the findings of other studies that contact has positive effects on intergroup relations (Maiti et al. 2020; Dovidio et al, 2011).

The positive attitudes of students do not differ according to the frequency of contact expressed in the form of greetings and participation in joint activities. Students who write daily on social networks with outgroup friends, those who spend free time every day with outgroup members, and those who rarely or several times a month visit outgroup friends at home express more positive attitudes than students who never do these activities with members of the outgroup. This data is consistent with the findings of other studies which emphasize that the quality of contact has greater effects on intergroup relations than superficial contact (Van Assche et al. 2023).

The data imply the construction of strategies that would enable conditions for contact between the two entities in North Macedonia to build positive intergroup attitudes. Future research could

examine the extent to which intergroup attitudes are predicted based on the type of contact, particularly considering whether such contact occurs voluntarily or involuntarily.

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