Is it Possible to Reduce Prejudice? The Proposal of Contact Theory

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Abstract

The text explores Contact Theory, introduced by Gordon Allport in 1954, as a proposal to reduce prejudice and discrimination between groups. Based on the idea that prejudice arises from processes of social categorization, the theory suggests that interaction between groups, when well structured, can be an effective tool to transform negative attitudes into positive ones. In this sense, the pillars of ideal contact include equality of status, institutional support, common goals and deep and genuine interactions. In addition, some moderators of the effect of contact are presented, as well as the transfer of effects beyond the immediate contact group and new possibilities of intervention of indirect contact to reduce prejudice. In conclusion, it can be stated that Contact Theory has evolved over the decades, remaining one of the most respected and applied approaches in Social Psychology.

Introduction

With the emergence of Social Psychology as an academic discipline in the 1930s and 1940s, researchers observed an interesting conflict that arose from contact between groups — mainly related to interracial issues — where people sometimes acted in a pro-social manner (e.g., helping, liking, or loving people from other groups), and on the contrary, at other times prejudice and discrimination against these same groups prevailed [1]. During this period, racist factions predominated in the international context in various cultures that sought scientific data to justify these differences.

Thus, the Nazi movement in Germany, which generated the Second World War; the discussions about the independence movements in Africa and America, which remained subjugated on the basis of racial differences between groups; or the debates surrounding civil rights and segregation laws in "American culture" were some of the preliminary events that gave rise to researchers' interest in investigating the effect of contact between different groups in reducing prejudice [2,3].

In this context, Williams [1] published a review of 102 articles on the literature related to intergroup research. In this work, the author suggested that for an effective reduction of prejudice, contact between groups should include very close interactions between the participants, with sharing of the same status and sharing of mutual tasks and interests. These indications triggered new research on contact and its effects on reducing prejudice, which presented evidence of the beneficial effects of contact between groups. For example, the study carried out by Wilner et al. [4] in four interracial housing projects located in the United States of America revealed that white people who lived near black people had a more favorable attitude towards social integration, which could not be explained on the basis of initial favorable attitudes. Therefore, the authors deduced that contact between groups increased the likelihood of a social climate conducive to positive coexistence as part of the community's social process.

Based on Williams' findings, Gordon W. Allport formulated the Contact Hypothesis in 1954 — later known as the Contact Theory — in his book "The Nature of Prejudice" [5]. In this work, the author compiled numerous forms of discrimination, indicating that prejudice is caused by multiple reasons, requiring a multifaceted intervention to reduce it. One of the author's main conclusions was that he stated that all people are chained to their culture, and therefore, all have tendencies towards prejudice (p. 4). Based on this hypothesis, the author researched methods that could reduce prejudice and allow a restructuring of attitudes, concluding that contact between groups could be an excellent tool for this positive change.

In general, the contact hypothesis is based on the idea that prejudice originates during the process of categorization and attribution of characteristics, and therefore, intergroup hostility is socially learned. Thus, it argues that human beings tend to reject what they do not know, with discrimination being a consequence of this lack of knowledge of the other group [6]. In this way, contact can favor experiences of knowledge between groups that increase the perception of similarities between their members, and thus their attraction.

Throughout his research, Allport [7] emphasized that casual contacts are more likely to increase prejudice and discrimination than to reduce them [1,8]. In this sense, he pointed out that sporadic and unintentional encounters usually reinforce the negative idea that the group has of the subject's stereotype, interpreting it as a confirmation of this difference [6,9-12]. In this way, the author stated that contact between groups should be prudently controlled in order to avoid an undesirable effect [7]. According to Barney [2], the explanation for why negative thoughts persist in casual encounters is related to the tendency to maintain our beliefs automatically, avoiding reorganizing them, which reduces our anxiety in social contact and allows us to make a minimum effort in analysis and critical thinking: this is known as "social interaction efficiency" (p. 40). For Santana [13], the experience of first contact with a stranger would allow us to attribute certain attributes to them with which we could categorize them in a certain group. Based on these preconceptions, stereotypes would be created for a certain type of individual, according to the attributes that they present (p. 37).

In this context, Allport [7] believed that knowledge of the reference group and an experience of structured direct contact could reduce the negative stereotype that promotes prejudice and discrimination, changing negative beliefs and improving the initial stereotype [14,15]. Thus, starting from contact with the group and knowledge of the members of the minority group, tolerance and friendly attitudes would increase, indicating a positive improvement [6,12,16]. However, as Calderón-López [17] points out, when the contact hypothesis was formulated by Allport, it was assumed that intergroup contact would not always reduce prejudice, so the focus was on maximizing the improvement of each group's attitudes. In this sense, most studies have been interested in the positive aspects of contact and not so much in the negative ones, since the latter could provide information on the conditions that promote or hinder the positive effects of intergroup contact [16].

According to Bramel [18], Allport developed his theory under the assumption that most ethnic or racial groups are more similar to each other than their members imagine. In this sense, Allport researched different groups using the terms "assumed similarity" and "prejudice", describing the latter as a mistaken set of unpleasant characteristics that are unfairly attributed to a group and generalized to all members belonging to it. In this context, the author highlights that the concept of "assumed similarity" has been neglected by researchers who have applied contact theory. For example, the concept of "assumed similarity" used by Allport has generated some contradictions when applying this theory to specific groups such as the disabled, since people with disabilities have historically been identified as "different" [2].

However, Gill [2] concludes that the argument based on the "difference" of people with disabilities is superficial, and that they are treated with prejudice by society, making the attributions of difference imprecise and usually based on the way in which a given task is performed. Therefore, the stigma associated with disability fits into the concept of "wrong and unfair characterization", making this premise that negative attitudes towards this group of people are likely to be changed through interventions based on contact theory. We would like to emphasize that there are few longitudinal studies on intergroup contact, and those that have been developed have indicated that contact, under optimal conditions, reduces prejudice and maintains change over time [17]. According to the author, there is also evidence that suggests that intergroup contact positively influences the minority group (outgroup).

However, as De Beer [1] points out, despite the positive results, the first reviews of the literature on contact produced controversial conclusions: while some reviews supported the Contact Hypothesis, others were more critical, dismissing the potential positive result of contact on discrimination between groups. Almost three decades after Donaldson's study [19,20], they carried out a meta-analysis with more than five hundred studies from 38 countries that had used contact theory as a form of intervention to reduce

prejudice. Although the studies were conducted in different contexts and applied to groups of different configurations (ethnic minorities, religious minorities; homeless people; people with HIV/AIDS, people with homosexual orientation, etc.), the authors concluded that there is evidence that the Intergroup Contact Hypothesis reduces prejudice between both groups. Thus, during the meta-analysis, the authors acknowledged that research conducted under the ideal conditions proposed by Allport [1] produced an optimal reduction in prejudice. However, Pettigrew & Tropp [20] stated that these conditions should be understood as interrelated and not independent. Furthermore, the authors confirmed that greater positive or high-quality intergroup contact was directly related to reduced prejudice.
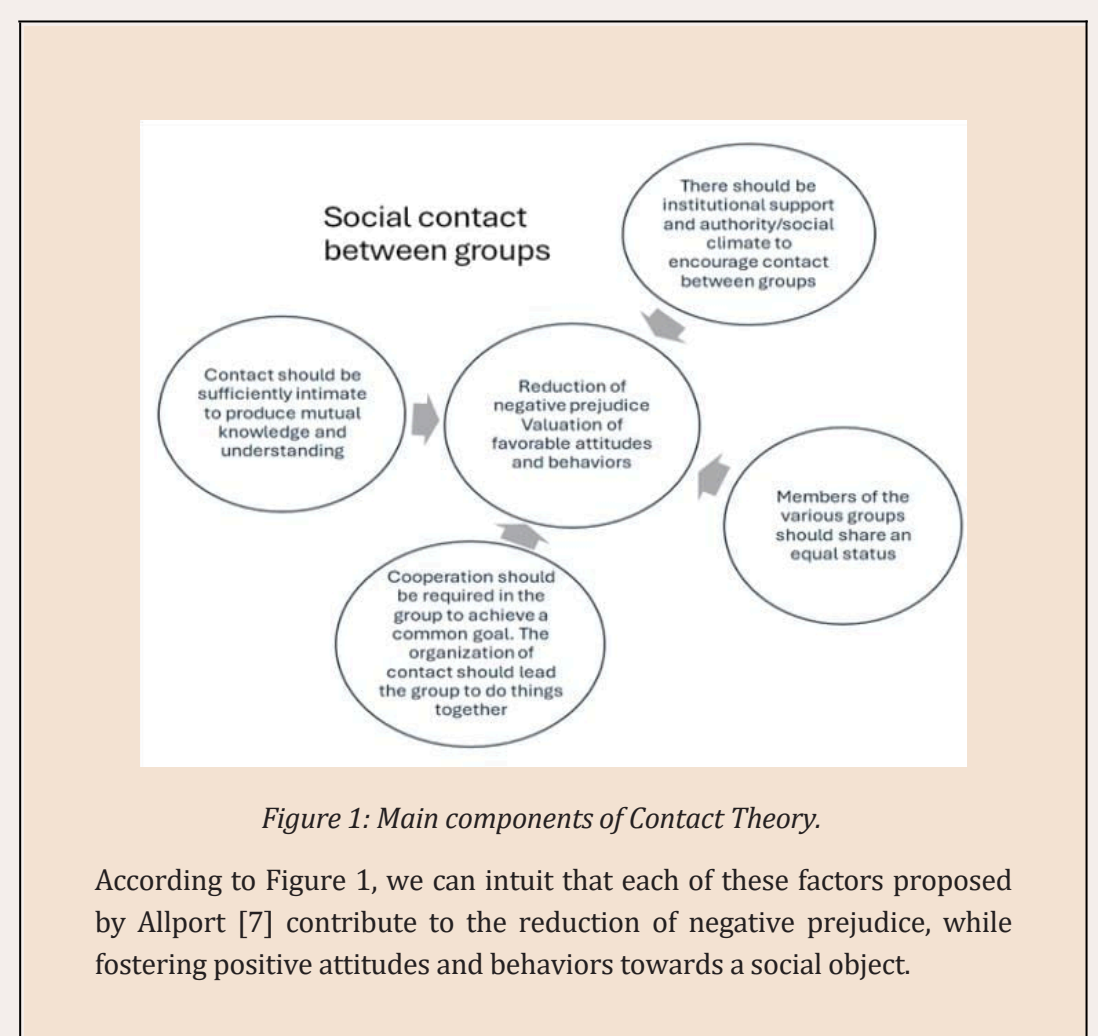
It is important to emphasize that most of the studies on contact included in the meta-analysis conducted by Pettigrew & Tropp [20] were cross-sectional in nature, which is not suitable for inferring a causal relationship between contact and prejudice. However, some more recent longitudinal and experimental studies seem to confirm this causal relationship between intergroup contact and prejudice [1,3].

Characteristics of Ideal Contact

In general, contact theory states that prejudice and discrimination against a minority group can be reduced through contact between individuals, when this experience is designed and implemented considering four aspects, namely

a) equality of status within the group
b) support for change by the community/institution
c) common goals among participants
d) deep, genuine and intimate joint experience [7].

According to the research carried out [1,2,15-17,20,21], researchers have agreed that for there to be lasting change, these aspects must be present, and that the lack of one or more of them could reduce its effectiveness. Figure 1 represents a diagram of the four characteristics proposed by Allport for intergroup contact to be successful.

Figure 1: Main components of Contact Theory.

According to Figure 1, we can intuit that each of these factors proposed by Allport [7] contribute to the reduction of negative prejudice, while fostering positive attitudes and behaviors towards a social object.

Thus:

a) Equality of status within the group. Equality refers to the parity of status within the experiential situation provided by the contact, outside the everyday social context of the groups. If the contact is produced in a situation in which one of the groups is subordinate or has a lower status than the other in some social characteristic relevant to the context, the negative stereotypes could be reinforced instead of weakened. As Calderón-López [17] indicates, equality of status is a difficult characteristic to measure, and is considered in different ways: some studies have anticipated the understanding of this concept in relation to the status of the groups prior to the intervention; while others have indicated that equality of status during the contact is relevant. In any case, it is through parity during the intervention that the perception of equality between groups (in terms of power, resources or importance) can facilitate rapprochement between their members, reducing prejudices [22].

b) Support for change by the community/institution. There must be an environment conducive to change, manifested by social concern and materialized by the creation of norms against intolerance between groups. These norms must advocate respect for the fundamental rights of each person, with social, institutional and legislative policies that support and sustain change, since without this institutional support, changes tend to be ineffective [6].

c) Common objectives among participants. Contact between groups must be mediated by the conception of common objectives, which must provide a solid structure for interaction, allowing both groups to identify with each other. To materialize these common objectives, it is necessary to apply cooperative strategies. This contact situation, where members of both groups work together and in a coordinated manner to achieve the same objective, helps to reduce prejudice towards the minority group (outgroup). In this sense, contact tends to accentuate positive results when a large number of activities are implemented that encourage cooperative work to achieve the common objectives outlined.

d) Joint experience should be deep, genuine and intimate. This aspect is based on the affective dimension of attitude, and is one of the pillars of the theory. As Barney [2] indicates, this was one of the principles that generated the contact theory — that people understand that "they are more alike than they realize" — and that through deep, rather than casual, contact, these conclusions can be discovered (p. 42). Therefore, deep experience would provide an increase in the knowledge that each group has in relation to the other, which would favor the understanding of the similarities that exist between them, in addition to providing an opportunity for the inclusion of the outgroup within the ingroup [23]. However, while similarities are recognized, differences and discrepancies would also be identified [17].

In addition to the four fundamental conditions presented in Figure 1, Allport [7] highlighted the importance of information as a way of changing stereotypes, although it is not clear whether knowledge would create a comfortable situation, or whether the comfortable situation would invite the acquisition of knowledge about the group [15]. In Allport's view, knowledge can be the result of direct experience or it can come from a credible and trusted source, and in either case, the feeling of comfort and friendship would favor the reduction of prejudice [2].

In addition to the characteristics indicated, Allport [7] mentioned that there are different variables with a direct influence on attitudes when the intention is to predict the effects of contact. In summary, he pointed out six categories of variables (pp. 290-291):

a) Quantitative aspects of contact (frequency, duration, number of people involved, variety);
b) Aspects related to the status of contact (inferiority, equality or superiority);

c) Aspects of the role within the contact (competitive or cooperative, superior or subordinate);
d) Social environment surrounding the contact (real or artificial, voluntary or obligatory, etc.);
e) Previous personal experiences of each individual in the contact and type of prejudice (e.g.: previous contact with people of race "x"; initial level of prejudice high, medium or low; etc.);
f) Areas of contact (casual, educational, residential, professional, recreational, etc.).

As indicated by numerous studies, direct contact between groups — carried out on the basis of equal status among participants, in a friendly and personal environment, with cooperative activities, carried out frequently and within a setting that emphasizes similarity and normality — promotes positive attitudes between groups [2,12,16,23-25]. Likewise, this type of contact would increase friendships, which would favor feelings of empathy and the perception of the perspective of another group [3].

Moderators of the Contact Effect

In addition to the optimal conditions proposed by Allport [7] for an "ideal contact" — equality of status within the group, support for change by the community/institution, common goals among participants and joint experience — research by Pettigrew and collaborators [3,16,20] highlighted that there are other factors that would act as moderators of the strength of the contact effect. Among these factors are:

a) the initial level of prejudice of individuals
b) the relevance of the category
c) the status of the group
d) quality and quantity of contact
e) friendship between groups

Therefore:

a) Initial level of prejudice of individuals. As Allport [7] stated, the initial level of prejudice of the individual can become a potential barrier to reducing it. According to De Beer [1], while some studies have found that proximity between highly prejudiced individuals in contact environments — with pressure to suppress prejudice — can result in an increase in negative attitudes, on the other hand, contact has been shown to be particularly effective among highly prejudiced participants when they have no choice but to engage in an intergroup contact situation (e.g., contact between inmates of different races).

In this sense, Pettigrew & Tropp [16,20] showed that more prejudiced and less motivated participants who engaged in mandatory contact situations had greater positive effects when compared to contexts in which participants had the ability to choose whether or not to engage in intergroup contact.

b) Category relevance. According to Pettigrew & Tropp [20], prejudice towards an outgroup can be reduced when intergroup contact emphasizes an exemplar of the outgroup as a representative member of the outgroup. Therefore, there seems to be greater significance in reducing prejudice towards the entire category when contact is experienced as an intergroup encounter rather than an interpersonal encounter.

In contrast, emphasizing an individual as a category can reinforce negative perceptions and stereotypes about the outgroup, leading to increased intergroup unrest, which can inhibit the generalization of the positive effects of contact. In this regard, perceiving the outgroup as a homogeneous whole — the "outgroup homogeneity effect" or the tendency to perceive the outgroup as more homogeneous — can be detrimental to intergroup relations, and is sometimes associated with more negative attitudes towards the outgroup [26].

However, as indicated by Cehajic et al. [27], intergroup contact helps to reduce the perception of outgroup homogeneity by separating negative examples of the outgroup from its stereotypical image, which can facilitate attitude improvement. From an eclectic perspective, contact should allow the outgroup exemplar to be seen as a representative member of his/her group, but without reaching the point of appearing entirely stereotypical [28] for a more in-depth review. According to De Beer [1], category salience is an important moderator of the generalization of the positive effects of contact to the outgroup as a whole.

c) Group status. As indicated in the meta-analysis by Pettigrew & Tropp [20], intergroup contact is
reliably associated with significant reductions in prejudice toward both members of the majority and minority groups. However, ideal equality between participants during contact [7] is not always possible. According to the study, intergroup contact appears to be less effective for members of the "minority" group when interacting with members of the "majority" group. This is because members of minority and majority groups interpret contact between them differently: while members of minority groups become more aware of their unequal (disadvantaged) status and are more likely to identify situations of prejudice directed at their group, members of the majority group tend to be more understanding and empathetic towards the situation of the minority group [1,20,25,29].

In any case, there seems to be a certain perception of insecurity and threat towards the other group, which the literature has treated as "intergroup anxiety" [16]. Uncertainty about whether members will be accepted by the other group, or how they should behave in situations of contact with the other group, would cause this insecurity and uneasiness [23]. As Tropp, Mazziotta and White [6] observed, members of the majority group (ingroup) may experience some anxiety during intergroup contact situations resulting from the pressure of feeling prejudiced by the other group. Similarly, members of the minority group (outgroup) allude to some anxiety as a consequence of perceiving themselves as targets of prejudice.

Therefore, if one can control the state of anxiety during intergroup interaction, the resulting situation may not be considered as threatening, which can reinforce contact and favor the reduction of prejudice. Thus, reducing negative feelings of threat and anxiety are key strategies for reducing prejudice and restoring the status of equality during contact [14,17]. In general, affective aspects related to emotions — such as high empathy that generates a change in perspective and low intergroup anxiety — have a greater effect on reducing prejudice when compared to cognitive aspects such as knowledge about the minority group [3,6,16,23,30].

d) Quality and quantity of contact. In Allport's initial formulation [5], in addition to the association
between a high frequency of intergroup contact and a greater reduction in prejudice, the author emphasized the importance of the quality of the experience of said contact. In this sense, he suggested that the quantity of contact without quality would be insufficient to achieve the objective. Therefore, most studies related to the contact hypothesis have made efforts to provide frequency and quality in direct contact between groups, finding that both factors were significantly associated with the reduction of prejudice towards the reference outgroup [1].

Authors such as Cehajic et al. [27] used a multiplicative index of quantity and quality of contact (quantity * quality), finding that the result of this index would be a significant predictor of prejudice reduction. However, studies seem to show that the quality of contact between groups predicts prejudice reduction better than the quantity of contacts [3,16], and that even short contact experiences, when well structured, can obtain good results.

Thus, confirming Allport's ideas [7], the quality of contact seems to be related to more positive attitudes when compared to a high frequency of contact, but of low quality, such as casual and/or superficial contact [31,32].

e) Intergroup friendship. Ideally, contact situations between groups should be structured in such a
way that a greater quantity of contact occurs with a high quality, an example being friendship relations between members of different groups. This type of relationship allows for regular and long-lasting contact (high frequency) and high quality with the external group. In fact, friendship relations between groups include several of the ideal conditions indicated by Allport [5], such as equality of status, common goals, cooperative activities and an intimate experience [3].

According to the meta-analysis study carried out by Pettigrew & Tropp [20], research that included friendship between groups as a measure of contact had a greater reduction in prejudice than those that did not take it into account. Another meta-analysis carried out by Davies et al. [33] indicated that intergroup friendships could predict more positive attitudes toward the outgroup when these friendships were operationalized and quantified according to the number of outgroup friends, the percentage of the friendship circle that belongs to the outgroup, the closeness of outgroup friendship groups, and the perceived inclusion of outgroup friends in the ingroup.

According to Pettigrew et al. [3], contact theorists have emphasized the role of intimacy in reducing prejudice, with intergroup friendships leading to strong, positive attitudes toward the outgroup that are especially resistant to change. In this sense, the sharing of feelings derived from friendship appears to be an important mediator of the positive effects of intergroup contact.

Generalization of the Effects of Contact

The data obtained from the exhaustive meta-analysis carried out by Pettigrew & Tropp [20] allow us to state that positive contact between groups is associated with a reduction in prejudice towards the reference group (similar data were found in the review study carried out by MacMillan et al. [34]. However, if the effects of contact could not be generalized beyond the immediate situation, the theory of contact would have limited value.

Consequently, social researchers using this theory have sought to understand whether the effects of contact between groups can be generalized to other environments or groups [3]. In this sense, they have presented up to three ways of generalizing the effects of contact, namely, the generalization of the effects from a specific situation to another; the generalization of the effects of contact with a subgroup to the outgroup as a whole; and the generalization of the effects of the outgroup involved in the contact to other outgroups not involved — also known as secondary transfer [1]. In this sense, the work carried out by Pettigrew & Tropp [20] presented evidence that the positive effects of intergroup contact were capable of generalizing from specific situations to the outgroup as a whole, and from the reference outgroup to other groups not involved in the initial contact. These results prompted Pettigrew et al. [3] to try to understand how the effects of intergroup contact were applicable to all groups involved, transferable to new situations, or generalizable to outgroups that had not been involved in the original contact situation.

In this sense, they found that the effects were applicable to all groups involved as long as they were aware of their identification as a group, from which it was inferred that the vast majority of intergroup contacts involved a certain degree of affection during categorization, which generated greater acceptance of the outgroup based on the "sympathy" of its members. Similarly, results were presented that indicated greater trust in the ingroup, as well as a more differentiated view of the outgroup (differentiating between "sympathetic" and

"less sympathetic" individuals), and therefore, distancing themselves from an outgroup homogenization. Likewise, Pettigrew et al. [3] pointed out that the studies analyzed agreed on the existence of a transmissibility of the effect of contact to new situations, and the research showed that the reduction of prejudice against an outgroup could be generalized to other outgroups not initially involved in the contact [16,20]. This would be possible through the process that the authors called "deprovincialization", referring to the fact that a person is less "provincial" about their own group when they like and trust an external group, which allows them to accept new outgroups, even those with which they have never had contact.

However, this type of generalization seems more feasible when the outgroups share some similarity [3,6,35] and the contact is consolidated beyond the immediate contact situation [36]. Despite the positive results obtained in the research, Calderón-López [17] points out that one of the criticisms made of the Contact Theory is the lack of a scientific explanation about the process of how contact with an element of the minority group generates a change in personal attitudes, which can involve the entire group, or even groups with which they have had no contact. In other words, for this author it is not clear how the change in attitudes is produced and generalized through intergroup contact. Likewise, the theory would not explain how the effect of a specific contact situation is transferred to other similar situations that include other contexts.

In order to develop an explanation for the effects of contact in reducing prejudice, the literature has sought explanations based on other theories. Thus, prejudice can be understood from a cognitive perspective — starting with universal cognitive processes such as social categorization — through the Social Identity Theory [26]. However, this Theory also includes motivational elements, such as the search for positive and group differentiation, through intergroup comparison [37].

As De Beer [1] indicates, the Social Identity Theory suggests that people define themselves, in part, by the groups of which they consider themselves members, having a "social identity" in addition to their "personal identity". This "social identity" would facilitate information on how the person defines himself, his behavior and the evaluation he makes of other groups. This theory began to emerge in the 1970s, based on Allport's reflections on prejudice [5], which began to be considered as a cognitive bias, considering the idea that its origin could be found in a normal cognitive process such as categorization or stereotyping. From this cognitive perspective, prejudice adopted a position based on "ingroup favoritism" (or "ingroup bias"), which is defined as "the tendency, on the part of members of a group, to favor, benefit or value more positively that group in relation to another to which they do not belong, in behaviors, attitudes, preferences or perceptions" [38]. However, it is worth highlighting that ingroup favoritism does not necessarily lead to contempt for the external group (outgroup). According to Brasil & Cabecinhas [37], the Social Identity Theory involves three fundamental concepts, namely, "social categorization" — referring to the cognitive process necessary for people to organize information and define their place in society — "social comparison" — a process that involves the comparison between one's own group (ingroup) and the relational group (outgroup) — and "social identity" — sharing a positive image of one's own group, differentiated from others, which constitutes a tendency towards social stereotypes.

In this regard, Navas Luque et al. [38] state that people have a natural tendency towards categorization that allows them to adapt effectively to their environment. Thus, given the huge amount of stimuli they must deal with on a daily basis, they have been forced to develop adaptive systems to summarize, classify and store in categories the information they receive from events, objects and subjects. In this sense, the elements belonging to each category share similar characteristics that differentiate them from other categories. This process aims to respond to their social environment in a way that has meaning, value, order and a certain predictability; without ceasing to be in accordance

with their psychological schemes (knowledge, attitudes, beliefs and expectations).

In this way, the process of categorization and self-categorization that presents the person as an element of a certain group — and therefore distinct from other groups — also affects our emotions and behavior. According to Brasil & Cabecinhas [37], belonging to a certain group is linked to the psychological sphere that occurs from a cognitive aspect (the notion that the subject has of belonging to a certain group); an evaluative aspect (positive or negative evaluations made by the subject about belonging to the group); and an emotional aspect (relating to the feelings and emotions that can be associated with the other dimensions of this belonging). In this sense, social categorization can be understood as "a system of orientation that helps to create and define the individual's place in society" [30].

As Garcia et al. [26] indicate, the bibliography has shown that when objects are grouped, there is inevitably a tendency to exaggerate the similarity between the elements of the same group (intra-categorial homogeneity), but also, the differences between elements of different groups become more evident (inter-categorial differentiation).

However, from the perspective of Social Identity Theory, "ingroup favoritism" does not have to be preceded by competition or conflict between groups; it is enough that the groups want to differentiate themselves from each other in a comparison that can be valued as positive. Therefore, ingroup bias cannot be considered synonymous with conflict or prejudice, but rather a previous stage that can lead to it. According to Allport [7] Ingroup loyalty does not necessarily imply hostility towards the outgroup. Similarly, Navas Luque et al. [38] emphasize that research related to ingroup bias shows that, although it is true that people tend to favor the ingroup, it is also true that they are reluctant to inflict demonstrations of direct hostility on the outgroup.

Thus, through evaluation and comparison with other groups, members tend to establish and share a positive image of their own group, favoring unity and social identity ("social favoritism"). A real or potential threat to the identity of the ingroup (such as competition for certain social, labor, economic status, security, etc.) can initiate the conflict that generates prejudice. Therefore, social identity constitutes the basis of relationships between groups, based on the self-evaluation of the group itself and of the outgroups, which constitutes the origin of the process of social categorization that sometimes results in prejudice. Experimental research in this area demonstrates that groups formed without any prior identification criteria, and therefore without the existence of previous conflicts, can generate ingroup favoritism and outgroup antagonism [30].

In this way, social identity — understood as the set formed by the individual's self-concept, his/her group membership and the value attributed to this membership; and configured as a social, relational, flexible and changeable construction [37] — constitutes one of the bases for the generation of stereotypes, since it allows certain generalizations and oversimplifications to be practiced based on the differentiation of real or symbolic characteristics of the different groups [30]. However, Brasil & Cabecinhas [37] indicate that social stereotypes help the elements of the ingroup in the cognitive and affective organization of their environment, through three functions:

a) positive distinction of the ingroup in relation to the outgroup
b) justifying function, dependent on the status of the group (if a minority group, it helps to re-signify negative stereotypes related to the group; if a group with a higher status, it justifies the superiority of the group compared to the other)
c) causal explanation, clarifications that simplify the social environment in which individuals find themselves.

Generalization of the Effects of Contact

In our daily lives, we can see how members of a given group seek to improve their self-image based on the connotation of negative aspects of an external group, that is, to favor the positive image of their own group by negatively stereotyping other groups. In this way, when social identity becomes a salient characteristic during contact, our perception and relationship with people in different categories can become competitive and discriminatory [1].

Thus, in order to reduce the negative effects and increase the positive effects of contact, Calderón-López [17] cites three models commonly used in the literature, which complement the theory of contact and which allow an explanation of the reduction of prejudice and the process of how its effect on attitudes is generalized: the decategorization model (Brewer and Miller, 1984); the recategorization model or common ingroup identity model (Gaertner, Dovidio, Anastasio, Bachevan and Rust, 1993); and the salient categorization model (Hewstone and Brown, 1986).

It should be emphasized that the three models have their origin in Social Identity Theory, although each of them has its own specificity in relation to the conditions for generalizing the effect of contact. Therefore, these approaches would be based on categorization processes based on cognitive mechanisms, which assume that modifications of the cognitive representations of groups in an intergroup context would cancel out the negative aspects that stimulate the production of prejudices [6,26].

a) The decategorization model (Brewer and Miller, 1984). It proposes the idea that group representations should move away from the social categorization constructed by society over time, since these representations or images are partial, superficial and tend towards homogenization [6]. In this sense, the model refers to a humanistic approach, which prioritizes that the member is seen as an individual rather than as a category, and therefore intergroup contact is made based on the promotion of personalized interactions between participants rather than relationships based on group membership. Thus, during interpersonal contact, individuals obtain more idiosyncratic information about the outgroup subjects, paying less attention to the stereotypical information they previously held about the group. Therefore, the model points to the breaking down of boundaries between groups based on the collection of relevant and individualized information about the subject. Given the wide variability of characteristics, it would be appropriate to foster contact between groups that promotes the personal attributes of each member and, therefore, the deconstruction of stereotypical categorization.

In this way, frequent interpersonal contact would favor personalized knowledge of the outgroup members, while challenging the initial negative stereotypes they had. If contact were to continue for a long enough period, interaction between groups would become normalized, leaving aside differentiation based on group membership [17]. Thus, the new pattern of information collected could contradict the initial stereotype, contributing to the generation of more personal impressions, reducing those of categorical origin.

These changes tend to be permanent in cognitive and motivational aspects, with a tendency to generalize to other elements of the outgroup, as well as to other contexts, due to the occurrence of a less negative evaluation that reduces the effects of categorization [6]. Therefore, the model proposes that the situation of intergroup contact oriented from the differentiated coexistence between its elements, can reduce the effect produced by ingroup and outgroup categorization. In this way, the relationship established between elements would reduce the connection of the individual as a representative of a group.

b) The recategorization model or model of common ingroup identity (Gaertner, Dovidio, Anastasio,Bachevan and Rust, 1993). This model is based on the restructuring of group boundaries — known as recategorization — which would lead members of the ingroup and outgroup to perceive themselves as members of the same group.

As De Beer [1] indicates, the model advocates a change in cognitive representations from two groups ("us" and "them") to a single inclusive, supra-ordered category ("we"). Therefore, recategorization would aim to make members of the ingroup aware that people in the outgroup belong to the group itself in some common dimension, or in a restructured category with a greater level of inclusion [6]. Consequently, the model proposes the creation of a common group in which elements of both groups are integrated, resulting in the recategorization of members into a single group [39]. Thus, the ingroup and outgroup would be under the same supra-ordered category, where all subjects would be "companions" [17].

One of the strategies for recategorization involves changing intergroup perception, from different groups to the single group; or creating superordinate subgroups with a more inclusive character. In this way, the ingroup can vary hierarchically and inclusively (e.g. from the family to the neighborhood, to the city, to the nation, to the continent, to the planet, or to the human species); recategorizing preexisting common aspects (e.g. school, corporation, nation, etc.); or accepting factors desired by the subjects (e.g. common destiny or goals) [6].

Therefore, the model aims to reduce prejudice and discrimination between groups — resulting from a previous categorization — by modifying the cognitive representation of belonging to different groups by the representation of belonging to a single group [39]. Therefore, intergroup bias can be altered by the cognitive representation of belonging to different groups, which can be affected by contextual factors that can have consequences in the cognitive, affective and behavioral dimensions. However, the representation of a single group does not imply the loss of group identity, but rather would allow a more positive evaluation of the outgroup, being able to generalize the common identity of the ingroup to the other members of the outgroup [1].

As pointed out by Rebelo et al. [39], this model proposes contact under conditions of equal status through the elimination of barriers in a single recategorized group, as well as interaction based on cooperation within a favorable normative context, the elaboration of supra-ordinate objectives, cooperative activities that reinforce the perception of common identity, and interactions that highlight the idiosyncrasy of the elements. All these elements — presented as characteristics of ideal contact by Contact Theory — would effectively reduce the intergroup bias caused by prior categorization. Similarly to the Decategorization Model, recategorization into a single group would motive more positive attitudes towards the elements of the initial outgroup, as well as a generalization of the benefits of the common ingroup, which, without ignoring its original identity, would compile information contrary to the initial stereotypes about the outgroup [39].

c) The salient categorization model (Hewstone and Brown, 1986). This model argues that contact should be carried out at an intergroup level, rather than at an interpersonal level, with elements that act as representatives of the group. In this way, any positive change during contact could be quickly transferred to other subjects in the outgroup [17]. In a crude way, we can see the use of salient categorization in the Media when they use the image of great Paralympic athletes — such as the South African athlete Óscar Pictórius — as a representative model of people with disabilities (both positive and negative).

However, one of the risks of increasing category salience is that this salience could result in the activation of negative stereotypes towards the outgroup, consolidating the categorization prior to contact [1]. Similarly, criticisms directed at the decategorization and recategorization models state that we cannot conclude that positive attitudes towards individuals from the outgroup resulting from the dissolution of intergroup boundaries are generalizable to

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other members of the outgroup or to the outgroup as a whole. However, it is admitted that contact with the person changes attitudes towards them, but the fact that the outgroup membership of the subject with whom contact was established is not highlighted does not imply that it is generalizable to the entire outgroup [1,17].

As highlighted, the literature has recognized advantages and disadvantages in each of these three theoretical models, with new proposals emerging with the aim of taking advantage of the benefits of each of them and limiting their drawbacks. Although they are not part of this work, for greater depth the Dual Identity Theory [40], the Three-Stage Contact Model [41] and the Integrative Model [28] can be reviewed.

New possibilities of the Contact Theory

With the interest in exploring the possibilities of the Contact Hypothesis, some authors such as Wright, Aron, McLaughlin-Volpe and Ropp [17], proposed an extension of it, called the "extended contact hypothesis". This hypothesis states that in order to reduce prejudice towards the outgroup, direct contact between members of both groups is not necessary.

Thus, simply knowing or observing that an element of the ingroup maintains a close relationship with an element of the outgroup can contribute to improving the intergroup attitudes of the former towards the latter [3,14]. In this way, a reduction in prejudice is observed when the observer is friends with people who maintain friendly relationships with elements of the outgroup [35]. We can summarize the idea based on the well-known popular saying "the friends of my friends are my friends". Therefore, Igartua et al. [14] assert that the positive effects of contact can occur even if it is indirect — vicarious or symbolic — with a positive correlation between indirect contact and improved positive attitudes towards an outgroup. One of the advantages of indirect contact is that it stimulates the generalization of positive attitudes towards the outgroup as a whole, since membership of the outgroup is more evident to the observer than to the person involved in the contact, and therefore, the subject's personal knowledge is also less [17].

In this context, Igartua et al. [14] reinforce the idea of indirect contact, based on three theories — frequently used by the Media — which contribute to the generalization of the effects of contact in reducing prejudice and stimulating positive attitudes: the Theory of Media Intergroup Contact, the Theory of Imagined Contact and the Theory of Parasocial Contact.

The first of these, the Theory of Intergroup Media Contact, refers to the interaction produced between a spectator belonging to the ingroup (e.g., a person of race "x") and a fictional character representing the outgroup (e.g., a person of race "y"). The reduction of prejudice can occur when the spectator of the ingroup identifies with the character of his/her own group, who is involved in situations of positive interaction or friendship with the member of the outgroup. According to the second theory, the Theory of Imagined Contact, there would be a reduction in prejudice simply by imagining oneself in a positive situation with a member belonging to the outgroup (e.g., being the coach of an athlete with a disability who wins major competitions). Therefore, indirect imagined contact could favor the reduction of prejudice whenever the interactions between the members of the ingroup and the outgroup were based on a pleasant and non-stereotyped experience.

Finally, the Parasocial Contact Theory states that the appearance in the Media (e.g., cinema, television and radio) of examples of positive and successful relationships between people from the ingroup and the outgroup could contribute to reinforcing attitudes of acceptance and inclusion of the outgroup members.
While it is true that these theories point to a positive change in attitudes through indirect contact, this does not seem to be as strong as that produced by direct contact. In this sense, the attitude generated by indirect contact is likely to be changed more easily and does not seem to last very long if it is not reinforced adequately.

However, the effect of indirect contact will be important for those who do not have the opportunity to establish direct contact with members of an outgroup [3], or even to reinforce the direct contact already established. This is especially useful when the contact group is made up of traditionally excluded people, where opportunities to interact directly with this group may be limited due to cultural aspects of segregation and marked discrimination, which give them little social participation at all levels. Today, there are numerous methods — based on both direct and indirect contact — that contribute to reducing prejudice and fostering a positive change in attitudes towards the various groups at risk of exclusion [2,21,42]. Some of these methods consist of intervention based on simulations, training, workshops, dramatizations, television series, etc.; these have been used, among others, by hospitals, government agencies, the media, associations and academic institutions [35].

We can conclude that, given the transcendence of the facts, what was originally a modest "contact hypothesis" presented by Allport [5], has now become a theory of considerable complexity [3,23]. As Bramel [18] states, contact theory is "one of the longest-running and most successful ideas in the history of Social Psychology" (p. 49).

Final Considerations

Contact Theory, initially proposed by Gordon Allport in 1954, stands out as a robust and multifaceted approach to reducing prejudice and promoting intergroup harmony. Although this theory has demonstrated positive results in multiple studies and contexts, some challenges still remain, such as the need for greater understanding of the mechanisms of generalization and transfer of the effects of contact. However, proposals such as indirect and media contact open up new possibilities to expand its impact, especially in environments where direct contact is limited.

Although its beginnings date back more than 60 years, Contact Theory continues to evolve, solidifying its place as one of the most respected tools in Social Psychology for combating prejudice and promoting more inclusive and empathetic relationships between groups. Further study in longitudinal studies and in different contexts promises to further enrich its effectiveness and applicability.

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