Including Outgroups in the Self: The Challenge and Promise of Positive Intergroup Relations

A Review of
Moving Beyond Prejudice Reduction: Pathways to Positive Intergroup Relations by Linda R. Tropp and Robyn K. Mallett (Eds.)
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Editors Linda Tropp and Robyn Mallett begin Moving Beyond Prejudice Reduction: Pathways to Positive Intergroup Relations by quoting Martin Luther King Jr.’s address at the 1963 March on Washington, inviting listeners to dream with him of children across races, someday “joining hands . . . as sisters and brothers” (p. 3). At the time of this address, social psychologists were already investigating the characteristics, causes, and means of reducing prejudice (Allport, 1958; Wrightsman, 2008).

In keeping with King’s rhetoric, this work was driven by optimism and by confidence in the applicability of scientific analysis to social problems (Allport, 1968). Gordon Allport acknowledged the resistance of social structures to change but argued that this “cannot be used to justify total pessimism” and that “new horizons in human relationships are opening” (Allport, 1958, p. 468).

In 2011, one can fall short of total pessimism, but it is understandable if one’s optimism is strained. Prejudice and intergroup conflict persist and fill the daily news, but this persistence in and of itself is not necessarily cause for despair; social change takes time, and setbacks must be anticipated. One’s hopes that prejudice can be eliminated may in fact be shadowed less by the slow pace of social change than by the major advances in our theoretical and empirical understanding of bias and conflict in the past two decades. Now, as ever, one aim of this research is to provide a scientific basis for change.

But data collected in recent years via increasingly sophisticated methods and measures highlight the intransigent and insidious nature of prejudice, even within a (largely North American) context of normative egalitarianism. Well-intentioned majority group members learn racial stereotypes and can be influenced by their automatic activation (Devine, 2005); suppression of prejudice is accepted as a desirable democratic social goal, but this suppression requires effort and taxes the self-regulatory system (Crandall & Eshleman, 2003). And the tendency to favor ingroups over outgroups, with concomitant automatic cognitive bias, is observed in children as young as five years of age (Dunham, Baron, & Carey, 2011).

Toward a Positive Psychology of Intergroup Relations

Where, then, to begin addressing cognitive, affective, and identity-related phenomena that appear overdetermined by mechanisms of human nature and nurture? One sticking point, perhaps, is that in spite of the extent and quality of current prejudice research, psychology as a discipline has not adequately considered the full range of intergroup
For Tropp and Mallett and the contributors they have gathered, Allport’s sense of new horizons in human relationships is lacking in recent social psychological discourse. “Indeed,” write the editors, “most of our research from the past several decades has focused on negative processes and obstacles in intergroup relationships” (p. 6). To counter what is portrayed as a one-sided state of the science, Tropp and Mallett offer their book as a positive psychology of intergroup relations, in line with the more general call for work in psychology that moves beyond psychopathology and focuses on human strengths and well-being (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000).

The book moves from Part I’s conceptualization and measurement of positive intergroup attitudes (dubbed allophilia by Pittinsky, Rosenthal, and Montoya in Chapter 2) to Part II’s examination of motives and expectancies that people bring to intergroup contact situations. Part III explores the broad impact of intergroup friendship on attitudes toward outgroups, and Part IV examines intergroup friendship in the context of resolving intergroup conflict that has involved violence. The variety of topics and approaches provides a satisfying breadth of coverage, but deeper thematic currents establish a theoretical coherence that can generate further research. These overarching themes include the functional separability of positive and negative attitudes, the role of close relationship processes in fostering positive intergroup relations, and the promise and risk of opening oneself to the perspective and group-based identity of another.

**Functional Separability of Positive and Negative Attitudes: Approaching Versus Avoiding Outgroups**

Pittinsky et al.’s Allophilia Scale is grounded in the broader notion of positive and negative attitudes as functionally separable. The assessment of attitudes along a bipolar continuum running from negative through neutral to positive can mask unique, separate positive and negative attitudes toward a social object or category. Separate positive and negative attitudes, in turn, serve distinct motivational functions (Cacioppo, Gardner, & Berntson, 1997).

In a given situation and/or for a given individual, a positive attitude may be highly salient, resulting in approach behavior; a salient negative attitude, on the other hand, would predict avoidance of the object. Thus, if prejudice reduction entails amelioration or conscious control of negativity regarding an outgroup, it cannot be assumed that positivity and approach will follow.

In order to operationalize specifically positive outgroup attitudes, Pittinsky et al. constructed their Allophilia Scale empirically by asking a sample of respondents to generate lists of positive feelings that one might have about outgroup members and creating items after “pruning” these lists (e.g., “I am at ease around [outgroup members],” “I feel a sense of belonging with [outgroup members]”; p. 47). Items were anchored by 6-point agree/disagree responses, administered to additional pilot respondents, and grouped via factor analyses into subscales.

The authors focus primarily on positive attitudes among White respondents toward African Americans but have generalized the measure to include other intergroup attitudes. Overall, allophilia scores are associated with a variety of approach-related feelings and behaviors, including greater ease and relaxation in intergroup interaction, and the expectation that friendship toward an outgroup member will be reciprocated in an anticipated interaction.

**Friendship and Social Change**

But friendship across group boundaries is more than a hoped-for outcome of improved intergroup attitudes. In Part III of the book, friendship formation and interpersonal closeness emerge as predictors of positive attitudes and approach behavior toward outgroups. The contributors build upon a theoretical perspective on closeness developed by Arthur Aron and his colleagues—specifically, the conceptualization and assessment of including the other in the self (IOS; e.g., Aron, Aron, & Smollan, 1992)—to link dyadic friendship to intergroup camaraderie.

In Chapter 6, Kristin Davies, Stephen Wright, and Arthur Aron provide background on the role of IOS in self-expansion,
described as a motive to gain efficacy by incorporating new resources and experience into the self. IOS in the context of a close relationship allows one to expand the self by linking the identity of a friend or partner to one’s self-concept, resulting in overlap between cognitive representation and evaluation of the self and representation/evaluation of close others.

Davies et al. go on to review evidence that people incorporate the social identities of close others into the self just as readily as they incorporate a friend or partner’s individual characteristics. A high degree of IOS with an outgroup friend predicts more positive attitudes toward the group as a whole.

The authors acknowledge subtyping—perceiving an outgroup member whom one likes as an exception, with outgroup stereotypes remaining unchanged—as a potential limit to this positive generalization from a friend to a friend’s group. But IOS in fact seems to place a limit on subtyping, cutting through the “selective perception and selective forgetting” that Allport (1958, p. 191) identified as key to the maintenance of negative stereotypes in the face of contrasting evidence.

IOS and its generalization from a friend to a friend’s group can also be experimentally induced. Davies et al., as well as Elizabeth Page-Gould and Rodolfo Mendoza-Denton in Chapter 7, present several studies using Aron’s fast-friends paradigm, a series of structured interactions in which new acquaintances engage in mutual self-disclosure and trust building, accelerating processes associated with friendship formation. This procedure increases closeness between members of different racial groups, and this increased closeness is associated with reduced intergroup bias and reduced physiological stress responses following fast-friendship interactions with outgroup members.

Chapters 6 and 7 also summarize research evidence for indirect friendship or extended contact, a phenomenon identified by Wright, Aron, McLaughlin-Volpe, and Ropp (1997) whereby mere knowledge that a fellow ingroup member has a close relationship with an outgroup member can predict more positive intergroup attitudes. The book’s updated review of the literature supports inclusion of an indirect friend’s group membership in the self and consequent reduction in anxiety around cross-group contact as a mechanism for the impact of observed friendship.

Self-Expansion and Identity Safety: The Risk and Promise of Intergroup Trust

Even in societies where recent history and therefore living memory are characterized by violation of basic human rights and violence, interpersonal processes involving closeness seem crucial to the sustainability of political reform. Chapter 9 opens Part IV of the book, and Hermann Swart, Rhiannon Turner, Miles Hewstone, and Alberto Voci describe surveys of Protestants and Catholics in Northern Ireland and of Black South Africans indicating that contact between conflicting groups predicted forgiveness by victims of past repression and violence to the degree that respondents reported perspective taking and empathy toward the outgroup. Perspective taking and empathy were strongest among those reporting cross-group friendships, and friendship, breadth of perspective, and empathy were associated not only with outgroup forgiveness but also with intergroup trust.

But opening the self to others makes one vulnerable to rejection or even victimization, and if we are to encourage a social practice, we must acknowledge the risks of that practice. Outside of the laboratory, self-disclosure and openness must be freely initiated. As Samuel Gaertner and John Dovidio put it in the book’s concluding chapter, “A vexing problem is how to facilitate the occurrence of mutually self-revealing interactions during intergroup contact in more natural settings” (p. 254). Likewise, Swart et al. cite evidence that “more effort is required to establish trust (toward an outgroup) than is required to destroy it” (p. 192).

When history suggests that the intentions of an outgroup are not to be trusted, how can vulnerability be encouraged? From the perspective of a group that has been on the receiving end of prejudice and oppression, should vulnerability be encouraged? Studies of social identity and well-being among members of stigmatized groups indicate that establishing a positive social identity from within-group boundaries is the most consistently observed predictor of positive self-evaluation and engagement in social change efforts (Branscombe, Fernández, Gómez, & Cronin, in press). Members of
stigmatized groups must turn to one another and positively redefine their group to moderate the psychological harm they experience. This would seem, at least potentially, to contraindicate trusting and opening outward.

Midway through the book in Chapter 8, Valerie Purdie-Vaughns and Gregory Walton focus in detail on the perspective of those who experience prejudice. Their chapter title captures the uncertainty of oppressed and stigmatized people with a stark question: “Is Multiculturalism Bad for African Americans?”

The authors view the multicultural ideal in general as useful and progressive but present evidence that even if a multicultural outlook is stated and intended in a given setting, identity-related threats may be present. To ameliorate identity threats, African Americans (or any target of prejudice and discrimination) must be empowered, beginning with the recognition that they may experience aspects of a situation, such as a pledge by majority group members to be “color-blind,” in a very different way compared with Whites/majority group members.

Nonetheless, a sense that one can safely be oneself as an individual and as a member of specific ethnic, cultural, or political groups provides a secure base from which to open outward and seek friendship and cooperation with members of other groups. Gaertner and Dovidio echo this point by stressing the importance of "a dual identity, in which both original subgroup identities and a common ingroup identity are salient simultaneously" (pp. 254–255).

These balancing acts of selfhood are delicate but not impracticable. The theory and data presented in the book suggest that confident self-definition and willing vulnerability to others are in fact mutually reinforcing. For this promise to be realized in any society, all eyes must be open to the psychological and historical forces in play, to the needs of all groups within the larger social structure in relation to those forces (see Arie Nadler and Nurit Schnabel’s needs-based model of reconciliation in Chapter 10), and to the degree of risk that people of goodwill across all groups must freely undertake in order to create positive change (Staub, 2008).

On balance, the work presented by Tropp and Mallett and by all contributors to Moving Beyond Prejudice Reduction provides a grounded, empirically rigorous source of hope that King’s dream of friendship among races and Allport’s observation of new horizons in human relationships are more viable than ever. I have by necessity touched on only a few of the book’s chapters and major themes but recommend it as an approachable and important addition to our field.

Graduate and advanced undergraduate students interested in prejudice and intergroup conflict, as well as advanced researchers, can benefit from selected chapters of interest. Reading the book in its entirety, however, provides a sense of the accumulating evidence for the possibility of and need for positive intergroup relations and the ways in which these positive relationships might in fact move us beyond prejudice reduction.

References


