

The irony of harmony: Why positive interactions may sometimes be negative

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History abounds with examples of dramatic social change occurring when a disadvantaged group finally stands up and says "Enough!". By recognizing their inequalities, members of disadvantaged groups can mobilize and attempt to bring about change. Traditional methods of improving relations between different racial and ethnic groups have focused on creating harmony between those groups. For example, "contact theory" proposes that bringing members of opposing groups together by emphasizing the things they have in common can achieve harmony by increasing positive feelings towards the other group. However, research has shown that positive contact not only changes attitudes, but can also make disadvantaged group members less aware of the inequality in power and resources between the groups.

Is it possible that there can be too much of a good thing? Psychologist Tamar Saguy from Yale University, along with her colleagues Nicole Tausch (Cardiff University), John Dovidio (Yale University) and Felicia Pratto (University of Connecticut) examined the negative effects of positive contact between groups, first in the laboratory and then in the real world.

In the first experiment, students were divided into either advantaged or disadvantaged groups, with the advantaged groups in charge of distributing course credits at the end of the experiment. Before the course credits were doled out, members of the groups interacted, with instructions to focus on either the similarities or differences between the two groups.

The results, described in *Psychological Science*, a journal of the Association for Psychological Science, revealed that following the similarity-focused interactions, members of the disadvantaged group had increased expectations that the advantaged group members would fairly distribute the course credits. These expectations were the result of overall improved attitudes towards the advantaged group and reduced attention of the disadvantaged group members to the inequalities between the groups. However, these expectations proved to be unrealistic- the advantaged group discriminated against the disadvantaged group when handing out course credits, regardless of the type of conversations they had engaged in at the start of the experiment.

The psychologists next wanted to see if this effect occurs in the real world. They surveyed Israeli-Arabs (a disadvantaged minority group) about their attitudes towards Jews. As in the previous experiment, more positive contact (assessed by the number of Jewish friends the Israeli-Arabs had) resulted in improved attitudes towards Jews and increased perceptions of Jews as fair towards Arabs. In addition, although in general Israeli-Arabs are strongly motivated towards social change and greater equality, positive contact with Jews was related to a decreased support for change. The results of the two studies suggest that positive contact with majority groups may result in disadvantaged groups being less likely to support social change- with improved attitudes towards the advantaged groups and reduced attention to social inequality, the disadvantaged groups may become less motivated to promote change.

These findings have important implications, not just for global diplomacy, but also in our everyday encounters. The authors note that positive contact between groups does not necessarily have to undermine efforts towards equality. Rather, they suggest that "encounters that emphasize both common connections and the problem of unjust group inequalities may promote intergroup understanding as well as recognition of the need for change." The authors conclude that such mixed-content

encounters can bring members of all groups together and "perhaps motivate them to eliminate social inequalities."

Source: Association for Psychological Science

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