

Dimensions of Group Interaction

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## Abstract

The correlation between positive and negative group interactions and one or another of individuals' attitudes or characteristics—moral development, critical thinking, resilience, and self efficacy—has been examined previously. However, no systemic examination of individuals' development of patterns of these characteristics and those patterns' potential correlations with either positive or negative group interactions has ever been conducted. Building on divergent previous research, including intergroup salience and acceptance research and group dynamics research, this paper posits the importance of examining individuals' positive or negative group interaction behaviors and attitudes not just as individual factors, but as systemic patterns among factors such as critical thinking, moral, resilience, and self-efficacy development. The reality is that most, if not all, individuals will not develop each of these skill areas optimally. Knowledge about the nature of these patterns and their correlations to intergroup interactions would allow expansive social change if used to foster development of positive patterns and help ameliorate negative patterns in future adults through the development of appropriate educational and community-based programs.

## Dimensions of Group Interaction

Current research indicates positive and negative acceptance of members of one group (by definition, those individuals' *ingroup*) by another (by definition, those individuals' *outgroup*) is a complex issue. Negative group attitudes appear caused most often by one group's potential monopolization of a limited resource that another group also wants or needs rather than because one group instinctively differentiates between and dislikes another group (Cottrell & Neuberg, 2005; Ackerman et al., 2006). However, the nature of that resource—economic, social, or other—is variable and at times unclear. In addition, whether that attitude, initially created, becomes a matter of social and societal expectation that is unchanged even with changed status surrounding the limited resource, is unclear. Further, why some individuals succumb to negative group interaction while others do not—what characteristic or combination of characteristics members of each group possess—remains unclear.

Numerous factors appear important to understanding the occurrence of positive intergroup and negative intergroup relationships. Two factors, morals and critical thinking, have been indirectly recognized and introduced, in some cases, into educational programs expressly to improve intergroup understanding and, as a result, intergroup interactions. The results of such instruction, though, have been mixed. Through that instruction, individuals' attitudes toward outgroups (any of the groups to which they do not belong) have been improved when it has incorporated some modeling of moral behaviors or some historical and factual instruction that could increase understanding of the selected outgroup or outgroups (Aberson & Haag, 2007; Aboud & Miller, 2007; Aboud & Fenwick, 1999).

In part, such programs' success or failure, though, has been impacted by whether their content effectively increased understanding of other groups (known as a comprehension goal) or

whether their content could be mentally altered by individuals receiving instruction to be perceived as enhancing their senses of self-worth (becoming for them what is known as an enhancement goal) (Rankema, Stapel, & Maringer, 2008). Comprehension goals result in at least some positive attitude development toward outgroups, while enhancement goals result in only negative attitude development toward outgroups. To develop consistently effective programs using moral instruction and critical thinking that improve outgroup relations, a thorough understanding of how to maximize acquisition of comprehension goals while minimizing development of enhancement goals is important. Therefore, consideration of the interaction of morals and critical thinking in the development of positive or negative intergroup relations—their patterns of development in individuals and how those patterns impact whether individuals process information about outgroups as either comprehension goal or enhancement goal data—appears necessary to understand how to maximize comprehension goal acquisition resulting from any instruction or intervention.

The success or failure of such programs could be impacted by the identification by participants of demographic similarities between themselves and the outgroup being discussed that encourage the forming of individual relationships among members of ingroups or outgroups (Valenti & Rockett, 2008). However, both how long those relationships will last, how individuals determine the demographic factors that will foster individual relationship development, or the strength of those bonds during the time they exist is unclear.

In addition, the impact of self-esteem, self efficacy, and resilience on individuals' reactions to ingroup and outgroup interactions is important in understanding how to maximize positive intergroup interactions. Self efficacy, its precursor self esteem, and resilience appear to be integral to each other's development and reinforcement (Martin & Marsh, 2008). Through a

sense of being able to positively impact one's life, the ability to recover from adverse experiences would appear to be strengthened (Drapeau, St. Jacques, Lepin, Begin, & Bernard, 2007; Park, Crocker, & Keifer, 2007). For example, research links such positive resilience and self efficacy to individuals' acceptance of an outgroup offender's apology; however, that positive link occurs only when an expression of shame in relation to an offense is included in that apology (Giner-Sorolla, Castano, Espinoza, & Brown, 2008). However, where self esteem is low, self efficacy and resilience are low, and individuals' ability to rebound from the adverse impacts of negative intergroup experiences can be minimal or nonexistent (Drapeau, St. Jacques, Lepin, Begin, & Bernard, 2007; Park, Crocker, & Kiefer, 2007). Still, the impact of the severity of an offense and the level of awareness of and sensitivity to offenses by individuals, including desensitization or growing anger or resentment that may result from repeated occurrences of the offense, and similar other factors have not been fully considered in relation to both resilience and self efficacy.

The importance of greater understanding of not just why individuals react as they do, but also of identifying patterns of characteristics individuals possess becomes evident when examining the variability of information provided in literature on intergroup relations. Some such research even appears to contradict itself, in part because the relationships of additional factors impacting the groups have not been examined. For example, some research indicates individuals who are aware of others' negative attitudes toward members of their group tend to react in a negative, even prejudiced, manner to those individuals (Ackerman, et al, 2006; Cottrell & Neuberg, 2005). Although altering those perceptions can sometimes occur through a slow and time consuming process, people who perceive their ingroup as being accepted negatively by

outgroups can tend to see contemptuous looks on the faces of outgroup members regardless of whether that contempt really exists (Inzlicht, Kaiser, & Major, 2008).

Further, variations caused by individual expectations for treatment also complicate the intergroup issue. For example, individuals who perceive their ingroup as superior to outgroups expect outgroup members to recognize their superiority (Vorauer, Main, & O'Connell, 1998). Some lesser status outgroup members expect to be afforded higher status within their groups and greater acceptance by the superior-perceived ingroup if they provide service to them and treat them with deference (Aguis & Lee, 2006). At other times, friction between groups has been apparent, resulting in tensions and prejudice (Brodish, Brazy, & Devine, 2008). At times the presence of others, whether ingroup or outgroup individuals, has been identified as mitigating negative outgroup treatment of individuals (Catelli & Tomelleri, 2008) and, at others, open mistreatment and devaluation of ingroup members has occurred if those members demonstrate positive behaviors toward outgroup members not accepted by other members of the ingroup as equals (Castelli, De Amicis, & Sherman, 2007). In addition, individuals who are ambivalent about their attitudes toward members of outgroups either may tend to seek more information about outgroups to determine their attitudes about those groups or may tend to avoid all information about outgroups to avoid facing their ambivalence; however, no clear reason for either choice has been identified. In contrast, individuals who have strong attitudes about members of other groups tend to read and consider only information favorable to their perspective (Clark, Wegener, & Fabrigar, 2008). Finally, some positive ingroup relations may be more about individuals' focus on themselves or their ingroup rather than on the actions of the outgroup members with whom they interact (Vorauer, 2008) and, in some circumstances, helping

members of their ingroup is a greater motivation than hurting outgroup individuals, but in others is not (Halevy, Bornstein, & Sagiv, 2008).

These complex and potentially contradictory findings are further complicated by the fact that groups measure the nature of fair intergroup activity differently and that those different measures can in themselves cause intergroup tensions (Brodish, Brazy, & Devine, 2008). In addition, current research indicates that affiliation can shift between groups based on a number of factors. Those factors include everything from insignificant intergroup members' interactions; individuals' perceptions of their own value or potential value within groups; and individuals' perceptions of others' value and, potentially, their own value by association with others (Geissner & Mummendey, 2008; Castelli, De Amicis, & Sherman, 2007; Abrams, Rutland, Cameron, & Ferrell, 2007). Group measures of fair treatment combined with the potential impact of what can appear as a relatively easy movement between groups, therefore, can make understanding how individuals select groups in which to participate and how they react within those groups and toward outgroups more complex.

Since little is known about the patterns of development and relative importance of the moral, critical thinking, self efficacy, and resilience characteristics of individuals examined in the studies mentioned here, several facts become evident. First, it proves impossible to identify the potential ability of those factors to explain the variability of individuals' actions and reactions surrounding both ingroups and outgroups. Further, since little is known about these developmental patterns, it is impossible to determine whether they explain either the importance of or possibility of altering them or, if both important and possible, how altering them would be accomplished. Therefore, it would appear beneficial to examine the characteristics of individuals who are and are not aware of positive bias toward groups and negative prejudice or tensions with

groups. By identifying these data in relation to those two mindsets or sets of behaviors, it should be possible to identify whether some combinations of developmental patterns are more conducive to positive group relationships than others.

It is clear that not every person will develop equal levels of morals, critical thinking, self efficacy, or resilience, regardless of the educational or experiential opportunities offered. Nor will every person be as sensitive to the existence of or impact of positive or negative intergroup relations. An understanding of individuals' patterns of moral, critical thinking, self efficacy, and resilience development, though, combined with knowledge of those individuals' recognition of and overt and covert actions surrounding both bias toward and prejudice toward ingroup and outgroup members can allow identification of what patterns are conducive to positive intergroup relationships and which allow or foster negative intergroup relationships. Using that knowledge, a more targeted development of positive intergroup support resources can be created for and used in educational environments, whether within schools or through community resources. Therefore, the systemic examination of the dimensions of positive and negative intergroup relations appears necessary to fully understand the nature of positive and negative group relationships enough to consistently positively affect change.

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