

# Gordon Allport's Contact Hypothesis

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In criminology, psychology, and sociology, the contact hypothesis has been described as one of the best ways to improve relations among groups that are experiencing conflict. Gordon W. Allport is often credited with the development of the contact hypothesis, also known as Intergroup Contact Theory. The premise of Allport's theory states that under appropriate conditions interpersonal contact is one of the most effective ways to reduce prejudice between majority and minority group members. If one has the opportunity to communicate with others, they are able to understand and appreciate different points of views involving their way of life. As a result of new appreciation and understanding, prejudice should diminish. Issues of stereotyping, prejudice, and discrimination are commonly occurring issues between rival groups. Allport's proposal was that properly managed contact between the groups should reduce these problems and lead to better interactions.

Contact fails to cure conflict when contact situations create anxiety for those who take part. Contact situations need to be long enough to allow this anxiety to decrease and for the members of the conflicting groups to feel comfortable with one another. Additionally if the members of the two groups use this contact situation to trade insults, argue with each other, resort to physical violence, and discriminate against each other, then contact should not be expected to reduce conflict between groups. To obtain beneficial effects, the situation must include positive contact. Some of the criteria are as follows:

- Equal status. Both groups must engage equally in the relationship. Members of the group should have similar backgrounds, qualities, and characteristics. Differences in academic backgrounds, wealth, skill, or experiences should be minimized if these qualities will influence perceptions of prestige and rank in the group.
- Common goals. Both groups must work on a problem/task and share this as a common goal, sometimes called a superordinate goal, a goal that can only be attained if the members of two or more groups work together by pooling their efforts and resources.
- Intergroup cooperation. Both groups must work together for their common goals without competition. Groups need to work together in the pursuit of common goals.
- Support of authorities, law, or customs. Both groups must acknowledge some authority that supports the contact and interactions between the groups. The contact should encourage friendly, helpful, egalitarian attitudes and condemn ingroup-outgroup comparisons.
- Personal interaction. The contact situation needs to involve informal, personal interaction with outgroup members. Members of the conflicting groups need to mingle with one another. Without this criterion they learn very little about each other and cross-group friendships do not occur.<sup>1</sup>