EXAMINING HOW INDIRECT INTERGROUP CONTACT CAN INFLUENCE ATTITUDES TOWARDS MINORITY GROUPS AND IMPROVE SOCIAL COHESION

STATEMENT OF RESEARCH PROJECT

"Despite the widely acknowledged benefits of pluralism and multiculturalism, prejudice and discrimination against minority groups are still prevalent in modern society. Part of the difficulty is that in many countries, majority group members’ contact with out-groups is low because opportunities to have face-to-face conversations with minority groups are rare. Traditional and digital communication technologies provide new opportunities to promote inclusivity, diversity, and equality. Compared to face-to-face interaction, alternative modes of intergroup communication are likely to be the more common, if not primary, form of contact with marginalized groups. For example, a Singaporean might never speak to a gay person in his or her life, but he or she can enjoy the movies about related to the LGBT community and follow gay celebrities on social media. Similarly, people might learn about new immigrants, their home culture, and their lifestyles via traditional media or social media. Through these indirect contact experiences, people might acquire information about minorities that they might have previously been ignorant about. In turn, new knowledge may alter attitudes, increase empathy, or help to dispel previously held stereotypes. In order to promote greater understanding of differences in a multicultural society, and thereby improve the likelihood of social cohesion and societal resilience, it would be beneficial to study how indirect intergroup contact affects peoples’ perceptions of and attitudes toward minority groups.

One of the more promising areas of indirect contact research concerns computer-mediated communication (CMC), where people interact through networked systems. For example, intergroup relations via CMC has been shown to increase understanding and reduce tension (Amichai-Hamburger & Furnham, 2007). One reason this may occur is that the salience of group identity increases in anonymous online environments (Postmes, Spears, & Martin, 1998). However, there is a gap in the literature in terms of what kinds of political and socio-cultural factors might facilitate or hinder positive intergroup relations via CMC, especially in as complicated and multi-cultural context as Singapore.

We propose a re-examination of Contact Theory (Allport, 1954), which stipulates that prejudice can be reduced through intergroup contact. The nature of the contact affects the degree of attitude change, and can be either direct or indirect (Harwood et al., 2013). Direct contact between groups that are experiencing intergroup tension may be difficult to achieve, thus recent research has begun to explore more fully how indirect contact functions, and in some cases why it is inhibited. Given the potential of intergroup contact, a logical next step is to explore the contingent conditions and intervening variables (i.e., moderators and mediators) that facilitate or diminish contact effects. For example, system justification theory (Jost & Banaji, 1994) might help to explain how pre-existing value orientations interact with the underlying psychological mechanisms that give rise to intergroup contact effects, especially when it comes to minority groups who are seen as a threat to social norms.

We propose the following overarching research objective that will guide the development of the project, and several specific research questions that will be investigated.

RO1: Combine social psychological and CMC theories to better understand how indirect contact can affect people’s sense of group identity and attitudes toward others.

RQ1: How best can indirect intergroup contact improve people’s attitudes towards minority groups?

RQ2: In what ways are people’s value orientations and group identities related to prejudice against minority groups?
RQ3: Assuming there are both positive and negative influences of value orientations and group identities on prejudice against minority groups, how can they be enhanced or mitigated?

**SCOPE OF WORK FOR SELECTED PHD STUDENT**

"The Ph.D. student is expected to participate in all aspects of the research process.

The student will do a literature review that will comprehensively address several issues. First, it will delineate the ways in which threats posed by minority groups are perceived by majority communities, and how the threats affect attitudes. Second, it will outline the nature of system justification theory, and highlight the key factors that affect minority-majority group relations. Third, it will address the nature of indirect contact via CMC, identifying the types of outcomes that are likely and how technological affordances may influence those effects. The literature review will provide the basis for the conceptualization of the key constructs to be used in the experimental studies that are planned.

The student would then design a series of survey studies and experimental studies, which will be conducted in online or laboratory environments. The student would participate in recruiting participants and training research assistants. The experiments will be designed to systematically assess the influence of numerous factors affecting system justification theory, group identity and attitudes. While the specific factors have yet to be identified, they are likely to be: a) attributes of the minority outgroup, or nature of the threat they are perceived to present and the stereotypes that they elicit, b) attributes of the majority population (e.g., strength of national identity), and the beliefs that enable them to bolster the political and social status quo c) technological aspects of CMC (e.g., level of identification in the system), and d) characteristics of the interaction.

The plan is for several controlled, laboratory experiments to be conducted in either facilities available at the Psychology Department or in the new Cognitive and Behavioral Science Lab housed in WKWSCI. Some of the studies are likely to use online confederates, so the student will need to become versed in developing techniques used for deception studies. IRB applications for the studies will also be drafted by the student.

All of the data collection and analyses will be done by the student, under the guidance of the co-supervisors. The student will also be responsible for writing up the findings, and preparing reports."