INTERGROUP COMMUNICATION ON RELIGION AND THE TROUBLES AMONG UNIVERSITY STUDENTS IN NORTHERN IRELAND

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The effects of intergroup contact between Protestants and Catholics on communication were examined in a questionnaire administered to 87 university students in Northern Ireland Subjects were asked about their personal contacts with other group members the extent of communication with own and other group members on the topics of religion and the political troubles in the province their perceptions of the value of discussing these two topics and the outcome of such discussions with own and other group members The results revealed differences in the way the two denominational groups related to own and other group members when discussing religion and the troubles Degree of contact with other group members had a significant effect on subjects' ratings of the value of such discussions but not on either the amount or the perceived outcomes of such interactions

The analysis and understanding of intergroup behaviour in Northern Ireland has been a major aim of many studies over the past decade, resulting in a large and multidisciplinary literature on the province (Darby, 1976, 1986) Psychological studies of intergroup conflict and behaviour, while initially limited by the lack of an appropriate theoretical framework against which to evaluate research findings, are now beginning to contribute more proportionately to this growing literature The emergence of the theory of intergroup behaviour of Tajfel and Turner (1979) and its subsequent application to the Northern Ireland conflict (Cairns, 1982, Stringer & Cairns, 1983) has provided researchers with a sufficiently flexible framework to explain the results of intergroup research in a society in conflict. The importance of social categorization (the division of the social world into mutually exclusive categories) has been demonstrated in numerous studies which have examined the ability of Northern Irish students to distinguish Protestant from Catholic over a range of stereotypic cues (Cairns, 1980, Stringer & Lavery, 1987, Stringer & McLaughlin-Cook, 1985)

This research, while providing an essential baseline for the application of social-identity theory, reinforces the view that Northern Ireland is a region where sectarianism has led to a voluntary social segregation of the two denominational groups. Indeed, the combination of social, historical, and economic differences between the two groups led Whyte (1978) to postulate the existence of an environment which has produced 'two religious communities which to a remarkable extent live self-contained lives'. The assumption that Northern Ireland is a deeply divided society has been challenged only infrequently (e.g., McWhirter & Trew, 1981).

The extent and nature of interactions between Protestants and Catholics in Northern Ireland are inevitably constrained by the nature of their social environment. Unlike other divided regions however, Northern Ireland has not been studied in any detail. (See the description by Taylor, Dube, and Bellerose, 1986, of research into contact between English and French-speaking Canadians in Quebec.) Trew (1986), in the only review to date of such encounters, could find only two published accounts which directly addressed this question. One of these was the much criticized ten-day residential workshop of Doob and Foltz (1973, 1974) in which Protestants and Catholics were brought together to devise projects in mixed groups. As Trew notes, the technique employed (a combination of National Training Laboratory and the Tavistock approach) was very stressful for the participants. Boehringer, Bayley, Zeeruolis, and Boehringer (1974) – the overall administrators of the project – concluded that the interactions involved were both ineffective and potentially harmful to participants. Lockhart and Elliot (1980), using a repertory-grid technique, assessed the changes in young Protestant and Catholic offenders' perceptions over a five-week period in a residential assessment centre. They found that, after close contact with members of the other group, ratings of other-group members became more similar to those of own-group members. This difference was also found on retesting five weeks after release from the centre. These two radically different approaches illustrate the difficulties inherent in both contact research generally and in making valid comparisons across studies since the researchers employed differing techniques, with different subject samples, under different environmental conditions.

Hewstone and Brown (1986) in a thorough critique of the contact hypothesis emphasize the complexity of intergroup contact and suggest the need to distinguish between encounters occurring at an interpersonal level and interactions where these same individuals are meeting as members of their respective groups (cf. Tajfel & Turner, 1979). From this it is clear that the investigation of intergroup behaviour is going to be a difficult task, since the determination of whether an interaction occurs at the interpersonal or the

intergroup level may be determined by the nature of the encounter itself as well as by individuals' perception of this interaction

Turner (1982, 1985) drew heavily on social-identity theory to advance a theoretical explanation of intergroup behaviour in which the process of social identification is viewed as occurring in three stages The first stage, social categorization, occurs when the social world is perceived as being composed of members of clearly definable social groups This leads to a secondary change, involving the determination of the distinguishing facets of group membership, which results in a more extreme or stereotypical perception of group members and their behaviour In the final stage, individuals adopt the social characteristics of the group as their own through the process of self-stereotyping

Within Northern Ireland, different environmental situations appear to make group identity more salient for the individual (see Waddell & Cairns, 1986) Thus, the perception of an encounter with an other-group member as occurring at either an intergroup or an interpersonal level is likely to depend upon a complex combination of factors These may include the importance of group membership to the individuals concerned, the nature of the topic under discussion, and the group salience of the situation within which such contact occurs

The study described in this paper set out to examine the effects of the strength of individuals' group identity and their reported contact with other-group members on the discussion of religion and of the political and civil unrest in Northern Ireland, locally referred to as 'the troubles' (two topics which were selected to heighten the salience of social categorization for people within Northern Ireland)

Prior research indicates that such sensitive topics may be avoided in intergroup contacts in order to enable interpersonal contacts to remain friendly (Bellerose, Hafer, & Taylor, 1984, Trew, 1986) In order to partially control for environmental effects, these interactions were examined among university students who have arguably a more equal opportunity to discuss such issues in an environment which is viewed as essentially neutral in group terms Given the lack of information concerning intergroup communication on religion and the troubles within Northern Ireland, two tentative hypotheses were tested

(i) Discussion of religion and the troubles will occur more frequently, be valued more, and be perceived as leading to more positive outcomes with own as opposed to other-group members This hypothesis assumes that consideration of these topics will lead individuals to define themselves as members of a distinct social category (either Protestant or Catholic) and that their ratings of inter-

actions on these topics will be influenced by their awareness of this category membership.

(ii) Individuals with higher levels of reported intergroup contact will discuss religion and the troubles more frequently, value it more, and view the outcome of such discussions more positively with other-group members than those with lower contacts. This hypothesis was offered tentatively since it could be argued that increased contact with other-group members will lead to either greater discussion of sensitive topics with other-group members or that such potentially divisive topics will be avoided to ensure more friendly interactions with the other group.

<div align="center">METHOD</div>

Questionnaire
A series of 7-point bipolar rating scales was derived from a pilot questionnaire administered to students (n=20) concerning their contact with other-group members and concerning the frequency and value of discussions about religion and the troubles with other-group members. From these responses, a questionnaire was constructed which contained scales aimed at determining:

(i) *Subjects' Degree of Contact with Other-Group Members,* which was assessed using a 7-point scale based on six items:

Never talk to (1) – Talk frequently with (7)

Have many friends (7) – Have no friends (1)

Regular social friend (7) – Never mix socially with (1)

Live near (7) – Live far from (1)

Play sport with regularly (7) – Don't play sport with (1)

Work with all the time (7) – Don't work with (1).

(ii) *Frequency of Discussion of Religion with Own-Group Members*, which was assessed on a single 7-point scale, ranging from Discussed often (7) to Not discussed (1).

(iii) *Frequency of Discussion of Religion with Other-Group Members*, which was assessed on a single 7-point scale, ranging from Discussed often (7) to Not discussed (1).

(iv) *Frequency of Discussion of the Troubles with Own-Group Members*, which was assessed on a single 7-point scale, ranging from Discussed often (7) to Not discussed (1).

(v) *Frequency of Discussion of the Troubles with Other-Group Members*, which was assessed on a single 7-point scale, ranging from Discussed often (7) to Not discussed (1).

(vi) *Feelings about Value of Discussion of Religion*, based on a single 7-point
scale, ranging from Very useful (7) to Not very useful (1)
(vii) *Feelings about Value of Discussion of the Troubles*, based on a single
7-point scale, ranging from Very useful (7) to Not very useful (1)
(viii) *Perceptions of Outcomes of Discussion about Religion and the Troubles*
which were assessed using a 7-point scale based on six items
Results in conflict (1) – Results in better understanding (7)
Improves relationships (7) – Destroys relationships (1)
Leads to heated emotional exchanges (1) – Leads to rational discussion (7)
Produces solutions (7) – Ends in deadlock (1)
Encourages entrenched positions (1) – Leads to new perspectives (7)
Strengthens group membership (7) – Weakens group membership (1)

Information about respondents' gender and religious background was
obtained in a brief personal information section Religious affiliation was
determined by individuals' response to a request to specify the religious tradition
within which they had been brought up Protestant/Catholic/Other

Subjects

Eighty-nine university students of Northern Irish origin and attending
university within Northern Ireland were administered the questionnaire Two
respondents did not complete the questionnaire and were discarded leaving a
sample of 87 subjects made up of 20 Protestant males, 23 Catholic males, 22
Protestant females, and 22 Catholic females

Procedure

Students entering the university libraries at the University of Ulster at
Coleraine and at Queen's University Belfast were approached and asked to
complete the questionnaire Participants completed the questionnaire
individually in the library Subjects were requested to read the following
covering sheet containing the following instructions, before proceeding to the
rest of the questionnaire

It has been claimed that individuals in Northern Ireland are capable of
interacting with other people at two levels – the interpersonal level involving
contact between individuals as individuals and at the intergroup level where
individuals interact with others in terms of their religious group membership
This questionnaire is designed to examine how individuals interact with own
and other-group members The questionnaire also focuses on the amount of
contact that occurs between group members in Northern Ireland Please use

your own experience to guide your responses. Try to work through the questions reasonably quickly.

Subjects were assured that their responses would be treated in confidence. Completion of the questionnaire took a maximum of ten minutes.

<div align="center">RESULTS</div>

To examine possible differences in subjects' responses to the questionnaire by reported contact with other-group members, Protestant and Catholic subjects were sub-divided into high and low-contact groups on the basis of their responses to the contact section. The overall subject mean for the high-contact group was 5.3 (SD: 1.2) and for the low-contact group 3.0 (SD: 1.3). The responses of each subject were then used (in the case of section viii by averaging across subjects' responses to the six scales) as the basis for further analysis. A series of 3-factor ANOVAs was carried out on subjects' mean responses to the different sections of the questionnaire. This followed a standard design in which Religion of Subject and Other-Group Contact were the between-subject factors and interactions with Own/Other-group members was the within-subject factor.

Frequency of Discussion of Religion

A main effect was found for Own/Other-group member ($F=12.38$, $df=1,71$, $p<.01$) revealing that subjects reported significantly more discussion of religion with their own ($M=3.4$) as opposed to other-group members ($M=2.9$). A further Religion of subject x Own/Other-group member interaction ($F-12.1$, $df=1,71$, $p<.01$), however, revealed that this effect was due to Catholic subjects discussing religion more with own-group members and significantly less with other-group members than their Protestant counterparts who displayed similar rates for both own and other-group members (Table 1).

Frequency of Discussion of the Troubles

A main effect was found for Own/Other-group member ($F=37.91$, $df=1,71$, $p<.0001$) revealing that subjects reported significantly more discussion of the troubles with their own ($M=4.0$) as opposed to other-group members ($M=3.0$). A Religion of subject x Own/Other-group member interaction ($F=8.96$, $df=1,71$, $p<.01$) revealed that (as with discussion of Religion) this effect was primarily due to Catholic subjects discussing the troubles more with their own-group members and significantly less with other-group members than Protestant subjects. While both Protestant and Catholic subjects discussed the troubles

more with own-group members, Catholic subjects displayed much lower levels of discussion with other-group members (Table 2)

TABLE 1

MEANS AND STANDARD DEVIATIONS OF SCORES ON FREQUENCY OF DISCUSSION OF RELIGION SCALE WITH OWN AND OTHER GROUP MEMBERS BY RELIGIOUS BACKGROUND OF STUDENTS

	Own Group Member			Other Group Member		Total	
	M	SD		M	SD	M	SD
Protestant	3 2	1 7		3 2	1 8	3 2	1 7
				*			
Catholic	3 6	1 8	**	2 5	1 9	3 0	1 9

*p< 05 **p< 01

TABLE 2

MEANS AND STANDARD DEVIATIONS OF SCORES ON FREQUENCY OF DISCUSSION OF THE TROUBLES SCALE WITH OWN AND OTHER GROUP MEMBERS BY RELIGIOUS BACKGROUND OF STUDENTS

	Own Group Member			Other Group Member		Total	
	M	SD		M	SD	M	SD
Protestant	4 0	1 8	*	3 4	1 7	3 7	1 8
Catholic	4 0	1 6	**	2 6	1 8	3 3	1 7

*p< 05 **p< 01

Value of Discussion of Religion

In contrast to the findings relating to frequency of discussion of religion, there were no significant differences between Catholic and Protestant students in their perceptions of the value of discussing religion with own or other-group targets (Table 3)

TABLE 3

MEANS AND STANDARD DEVIATIONS OF SCORES ON PERCEIVED VALUE OF DISCUSSION OF RELIGION SCALE BY RELIGIOUS BACKGROUND OF STUDENTS

	Own Group Member		Other Group Member		Total	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
Protestant	4 5	1 7	4 4	1 8	3 7	1 8
Catholic	4 6	1 6	4 5	1 8	3 3	1 7

A Contact (high/low) with other-group members x Own/Other-group member interaction (F=7.23, df=1,71, p<.01) revealed that those reporting higher other-group contacts valued discussion of religion more with other than with own-group members. Those with lower other-group contacts valued discussion of religion more with own than with other-group members (Table 4).

TABLE 4

MEANS AND STANDARD DEVIATIONS OF SCORES ON PERCEIVED VALUE OF DISCUSSION OF RELIGION SCALE FOR HIGH AND LOW-CONTACT STUDENTS

	Own-Group Member			Other-Group Member		Total	
	M	SD		M	SD	M	SD
High Contact	3.9	1.6	.. .. *	4.4	1.7	4.2	1.7
				. **			
Low Contact	3.8	1.6		3.4	1.5	3.6	1.6

*p<.05; **p<.01

Value of Discussion of the Troubles

A main effect was reported for Religion of subject (F=8.17, df=1,71m p<.01) indicating that Protestant subjects (M=4.6) valued discussion of the troubles more highly than did Catholic subjects (M=3.6) (Table 5).

TABLE 5

MEANS AND STANDARD DEVIATIONS OF SCORES ON PERCEIVED VALUE OF DISCUSSION OF THE TROUBLES SCALE, BY RELIGIOUS BACKGROUND OF STUDENTS

	M	SD
Protestant	4.6	1.8
Catholic	3.6	1.9

In addition, a main effect was found for Contact with other-group members (F=7.09, df=1.71, p<.01) revealing that subjects reporting higher other-group contact (M=4.5) rated the value of discussion of the troubles more highly overall than those with lower contacts (M=3.6) (Table 6).

TABLE 6

MEANS AND STANDARD DEVIATIONS OF SCORES ON PERCEIVED VALUE OF
DISCUSSION OF THE TROUBLES FOR HIGH AND LOW CONTACT STUDENTS

	M	SD
High Contact	4 5	1 6
Low Contact	3 6	1 7

Perception of Outcomes of Discussions about Religion

A main effect was found for Own/Other-group target (F=9 25, df=1,71, p< 01), indicating that, overall, respondents reported a significantly more positive outcome of discussion about religion with their own (M=4 2) than with other-group members (M=3 9) A further Religion of subject x Own/Other-group target interaction (F=5 3, df=1,71, p< 05) revealed that this effect was mainly due to Catholic subjects viewing the outcome of such discussion more positively with own-group members and more negatively with other-group members Protestant subjects, by contrast, perceived no significant differences in outcome between own and other-group members (Table 7)

Perception of Outcomes of Discussion about the Troubles

A main effect was found for Own/Other-group target (F=12 84, df=1,71, p< 001), indicating that, overall, subjects reported a significantly more positive outcome of discussion about the troubles with own (M=4 3) as opposed to other-group members (M=3 8) A further Religion of subject x Own/Other-group target interaction (F=4 9, df=1,71, p< 05) revealed that this effect was largely due to Catholic subjects viewing the outcome of such discussion more positively with own-group members and more negatively with other-group members Protestant subjects, by contrast, displayed a similar but non-significant trend in the same direction (Table 8)

TABLE 7

MEANS AND STANDARD DEVIATIONS OF SCORES FOR PERCEPTION OF
OUTCOMES OF DISCUSSION ABOUT RELIGION BY RELIGIOUS BACKGROUND OF
STUDENTS

	Own Group Member			Other Group Member			Total	
	M	SD		M	SD		M	SD
Protestant	4 1	1 7		4 0	1 8		4 0	1 7
Catholic	4 3	1 6	*	3 7	1 9		4 0	1 8

*p<.05

TABLE 8

MEANS AND STANDARD DEVIATIONS OF SCORES FOR PERCEPTION OF
OUTCOMES OF DISCUSSIONS ABOUT THE TROUBLES, BY RELIGIOUS
BACKGROUND OF STUDENTS

	Own-Group Member			Other-Group Member		Total	
	M	SD		M	SD	M	SD
Protestant	4.1	1.8		3.9	1.5	4.0	1.7
Catholic	4.4	1.6	.. .. *	3.6	1.8	4.0	1.7

*$p<.05$

DISCUSSION

In terms of the two hypotheses offered for this study, the results suggest that Protestant and Catholic subjects reported more frequent discussion of the troubles with own-group members than with other-group members in line with our first hypothesis. In the same vein, Catholic subjects, but not their Protestant counterparts, reported more frequent discussion of religion with own-group members. Catholic subjects displayed a significantly greater tendency to discuss these topics with own-group members. By contrast, no differences were reported in terms of the value of such discussions with own or other-group members, contrary to our hypothesis. Finally, subjects' ratings of the outcomes of discussions about the troubles and religion displayed a similar pattern to those for discussion of these topics. Catholic subjects reported better outcomes of discussions with own-group members while Protestant subjects displayed only a tendency toward more favourable outcomes with own-group members when discussing the troubles.

Contrary to our second hypothesis, subjects with high other-group contacts compared to those with lower contacts, did not discuss these two topics more frequently or perceive the outcome of such discussions with other-group members more positively. In line with our first hypothesis however, both Protestant and Catholic subjects with higher other-group contacts, compared to those with lower contacts, placed greater *value* on discussion of the troubles. Similarly, those reporting higher other-group contacts valued discussion of religion more with other-group than own-group members while those with lower contacts valued discussions more with own-group members.

These findings suggest that denominational differences exist in the way Protestant and Catholic university students view discussions about sensitive

intergroup topics in Northern Ireland The most marked feature of the results is the significantly lower rates of discussion of both religion and the troubles and much poorer perceived outcomes reported by Catholic students when interacting with other-group members Protestant subjects by contrast displayed only minor differences when interacting with own or other-group members on these topics One possible explanation for this difference between the two denominational groups could be a greater reluctance by Catholic (minority) group members, compared to their Protestant (majority group) counterparts, to discuss potentially divisive topics Discussion of religion and particularly of the troubles may place moderate Catholics in somewhat of a dilemma since more extreme members of their own group are engaged in what is perceived by some group members as a legitimate struggle against majority oppression Support for this suggestion of greater Catholic unease can be seen in Protestant subjects' significantly higher ratings of the outcome of discussions about the troubles Catholic subjects' greater preference for discussion with own-group members may reflect their reluctance to discuss an issue with members of the other group, which may force them to defend characteristics of their own group through self-stereotyping about which they are ambivalent or with which they may disagree

A second possible explanation for our findings is the possibility that Catholic subjects may be 'playing safe' by applying informal rules which help prevent intergroup conflict in everyday social encounters to the university context Stringer and McLaughlin (1990), using the rule-endorsement methodology of Argyle, Henderson, and Furnham (1985) in Northern Ireland, have demonstrated that subjects use informal rules in interpersonal interactions with members of the other group to avoid the possibility of conflict. In addition, they found that these rules are applied differently in varying intergroup contexts Our results suggest that Catholic subjects are less likely than their Protestant counterparts to broach such topics with other-group members in a university context In addition, Catholic subjects clearly perceive a significantly more negative outcome of such discussions with other-group members than do Protestants The fact that Catholic subjects do not differentiate between own and other-group members in terms of the value of discussing such topics, in contrast to their ratings of the extent and outcome of such discussions, also suggests the operation of informal rules which serve to regulate potential conflict in intergroup encounters These findings offer some promise for the discussion of potentially divisive issues in neutral contexts, since Catholic subjects' perceptions of the outcomes of such discussions may be altered by an appreciation of the less threatening perspective reported by their Protestant counterparts

The effects of other-group contact on the extent of discussion of religion and the troubles and the outcomes deriving from them were minimal. The only significant effects relating to contact related to the *value* that subjects reported in discussing these topics. The fact that contact with other-group members can affect how subjects value such discussions and, at the same time, have little effect on the time spent discussing them (or more surprisingly, on the outcomes deriving from such discussions) graphically highlights the need to move away from simplistic explanations of the effects of intergroup contact (cf. Hewstone & Brown, 1986).

In summary, the results of the present study suggest that members of majority and minority groups within Northern Ireland differ both in the extent of their interactions with other-group members on sensitive intergroup topics and in their views of the projected outcomes of such discussions. While the current results apply only to interactions within a university context, they underline the importance of determining how the two groupings feel about the discussion of potentially divisive topics as an integral part of any systematic attempt to establish meaningful intergroup contacts. The disjunction between the reported value of such discussions and extent of contacts with other-group members and discussion outcomes indicates the importance of using multiple measures in assessing the effects of complex group interactions. Future work could profitably focus on the effects that the strength of an individual's group identification have on intergroup discussions on sensitive issues.

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