

# Intergroup Contact Theory: Theoretical Evolution and Application in the Chinese Context

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**Abstract:** Intergroup Contact Theory (IGCT) has evolved as a foundational framework in social psychology for understanding and improving interactions between diverse groups. This study traces the theoretical development of IGCT, from its early origins in addressing intergroup tensions in post-WWII societies to its formalization by Gordon Allport, who emphasized the “optimal conditions” for positive contact (equal status, common goals, cooperation, and institutional support). Subsequent advancements expanded the theory’s scope, including extensions to indirect contact (e.g., imagined or extended contact) and refined mechanisms (cognitive, affective, and behavioral pathways). The paper also examines the adaptation and application of IGCT in the Chinese context, where scholars have progressively integrated the theory with local realities, particularly in educational settings. Early introductions focused on theoretical translation, while recent studies explore its relevance in culturally diverse classrooms, campus environments, and community interactions, highlighting the role of institutional support and contextualized practices in fostering constructive intergroup relations. This analysis underscores IGCT’s adaptability across cultural contexts and its utility for promoting inclusive interactions, offering insights for researchers and practitioners working in diverse societies.

**Keywords:** Intergroup Contact Theory; Optimal conditions; Prejudice reduction; Cultural adaptation; Chinese education

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## 1. Introduction

Intergroup Contact Theory (IGCT), as a core framework in social psychology for explaining group interaction and relationship improvement, has consistently centered on the proposition: “How can intergroup contact alleviate conflict and promote inclusion?” Originating from Western societies’ practical needs to resolve racial conflicts, IGCT has evolved through decades of theoretical refinement and cross-cultural practice into a comprehensive system encompassing contact conditions, mechanisms, and effect generalization. With the prominence of cultural diversity in globalization, IGCT’s explanatory power and practical value have gradually extended to broader social domains. In China, the social landscape of multicultural coexistence provides a unique setting for the localized application of IGCT. This paper systematically examines the evolutionary trajectory of IGCT, from

empirical explorations in its embryonic stage to theoretical expansions after formal establishment, analyzing its core connotations. Simultaneously, it focuses on the theory's introduction, adaptation, and practice in China, particularly its application forms in education and group interactions, aiming to provide theoretical references for understanding group relations in cross-cultural contexts and practical insights for promoting inclusive societal development.

## **2. Theoretical evolution of Intergroup Contact Theory**

Intergroup Contact Theory originated in Western social psychology, primarily studying how groups interact and how such interactions affect intergroup relations, with the aim of resolving intergroup conflicts.

### **2.1. Embryonic stage**

After World War II, having experienced national consciousness and ethnic conflicts, many multi-ethnic countries realized that idealized nation-states might not necessarily promote social development, thus actively seeking ways to foster harmonious coexistence among different races. Initial social case studies laid the foundation for this theory. Sherif M., a renowned psychologist, further demonstrated through extensive experiments that intergroup contact plays a crucial role in the social environment <sup>[1]</sup>. Zelig R. and Hendrickson G., building on theoretical foundations, conducted in-depth studies of 39 ethnic groups and found that people's expressed awareness and familiarity with groups significantly influence their behavior <sup>[2]</sup>. Smith F.T. designed a series of social contact and intellectual activity experiments conducted on weekends, with participants being white students from Columbia University and leaders from New York's Black community. This study found that college students engaged in interracial communication showed significant shifts in attitudes toward Black people, while those without cross-racial contact maintained their original attitudes <sup>[3]</sup>. Additionally, sociologist Williams R. made outstanding contributions to pioneering this theory. In 1947, he constructed a series of relevant hypotheses and evidential bases to study and analyze group relationships, extensively covering topics such as intergroup interactions, cooperation, and social equity <sup>[4]</sup>. In summary, during the embryonic stage, researchers recognized that individuals from different ethnic groups perceived intergroup contact as promoting improved intergroup relations through actual contact processes. However, such theoretical understanding was vague, fragmented, and unsystematic, lacking practical guidance. Although the theory was incomplete, its emergence prepared the groundwork for future formalization.

### **2.2. Formalization period**

The eminent American social psychologist Gordon Allport contributed significantly to the formal establishment of IGCT. His seminal work, *The Nature of Prejudice*, built upon prior research. Its publication in 1954 marked the formal establishment of IGCT. In this book, Allport emphasized cognition's influence on prejudice. His second core argument posited that if the causes of prejudice were understood, actions would be taken to reduce widespread prejudice, thereby diminishing discriminatory behavior. Furthermore, Allport deeply analyzed the relationship between intergroup contact and intergroup relations: intergroup contact does not necessarily improve relations and may even worsen them. Positive contact effects require four conditions, as he proposed: "If majority and minority groups interact under conditions of equal status, pursuing common goals, prejudice may be reduced. If institutional support (i.e., laws, customs, or local atmosphere) is present and promotes mutual understanding of shared interests and attributes, the effectiveness of intergroup contact is greatly enhanced" <sup>[5]</sup>. Unlike the

vague theoretical understanding during the embryonic stage—where people held simplistic, linear views about the relationship between contact and relations—Allport’s optimal conditions revolutionized this perception. Pioneeringly, Allport shifted focus beyond contact itself to contact conditions and contexts. Under his framework, the Contact Hypothesis generated significant influence, prompting extensive empirical research using field studies, laboratory experiments, and longitudinal studies to test and expand its principles. These investigations not only explored the types and mechanisms of intergroup contact in depth but ultimately solidified IGCT. Through scholarly exploration, it has become one of the few scientific theories providing effective foundations for policymaking and implementation.

### **2.3. Subsequent development period**

For decades after its formation, scholars have conducted extensive research on IGCT using diverse methodologies, including experimental, survey, field, and archival studies. Research subjects have evolved from racial groups to intergenerational groups, people with differing physical health characteristics, and groups with different sexual orientations. Scholars have continuously deepened theoretical exploration, systematically studying contact methods, types, outcomes, and pathways, providing robust evidence for establishing a scientifically structured theoretical system. Theoretical development has driven practical advances: IGCT research has expanded from direct dyadic relationships to indirect relationships involving mediating variables—a significant step forward. However, direct group contact studies face limitations, as many influential relationships lack control for external environments and group characteristics, undermining the persuasiveness of conclusions. Consequently, scholars proposed four new hypotheses based on existing methods and perspectives: imagined contact, extended contact, vicarious contact, and simulated contact. Originally focused on racial and ethnic relations, IGCT’s explanatory scope has recently expanded to other intergroup relationships, further extending Allport’s foundational hypotheses. Today, IGCT constitutes a comprehensive theoretical system for addressing intergroup contact issues and improving intergroup relations.

## **3. Core connotations of intergroup contact theory**

The core value of IGCT lies in revealing the principle of “how effective contact promotes improved intergroup relations.” Its essence can be systematically explained through three dimensions: contact conditions, mechanisms of action, and effect generalization.

### **3.1. “Optimal conditions” for intergroup contact**

Regarding how to effectively promote positive group contact effects, Allport summarized four optimal conditions: Equal status: IGCT advocates an equal and mutually beneficial relational model, where interactions stem from genuine communicative purposes rather than individual interests, ensuring relative equality in social status and creating favorable environments for group contact. Common goals: All social interactions are goal-oriented; shared objectives are essential for motivating positive engagement. Institutional support: Many intergroup contact issues arise not from unwillingness but from constraints imposed by institutions, laws, or culture, preventing normal interaction. Cooperative relationships: Intergroup contact inherently involves negotiation, with cooperation representing its highest form. Groups should establish cooperative relationships driven by shared goals and collective interests, reducing divisions and extending contact types and methods toward diversity.

### **3.2. Mechanisms of intergroup contact**

The relationship between intergroup contact and intergroup relations is not merely linear causality; positive outcomes require mediating mechanisms: Cognitive dimension: Deepening understanding. Pettigrew posits that knowing and understanding outgroups forms the basis for building intergroup relations <sup>[6]</sup>. Contact increases willingness to learn about outgroups; increased knowledge reduces prejudice. Affective dimension: Anxiety reduction and empathy. Emotions are crucial in social networks and irreplaceable in establishing intergroup relations. Initial contact triggers subconscious cognitive and emotional rejection, causing discomfort. However, successful positive intergroup interactions significantly reduce anxiety and increase willingness for future contact. Empathizing with outgroup members' experiences reduces contact anxiety and transforms prejudicial attitudes. Behavioral dimension: Changing prejudiced behaviors. Establishing positive intergroup interactions in contact environments constitutes optimal contact. This process facilitates mutual psychological acceptance, creating new forms of group interaction. Optimal contact enhances mutual familiarity, resolves information asymmetry, and reduces prejudiced behaviors. Encouraging or rewarding positive individual behaviors further amplifies contact effects.

### **3.3. Effect generalization of IGCT**

Categorization is a natural tendency developed for survival. Facing complex social environments, people seek stability by classifying new experiences into existing categories using the "principle of least effort." Building on Allport's work, Pettigrew proposed a theoretical model for the IGCT effect generalization <sup>[7]</sup>. This model establishes safeguard mechanisms for theoretical realization: intergroup contact is not predetermined but requires specific conditions (equal status, common goals, cooperation, institutional support) as foundational guarantees for positive effects. Since its proposal, this model has sustained academic interest, with research expanding from sociology to education and management, perspectives shifting from contact effects to contact types/methods/outcomes, and research subjects diversifying.

## **4. Introduction and application of IGCT in the Chinese context**

The localization of IGCT in China is a process evolving from theoretical introduction to innovative integration with local practices. Its application focuses on multicultural interactions, generating rich practical experience, especially in education.

### **4.1. Theoretical introduction and early exploration (Early 21st Century–2010)**

Domestic research indicates that scholar Wang Yapeng first introduced contact theory to China <sup>[8]</sup>. He initially reviewed developments in the Contact Hypothesis. Subsequently, the theory gained recognition in Chinese academia, spurring research and achievements. However, pre-2010 studies were scarce, often derivative of Western perspectives with limited scope and application. Later, researchers integrated IGCT with China's realities, exploring its manifestations in specific social contexts. Gradually, IGCT became a vibrant academic focus in psychology and ethnology. Early efforts involved introducing Western theoretical achievements and contextualizing Western practices, laying the groundwork for Sinicization. Later, scholars applied IGCT to ethnic education and inter-ethnic student relations.



## 4.2. Application and development in education (2010–Present)

With China's emphasis on multicultural integration in education, IGCT became vital for analyzing student interactions and improving campus relations, yielding localized outcomes: Ethnic education applications: Hong Yun pioneered applying IGCT to China's ethnic education<sup>[9]</sup>. Hao Yaming explored alignments between China's ethnic characteristics and IGCT's logic<sup>[10]</sup>. He advocated treating IGCT as an inter-ethnic contact theory applicable to diverse ethnic interactions. Zhang Dawei integrated IGCT with China's practical issues<sup>[11]</sup>. Empirical Studies on student interactions: Scholars extended IGCT to student groups. Yi Li proposed stage-specific contact strategies to improve inter-ethnic student relations<sup>[12]</sup>. Su Guangzheng et al. studied Han-Tibetan interactions in integrated schools<sup>[13]</sup>. Gu Jianjie et al. demonstrated that mixed-ethnic dormitories in Xinjiang universities reduce cognitive conflicts and enhance collaboration<sup>[14]</sup>. Duan Zheze et al. examined interactions between Taiwanese youth and mainland students<sup>[15]</sup>.

## 4.3. Localization characteristics and implications

IGCT's application in China transcends “theoretical transplantation”, deeply integrating with socio-cultural and institutional environments, forming distinct localized features that demonstrate theoretical adaptability and provide unique insights for multicultural societies: Value alignment: Resonance with “Pluralistic unity” (多元一体). China's cultural framework inherently aligns with IGCT's core values. Fei Xiaotong's philosophy—“Appreciate one's own beauty; appreciate others' beauty; unite all beauties; achieve global harmony” (各美其美, 美人之美, 美美与共, 天下大同)—emphasizes coexistence through respecting cultural uniqueness, mirroring IGCT's logic of “promoting understanding through contact, seeking consensus amid differences.” Practically, this manifests not as homogenization but as “harmony in diversity” (和而不同). Contextual focus: Education as core venue. Unlike Western applications across communities/workplaces, China's IGCT implementation concentrates on education (K–12 and higher education). Schools function as “primary sites for cultural transmission/innovation”, and education's long-term impact on intergroup relations makes it strategic. Educational settings offer unique advantages: 1) Students are at critical stages of value formation, where positive contact experiences shape lifelong intergroup attitudes; 2) Schools' semi-closed environments enable active creation of “optimal contact conditions” through curricula and activities. This focus spurred innovation—researchers integrated IGCT with China's fundamental education goal of “fostering virtue through education” (立德树人), proposing “contact as education”: respect, tolerance, and collaboration learned through contact become core competencies for multicultural societies.

China's IGCT practice demonstrates that cross-cultural theory localization is not a departure from original principles but a creative integration with local values, institutions, and contexts. Key implications: For multi-ethnic nations, intergroup contact requires value consensus to avoid tokenism; institutional support is vital for scaling contact initiatives, especially in vast, diverse countries where policy guidance reduces costs/resistance; education is a strategic lever for shaping intergroup relations through national education systems. These features enrich IGCT's cross-cultural dimensions and offer a “Chinese experience” for global multicultural governance.

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