

# Harmonizing Differences: Utilizing Allport's Intergroup Contact Theory In Interreligious Conversations

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## Abstract

In the contemporary scenario, the holistic scene around the Globe is very much heart-wrenching due to hostility and antipathy among people belonging to different religions. The main reason behind is misinterpretations of religions due to susceptible and faded contact among religious authorities from different religions. The main motive and purpose of this research article is to highlight the role of intergroup contact theory in interfaith dialogue by incorporating teachings of Islam and to know about the impact of interfaith dialogue on mental health. Prejudice and stereotype are two social evils that vehemently effects the social dimension of mental health. Mental health can be promoted by eliminating the above-mentioned social evils with the help of Intergroup contact theory and teachings of Islam which proposes that intrinsic religiosity plays a more pivotal role than extrinsic religiosity in eliminating these social evils. Intrinsically religious are more tolerant than extrinsically religious people. The elimination of these socials is possible by establishing a volatile and friendly ambience during interfaith dialogue. The methodology of this study was made through secondary data and some experimental studies of Social Psychology.

**Keywords:** Intergroup contact theory, Interfaith Dialogue, Islam, Pyschology.

## 1.1. Introduction

Modern psychology has developed as a broad discipline. It comprises many branches and types with different theories and concepts. One of the important branches is social Psychology which constitutes various theories playing a vital role, especially in interfaith dialogue. Gordon Allport's intergroup contact theory is one such theory which is highly significant. This theory has a reductionist approach towards social evils like prejudice and stereotype. These two social evils adversely impact mental health. Social Psychology helps us to identify interactions between ingroup and outgroup relations. Interfaith dialogue crashes and deteriorates the walls of anxiety and fear between people belonging to different religions. The essence and esoteric value of all religions is to maintain peace and prosperity. Islamic ethical teachings, Social Psychology, and interfaith dialogue have a strong bond to promote mental health and well-being for humans around the world. According to the American Psychological Association mental health is defined as "A state of mind characterized by emotional well-being, good behavioural adjustment, relative freedom from anxiety and disabling symptoms, and a capacity to establish constructive relationships and cope with the ordinary demands and stresses of life".

So, in this regard social dimension of mental health is correlated with interfaith dialogue and intergroup contact theory.

## 1.2. Concept of Interfaith Dialogue: An Islamic perspective

**1.2.1. Definition of interfaith dialogue:** Some definitions of interfaith dialogue given by Muslim scholars are as under:

According to Ismail Raji Al-Faruqi, “Interreligious dialogue is also a good platform to understand traditions other than one’s religion”.

According to Azazian, “Interreligious dialogue is perceived as a tool to strengthen national unity and integration for instance states that to clarify any misunderstanding in a community, a dialogue where people can meet, discuss, exchange opinions and explore the truth while simultaneously preserving peaceful co-existence among the communities is crucial.”<sup>1</sup> (Majid, 2021)

Ghazali (2005) “Describes inter-religious dialogue as an intellectual discourse that involves the meeting of religious representatives. The topics for this dialogue normally revolve around philosophical and theological themes which are not suitable for the grassroots”

There are so many verses of the Holy Quran which depict about interfaith dialogue. Allah says in Holy Quran “Say (O Muslims), “We believe in Allah and that which has been sent down to us and that which has been sent down to Ibrahim (Abraham), Ismail (Ishmael), Ishaq (Isaac), Yaqub (Jacob), and to Al-Asbat (the offspring of the twelve sons of Jacob, and that which has been given to Musa (Moses) and Isa (Jesus), and that which has been given to the Prophets from their Lord. We make no distinction between any of them, and to Him, we have submitted (in Islam)”. (2:136). Islam promotes interfaith dialogue for the purpose to main peace and prosperity. At another place in Quran Allah “Say (O Muslims), “We believe in Allah and that which has been sent down to us and that which has been sent down to Ibrahim (Abraham), Ismail (Ishmael), Ishaq (Isaac), Yaqub (Jacob), and to Al-Asbat (the offspring of the twelve sons of Jacob, and that which has been given to Musa (Moses) and Isa (Jesus), and that which has been given to the Prophets from their Lord. We make no distinction between any of them, and to Him, we have submitted (in Islam)”.(3:64). This verse explicitly emphasis on interfaith dialogue as a tool to promote peace despite of differences. In this verse, there is the message that whatsoever be differences but peace and tranquillity is very much important for all humans around the Globe. Every religion promotes peace and prosperity. There are so many other verses of the Quran that promote peace and harmony despite of conflicts based on religious backgrounds “There is no compulsion in religion: Verily the Right Path has become distinct from the wrong path. Whoever disbelieves in Tagut and believes in Allah, then he has grasped the most trustworthy handhold that will never break. And Allah is All-Hearer, All-Knower.” (2:256)

“Say (O Muhammad Sm.) to the believers to forgive those who (harm them and) hope not for the Days of Allah (i.e., His Recompense), that He may recompense a people, according to what they have earned”. (45:14)

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c) “And insult not those whom they (disbelievers) worship besides Allah, lest they insult Allah wrongfully without knowledge.” (6:108)

These Verses obviously claim that Islam not only approves interfaith dialogue for its adherents but also earnestly urges the peoples of other religions to come forward for the sake of peace and tranquillity and engage in inter-religious dialogue.

Despite of Quranic verses underscoring interreligious dialogue, there is an ample of events about the life of Prophet Mohammad (S.A.W) and his companions. For example, The charter of Madinah and the Treaty of Hudabiyah with the people of Makkah. The charter of Madinah provides equal rights to the citizens of Madinah despite of conflicts based on theological issues. While writing the treaty of Hdaybiyah Prophet Mohammad (s.a.w) cast aside to write the title “Rasulullah” (Allah’s Messenger) for the purpose to maintain peace and harmony. Interfaith dialogue is based on to develop syncretism which aims to explore common grounds in different religions. When there is the existence of syncretism it develops a sense of social solidarity and psychological attachment among people belonging to different religions.

### **1.2.2. Definition of Interfaith Dialogue: A Psychological Perspective**

According to Social Psychology, interfaith dialogue is defined as the secondary group which prevails over temporarily for a particular purpose. ( H. Steven Moffic, John Petet, Ahmed Zakira Hankir, Raina Awad, 2019)

Psycholinguistic definition of Interfaith Dialogue: According to Rydzek and Bartezuk, they describe “interreligious dialogue as a person’s mental readiness to exchange views about religious topics with the people of other religions” (Elzbieta Rydz, Daria Stawaez, 2022)

According to Gorky and Capsi “A discursive relationship between two participants characterized by thought-provoking activities such as hypothesizing, questioning, interpreting, explaining, evaluating and rethinking issues or problems at hand” (Elzbieta Rydz, Daria Stawaez, 2022)

According to Clarke, he describes “Interfaith dialogue which refers to one’s mental readiness to start a conversation on a religious topic with a person of another faith”<sup>2</sup> (Elzbieta Rydz, Daria Stawaez, 2022)

According to Hayward, he defines interfaith dialogue from a psychological perspective “Interfaith dialogue is increasingly offered as a concrete means to bridge inter-communal divides, build coalitions, and challenges the social psychological dynamics that can be a particularly useful tool for building awareness among majority communities about the experiences and needs of minorities and for bringing simmering tensions to the surface, and addressing them in a potentially constructive manner.”( Josephine C. Igbokwe, Fidelia Ngozi Enem, Desmond Chinedu Oparaku, Chinwendu Chizoba Akpom, 2019).

### **1.3. Gordon Allport’s Intergroup contact theory**

This theory is also known as the contact hypothesis. This theory was propounded by American Psychologist Gordon Willard Allport. (Sanderson, 2010) The central core and crux of this

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2

theory is peaceful co-existence between the members of the intergroup helps in the reduction of prejudice. Interdependence between the members of different groups is a reductionist approach to combat prejudice and stereotypes. Allport's contact hypothesis states that prejudice reduction takes place when the members of the intergroup interact with each other to achieve identical goals through collaborative interaction. Authorities from different institutions also help to reduce prejudice. Numerous studies prove that intergroup cordial contact and correspondence reduces prejudice which in turn inculcates and imbibes a friendly attitude. Some steps help to reduce prejudice between the members of different groups. According to Gordon positive contact is important to make susceptible the boundaries of anxiety and fear among the members of the outgroup. (Sanderson, 2010)

The contact hypothesis states that interaction with out-group reduces more crucial and critical prejudice and stereotypes.

1. **Optimal status:** Both groups should on equal status because equal status is important for the cultivation of agreeable traits that in return build social affiliation between groups.
2. **Common goals:** superordinate goal is that goal which cannot be achieved through the collaboration of intergroups and outgroup interaction. In achieving superordinate goal equal efforts should be executed by outgroup and ingroup is essential to make strong social affiliations.
3. **Intergroup cooperation:** Achieving of superordinate goal is impossible without intergroup cooperation.
4. **Institutional support:** Intergroup contact can readily become acceptable with the decree of authorities.
5. **Friendship potential:** This was the fifth condition proposed by Thomas F. Pettigrew. Exposition for friendship through contact should be very much easy.

**1.3.1. Factors responsible for the reduction of prejudice and stereotype:** Intimate intergroup contact is vehemently responsible for the reduction of prejudice and stereotype. Thomas F. Pettigrew's publication highlights the following important for the reduction of prejudice and stereotypes.

1. **Learning about the outgroup:** One of the biggest and praiseworthy features of intergroup contact is that it induces and imbibes sympathetic and empathetic relations between the members of different groups. The learning process rectifies negative thoughts and misperceptions about the members of the outgroup.
2. **Changing behaviour:** Intergroup contact modifies the behaviour of individuals which results in the building of an attitude that generates positivity among members of different groups.
3. **Generating affective ties:** Research had been done that affectionate attitude and social affiliation deteriorates the walls of anxiety and phobia in minds of people that have been generated due to prejudices and stereotypes. Initial concurrency with outgroup members creates anxiety but intergroup contact phenomenon reduces anxiety and phobia.

**1.3.2. Ingroup reappraisal:** Optimal intergroup contact unveils misconception about ingroup and outgroup. In terms of Psychology reappraisal is defined as controlling emotions by

restructuring cognition through the process of teaching and learning. Through the process of ingroup reappraisal prejudice and stereotypes can be reduced easily that have been developed due to misconception and misguidance. (Sanderson, 2010)

#### **1.4. Human Interaction: An Islamic perspective**

The main purpose of discussing this theme is to elaborate about factors which are responsible for the interpersonal and intrapersonal interactions in the Muslim community. What is the Islamic point of view regarding human interaction. From the Quranic point of view is that all humans are children of Adam (A.S) no one is superior than one another, only those people are superior whom their intrinsic religiosity is very much strong because they are less prejudiced (Allport). Intergroup contact theory is appreciating the Islamic point of view regarding human interaction. So, in this regard there is no any desirability of colour, race, age, gender social status and physical appearance in the sight of Allah. From this lens of Islam the Quran stimulates desirability for interfaith dialogue for the sake to degenerate different prejudices and stereotypes. In connection with the point previously mentioned that Prophet Mohammad (S.A.W) said that all people are equal just like the teeth of comb. Islam prohibited to ridiculing and nicknaming any who belong to any other religion as well.

**1.4.1. Concept of Ta‘aruf (knowing one another):** The term ta‘aruf is derived from a word ma‘rifah which means knowledge. The word ‘ta‘aruf is an Arabic word which means harmony and togetherness. The main purpose of ta‘aruf is to inculcate communal harmony to bring peace and prosperity. In surah Hujrat verse number 13 Allah says “O mankind! We have indeed created you from one man and one woman, and have made you into various nations and tribes so that you may know one another; indeed, the more honourable among you, in the sight of Allah, is one who is more pious among you; indeed, Allah is All Knowing, All Aware.” At another place in Quran Allah says in surah al-Nisa verse 1: O men! Fear your Lord Who created you from a single being and out of it created its mate; and out of the two spread many men and women.1 Fear Allah in Whose name you plead for rights, and heed the ties of kinship. Surely, Allah is ever watchful over you. According to Ibn- Asyur he emphasized that “Allah SWT invokes in that verse with the cry of men and not in the cry of believers is the purpose of making people realize that the origin of man is one of the offspring of Adam and Eve, thus, their glory does not lie to their lineage but rather lies to the righteous.” In connection with the above Qur’anic verses Islam underscores humanitarian harmony not directed towards a particular religion. intergroup contact theory is compatible with the teaching of Islam. By incorporating the teaching of Islam with intergroup contact theory it easily stimulates interfaith dialogue which results in the depletion of prejudice and stereotype. (Akila Mamat, Aminuddin BASIR@Ahmad, Shamsuddin Yabi, Fadlan Mohd Othman, 2020)

#### **1.5. Prejudice from the context of Intergroup contact theory:**

Prejudice is defined as biased and firm judgement about others. According to Woolfolk “Prejudice is constituted of beliefs, emotions and tendencies towards particular actions”. According to Seul “To treat the stranger as your own as a prosocial motive to intervene in religious conflicts” (Ingroup favouritism and attribution error are the factors responsible for the conflict between two groups. (H. Steven Moffic, John Petet, Ahmed Zakira Hankir, Raina

Awad, 2019). Adoree and his colleagues in 1940 established a committee on prejudice and religion. Cognitive approach of prejudice was founded by Allport. Allport said that prejudice is negative feelings about others without any critical judgement. Allport scrutinized the changing degree of prejudice belief of church attendants and non-attendants. According to him Church non- attendants were not prejudiced than church attendants. According to Gordon Allport intrinsic religiosity means “A religious orientation in which religious practice is an end itself, rather than a means to other ends”. He observes that extrinsic religiosity and intrinsic religiosity plays pivotal role in deducing intensity of prejudice among people from different religious backgrounds. According to Allport and Ross intrinsically religious people are less prone to prejudice than extrinsically religious people. Further said by them that intrinsically religious people are more stable and tolerant while encountering with strange situations discussion which more prone to chaos and confusion. Religious orientations stimulate their followers to be affectionate with each other that results reduction of prejudice and stereotypes. Allport put forward that contact hypothesis is considered as a helpful to understand relationship between religion and prejudice. According to the Allport he states that enhancement of positive attitude depends upon contact and strong adherence between groups. According to Allport prejudice can be eliminated by adopting following steps with much curiosity.

The steps are as under.

1. Identical Position: Participant should not suffer from identity crisis.
2. Participants should have same motive to something.
3. Contact between groups should be conducted by higher authorities.
1. Nature of the contact should be positive. (BENAOUDA BENSAID, MUSTAFA TEKKE, 2018)

#### **1.6. Impact of Interfaith Dialogue on Mental health:**

Oxytocin is a hormone which is released by different parts of brain like amygdala and hippocampus which releases when there is a strong affiliation between the individuals of different groups. (H. Steven Moffic, John Petet, Ahmed Zakira Hankir, Raina Awad, 2019). Universally this hormone is known as the “Love hormone” ( (Miranda Olf, Jessie L. Frijling, Laura D. Kubzansky, Bekh Bradley, Mark A. Ellenbogen, Christopher Cardoso, Jennifwer A. Bartz, Jason R. Yee, Mirjamand Zuiden, 2013) ). The role of oxytocin in social bonding is a hormone which is released by amygdala which act as a strong booster for social affiliation. Human oxytocin hormone has a tendency to abate anxiety in other words it acts as an antianxiety. This hormone has a vigorous propensity to make strong social bonds between ingroup and outgroup hostility. It has also propensity to stimulate interpersonal contacts. Ingroup favouritism also stimulated by this hormone. ( (H. Steven Moffic, John Petet, Ahmed Zakira Hankir, Raina Awad, 2019). It has also capacity to regulate stressful situations and play vital role in therapeutic process. This hormone has a dual nature it can imbibe prosocial behaviour or anti-social behaviour depends upon presence of social cue (safe cue and unsafe cue) in environment. Prejudice is a social evil which drastically effected mental health. According to the research studies of Social Psychology, the amygdala (Part of the brain dealing with fear and stressful situations) gets activated when sharply exposed to unconscious prejudice. So we can say that the social dimension plays a pivotal role in maintaining mental

health. Interfaith dialogue is a platform to degenerate and demolish different types of prejudice and stereotype in the minds of people belonging to different religions. From the lens of intergroup contact theory prejudice can be reduced through interaction between individuals from different religious backgrounds.

### **1.7. Intergroup contact theory and interfaith Dialogue:**

Principles of intergroup contact theory are more helpful for interfaith dialogue because cordial contact between different groups alleviates and mitigate prejudice and stereotypes. Interreligious dialogue alleviates prejudice when group members motivate to accomplish congruent goals. According to some personality theories, there are some traits which are responsible for successful interfaith dialogue, the traits are just as agreeableness, extravert and openness to experience. People with an elevated degree of openness to experience have strong power of religious tolerance. They have increased level of prosocial behaviour. Their stimulation towards new events is more amiable (DARIUSZ KROK, PRZEMYSŁAW KROL, 2019). Intrinsic religiosity (Allport and Ross) plays a supreme role to maintain discipline during interfaith dialogue. Interfaith dialogue sensitizes religious cognition and perception. According to the research findings of Social Psychology, only those people are commencing interfaith dialogue who are more openness to experience. (Knight, 1996). According to Psychologists who have experience in the Psychology of dialogue claim that one must adopt a personal approach to another person without treating them through the prism of one's own. (Elzbieta Rydz, Daria Stawaez, 2022). According to Abu- Nimer he suggests four steps which are more pivotal to keep under consideration during interfaith dialogue.

1. Participants while in interfaith dialogue are more emotional. When group members centred their attention towards similarities in religions then individuals incline towards their own religious beliefs.
2. Participants begin to investigate the difference in religions while keeping under consideration not to tease the religiosity of anyone. Due to this clarification gets induced about negative stereotypes about other religions.
3. Participants begin to investigate contrasting beliefs from other religions. At the termination of this session, individuals are motivated to infuse the power of tolerance which is important for peaceful co-existence.
4. Participants identified that there are certain upper limits for interfaith dialogue despite of this individuals feel a kind of serenity by having contact with other faith communities.

Abu-Nimer states that the above four steps have a strong affiliation with intergroup contact theory.

According to David Rosen “He believes that violent abuse of religion is the biggest challenge as it puts peaceful co-existence in danger because of the Wounded Psychology” (Dr. Farideh Amirfarhangi, Ahmad Ramezani, 2020). According to the Mary C. Boy without emotional attachment between two different groups, there is no any possibility for interreligious learning. (Waillet, 2013)

### **1.8. Conclusion**

From the above elaboration we can conclude that intergroup contact theory given by Allport plays pivotal role in interfaith dialogue for the reduction of prejudices and stereotype about different religions around the Globe. According to Allport and Ross intrinsic religiosity plays important role in interfaith dialogue because it imbibes power of tolerance and intrinsically religious people are less prejudiced. Islam categorically laid much emphasis on intrinsic religiosity than extrinsic religiosity. So, intergroup contact theory helps to creates friendly ambience during interfaith dialogue that helps to perish walls of anxiety and fear among people belongs to different religions. Finally we can say that by incorporating intergroup contact theory and teachings of islam in interfaith dialogue helps to promote mental health.

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