Commentary: Elizabeth Levy Paluck

The dominance of the individual in intergroup relations research:
Understanding social change requires psychological theories of collective and structural
phenomena

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Abstract (60 words)

Dixon et al (2012) suggest that the psychological literature on intergroup relations should shift from theorizing "prejudice reduction" to "social change." A focus on social change exposes the importance of psychological theories involving collective phenomena like social norms and institutions. Individuals' attitudes and emotions may follow, rather than cause, changes in social norms and institutional arrangements.

Dixon et al (2012) provide important direction to the psychological literature on improving intergroup relations by shifting the research goal from "prejudice reduction" to "social change." The authors review the history of prejudice conceived as an individual's negative attitude or emotion, and argue that a model of collective action is preferable to one of individual prejudice reduction for achieving intergroup equity and justice. However, their proposed model of collective action is also founded on ideas about the primary role of individual attitudes and emotions, "including anger and a sense of relative deprivation" (p. 19). In this way, Dixon et al. overlook an equally strong historical idea within psychology, which is that social change and the achievement of intergroup equity and justice will not result from a bottom-up change in attitudes. In the words of Thomas Pettigrew (1991), theorizing social change as a project in changing individual attitudes is a "reductionist view that [denies] social and structural factors" (p. 10).

What are the social and structural factors that are useful for a psychological model of social change? Prior to Allport's (1954) seminal work on intergroup relations and prejudice, psychologists theorized that social norms are critical determinants of intergroup behavior. A social norm refers to group members' perceptions of the group consensus regarding the typical or appropriate treatment of another group. An early and continuing tradition of research in psychology conceptualizes prejudice *as* a perceived social norm, rather than as an individual's personal attitude or emotion (e.g., Crandall & Stangor, 2005). An individual's attitude may interact with a social norm; for example, when personal attitudes are aligned with the perceived norm, the norm gives individuals social permission to act. When the attitudes are not aligned, the perceived norm

encourages repression of attitudinal expression. Including social norms in a model of social change is critical because behavioral conformity to the perceived group consensus is a normal, universal process (Crandall & Stangor, 2005).

Indeed, research has consistently suggested that perceptions of social norms regarding the appropriate treatment of an outgroup are more powerful predictors of intergroup behavior than individual attitudes toward that group (e.g., Blanchard et al., 1994; Paluck, 2009a). Furthermore, norms are important psychological constructs for investigators interested in the mobilization of collective behavior (e.g., Latané, 1980) because they define the standards of behavior for a group, not just for an individual (Paluck & Shepherd, in press). This research suggests that to change intergroup relations, the critical target is not what an individual personally thinks or feels about another group, but rather what they perceive other members of their group think or feel. Examples of social norms interventions include media messages depicting a social consensus of nondiscrimination, or referent group leaders announcing support for stigmatized group members.

Psychologists have also theorized the role of structural factors for improving intergroup relations. Some psychologists have even argued that the top-down process of change starting with institutional change has been the most successful for promoting intergroup justice and equity (Pettigrew, 1991). This model of change starts with formal regulations and other types of behavioral channels (Lewin, 1951) created by nations, organizations, or communities, which affect behavior and perceived social norms, and finally individual level variables like attitudes and emotions. This type of theory was initially conceived in response to arguments that an authoritarian personality was

responsible for racism and discrimination. Instead, theorists argued that "direct structural change to which individuals (even authoritarian personalities) must accommodate is both more practical and effective…individual personality and attitude changes remain important for the successful completion of the change cycle. But they are usually not initially causal" (Pettigrew, 1991, p. 10-11).

A recent empirical review of the organizational diversity literature, cited by Dixon et al (2012), provides support for this argument. The review (Kalev, Dobbin, & Kelly, 2006) suggests that an organization's institutional diversity initiatives, such as appointing managers responsible for maintaining diversity, are responsible for advancing minorities and women into higher and better paying positions, and not individually-directed attitude change efforts like diversity training. In contrast to attitudinal change, diversity in managerial positions is the kind of material and behavioral outcome to which Dixon et al. (2012) are referring as the goal for psychological intergroup relations research.

Theories of individual attitudes and emotions can be fruitfully combined with theories of social norms and structural factors in intergroup relations research. For example, our research program has focused on measuring the success of interventions that target the collective norms of a group, and have shown that changes in perceived norms regarding harassment and bullying change behaviors in schools over the course of one year (Paluck & Shepherd, under review). Future research should investigate whether attitudes, which do not change in the first year, eventually follows these normative and behavioral changes.

Additionally, psychologists have identified a number of individual level attitudes and emotions that might speed the process of social change once institutions or social

norms have started to shift. For example, a belief that institutional changes are inevitable and permanent weakens people's resistance to and increases support for the changes (Laurin, Kay, & Fitzsimons, in press). Additionally, disconfirming fears or anxieties about outgroup members is predicted to improve intergroup interaction in times of social transition (Pettigrew, 1991). Making positive examples of outgroup members accessible through storytelling or through the mass media, as a form of extended intergroup contact, are two examples of such interventions (Cameron & Rutland, 2006; Kenrick & Paluck, in progress).

Without negating the importance of individual level variables like attitudes and emotions, research suggests that psychologists reweight the importance of social and structural factors in theories of social change. I applaud the authors for their timely review and provocative reformulation of critical questions about improving intergroup relations. It seems time for psychologists to revisit the historical debate of whether we as a discipline should prioritize bottom-up versus top-down models of social change, and what role psychology can play in either effort.

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