Intergroup conflict is sadly part of our existence. Such conflicts exist around the globe originating through differences, for example, in beliefs, religion, race, and culture. The degree of conflict between rival groups varies from mild hostility to all-out war, leading to the loss of thousands of lives every year. The field of intergroup conflict has attracted the attention of many social psychologists who have attempted to understand the phenomenon and to provide solutions to end it.

These scholars concentrated their research on the structure of such conflicts that they perceived as comprising three major aspects: cognitive, affective, and behavioral. The cognitive aspect is demonstrated by the stereotype held by one group toward the other; the affective aspect by the prejudice held regarding the other group, and the behavioral aspect by discrimination against this group.

The fundamental component found in intergroup conflict is the stereotype – the negative perception of the other group. Stereotypes may include negative perceptions of a variety of characteristics such as traits, physical characteristics, and expected behaviors. People generally believe that their group (the ingroup) is a heterogeneous group, whereas members of the other group (the outgroup) are all similar to one another. This perception, known as the homogeneity effect, is one of the bases for our tendency to stereotype the members of the outgroup and claim that they are all, for example, hostile, liars, and lazy (Linville, Fischer, & Salovey, 1989; Linville & Jones, 1980). This process is compounded by the perception of a total lack of similarity between our ingroup and the outgroup; thus, the outgroup members are perceived as being totally different from us (Pettigrew, 1997). This total “us versus them” serves to enhance the stereotypical perception.

People have a strong tendency to search for, and pay more attention to information that confirms their existing perceptions and, at the same time, ignore information that conflicts with these perceptions (Fiske & Neuberg, 1990; Snyder & Swann, 1978; Trope & Thompson, 1997). This confirmation bias reduces the likelihood of people changing their stereotypes. This difficulty is compounded because when the rival groups do interact, the phenomenon of the “self-fulfilling prophecy” is likely to play a part. In other words, when we have a negative stereotype against an outgroup member, we are likely to behave toward the outgroup in line with our preconceived perceptions of it,
without regard to the way in which the group actually behaves. Our negative approach is likely to lead the outgroup members to respond in accordance with our expectations, thus giving us, the ingroup, evidence that our initial negative stereotypes were correct. These behaviors are likely to create a closed cycle of negative conduct out from which it is hard to break.

People tend to activate their stereotypes on others without being aware that they doing so (Devine, 1989; Gilbert & Hixon, 1991). Since those responsible for these attitudes and behaviors are unaware of them, it makes them particularly difficult to combat. Awareness of prejudices is a necessary prerequisite for the solution of intergroup conflict.

The contact hypothesis came to prominence in 1954, following the decision of the U.S. Supreme Court to end the segregation of black and white students in the education system. It was widely believed that once the two groups had contact with one another, there would be an end to ethnic prejudice and discrimination. An appendix attached to this Supreme Court ruling records the support given to it by thirty-two leading anthropologists, psychiatrists, psychologists, and sociologists (Cook, 1984).

Allport (1954) believed that the expectations of the Supreme Court judges and their supporters were unrealistic and that placing different ethnic groups together would not be sufficient to eliminate the negative stereotypes they held. He argued that what would be created would be a situation in which schoolchildren from different ethnic backgrounds had only casual contact with one another. Rather than alleviating tensions, this was likely to create anxiety and lead to the reinforcement of the negative stereotypes they already held. In other words, contact per se was unlikely to be an effective tool for overcoming prejudice. Allport’s prediction has been borne out by a study carried out by Stephan (1986) in which he reported that the cessation of racial segregation in the American educational system had not led to the end of prejudice. Stephan analyzed studies that had examined this issue and found that only 13 percent of the studies reported an improvement in the way black people are perceived by whites, 34 percent of the studies found no change, and 53 percent found an increase in negative perception.

In what became the Contact Hypothesis, Allport (1954) suggested that in order for a contact to create a positive effect, a set of conditions must be met. The four most important criteria are the following:

1. *Equal status*: To counteract the stereotype, the higher status group must hold a contact with a member of the outgroup who is of equal status. If this is not the case, the contact is likely to lead to a confirmation of fixed stereotypes.

2. *Cooperation*: Cooperation between the rival groups toward a superordinate goal is likely to reduce the stereotypes.

3. *Intimate contact*: The contact has to create a context in which the participants can really learn to know the other side. If the contact is restricted to an artificial level, stereotypes are likely to remain unchanged.
4. Institutional support and willingness to participate: Having the support of the authorities is likely to create positive expectations from the contact and build positive social norms enhancing positive contact. The participants must be contributing to the contact of their own volition and not because they have been compelled to do so (Allport, 1954; Amir, 1969, 1976).

Many scholars have used the Contact Hypothesis and made adjustments to the preconditions in accordance with their empirical results (Brown, 2000). However, an extended list of required conditions is also likely to make the intergroup contact less practicable. In a recent article, Amichai-Hamburger and McKenna (2006) suggested that the traditional face-to-face (F2F) contact suffers from three main obstacles: (1) practicality, (2) anxiety, and (3) generalization.

**Practicality**

If it is to be carried out according to Allport’s (1954) conditions, the contact confronts logistical stipulations that in many cases are difficult to achieve. For example, organizing a meeting among members of opposing groups raises both financial and practical issues. Bringing together groups that are geographically distant from one another may prove very costly, and bringing together those that live in segregated areas may prove logistically challenging.

Another issue is that of equal status. Equal status between the group representatives may be actually hard to achieve, since within-group interactions people tend to be highly sensitive in discerning subtle cues that may be indicative of status (e.g., Hogg, 1993).

**Anxiety in Contact**

Intergroup anxiety is the result of the anticipation of negative reactions during the intergroup encounter (Stephan & Cookie, 2001; Stephan & Stephan, 1996). Intergroup interactions are often more anxiety provoking than interpersonal ones, and such anxiety may not be conducive to harmonious social relations (Islam & Hewstone, 1993; Stephan & Stephan, 1985; Wilder, 1993). When an individual is anxious, he or she is more likely to use heuristics. Thus, if an intergroup contact produces significant levels of anxiety in the individual or individuals involved, he or she is more likely to apply stereotypes to the outgroup (Bodenhausen, 1990; Bodenhausen & Wyer, 1985). Wilder (1993) pointed out that when they are in a state of anxiety, group members are likely to ignore any disconfirming information supplied in the contact context. Under such conditions, when a member of the outgroup behaves in a positive
manner that contradicts the expectations of the other side, members of the ingroup do not alter their opinions and only recall the outgroup as behaving in a manner consistent with their negative perception. In such a case, the contact between these members is unlikely to bring about any change in the group stereotype (Wilder & Shapiro, 1989).

**Generalization From Contact**

One of the greatest challenges to the contact hypothesis is whether the results of a positive contact with a member of the outgroup will be generalized further. Group saliency during the interaction appears to be critically important to a successful generalization. There is much debate among researchers about the optimum level of salience. For example, Brewer and Miller (1984) suggested that for a contact to succeed, group saliency should be low. However, Hewstone and Brown (1986) suggested that, for a positive contact to have a wider group-level impact, individual participants need to be seen as representatives of their group so that the outgroup identity is highly salient. Hamburger (1994) suggested that what seems to be a lack of generalization is in many cases a result of overly rigid measures of stereotype change (see Garcia-Marques & Mackie, 1999; Hewstone & Hamberger, 2000; Paolini, Hewstone, Rubin, & Pay, 2004).

**Contact Over the Internet: The Contact Hypothesis Online**

The Internet may be the key to overcoming many of the difficulties mentioned above.

*Equal status:* Many of the cues individuals typically rely on to gauge the internal and external status of others are not in evidence online.

*Cooperation toward superordinate goals:* Virtual workgroups have proved an effective tool worldwide; in fact, Galegher and Kraut (1994) found that the final product produced by virtual workgroups was similar in overall quality to that produced by F2F group members. This is especially likely to be the case when technology used provides the capability for information-rich communication (Bell & Kozlowski, 2002).

*Institutional support and willingness to participate:* This might well be easier to achieve online because institutions may feel that participating in an Internet contact may be seen as taking less of a risk than a F2F contact (Bargh & McKenna, 2004). This, too, may make it easier for group members to volunteer to participate and for leaders to support such a meeting.

*Intimacy:* Cook (1962) suggested that as the contact process progresses and participants begin to form closer relationships, the groups were likely to display a more favorable attitude toward one another. He stressed the importance of the “acquaintance potential,” or the opportunity provided by the situation for the
contact participants to get to know one another. Recent research into the importance of personalized interaction (e.g., Miller, 2002) and intergroup friendships (e.g., Pettigrew, 1997, 1998) has reawakened interest in this aspect of the contact. It also has a particular relevance to this discussion on contact through the Internet. One of the major advantages of Internet interactions over face-to-face interactions is the general tendency for individuals to engage in greater self-disclosure and more intimate exchanges there. Interactions online tend to become “more than skin deep” and to do so quite quickly (e.g., McKenna, Green, & Gleason, 2002; Walther, 1996).

Anxiety: Many of the situational factors that can foster feelings of anxiety in social situations (e.g., having to respond on the spot, feeling under visual scrutiny) are absent in online interactions. Online participants have more control over how they present themselves and their views (e.g., being able to edit one’s comments before presenting them). People may feel better able to express themselves and feel more at ease with their online partners than they would if they were interacting in person.

Generalization from the contact: One of the advantages of online communication is that one can quite easily manipulate the degree of individual versus group saliency in a given contact situation to achieve a desired outcome. Following Leah Thompson’s procedure (see Thompson & Nadler, 2002), each member briefly introduces him or herself at the beginning of the interaction and adds a statement stressing his or her typicality as a member. As the online interaction progresses, group norms will quickly begin to emerge (Spears, Postmes, Lea, & Wolbert, 2002). These norms will be distinct from those that operate when the members of each group are alone together, and they will also be distinct from those of the other group; rather, these norms will emerge from the combined membership of the two groups in the online setting. The norms created will lead to heightened feelings of attachment and camaraderie among the participants. Thus, the necessary balance of a sense of both “us and them” will be evoked, allowing for acceptance and generalization.

The online environment may be said to heighten the perception of the individual members as representative of their disparate groups, while simultaneously fostering feelings of kinship and attachment to the “new group” composed of all members taking part in the exercise. There are a number of means by which the first can be achieved. For instance, all members may be given pseudonyms that are evocative of the group they represent.

The Net Intergroup Contact Platform: a New Innovation

The Net Intergroup Contact (NIC) platform is a new website, at the time of writing, in its final stages of development. It is dedicated to improving the relationships between rival groups around the world. The basis for the
yair amichai-hamburger

Figure 9.1. *Home page of the Net Intergroup Contact (NIC) platform.*

NIC platform is the Contact Hypothesis and the psychology of the Internet. The group behind the website includes social-organizational psychologists and webmasters. The front page of the platform (Figure 9.1) includes a call for people to join the vision of finding solutions to intergroup conflicts worldwide. The platform demonstrates a sequence of stages involved in forming an intergroup contact that surfers who wish to be involved in this project may employ.

The NIC platform focuses on intergroup contact through the Internet, which starts online and only moves to a F2F contact after certain conditions have been met. However, this platform could equally be used for other types of intergroup contact, for example, to support an ongoing F2F contact, or as a service for a F2F contact that in essence has finished its work but has a need to hold occasional follow-up meetings. This could be especially important since there is a danger that even the results of a successful contact may not be sustained because the positive contact dynamic has not been maintained. It is also the case that sometimes F2F contact sessions are held very infrequently because of the busy schedules of participants or their physical distance from one another. In such cases, the NIC platform, when used in-between F2F sessions, may prove a useful tool in maintaining the continuity of the contact.

Breaking the dissimilarity perception: The NIC platform aims to provide information about the other side. This knowledge leads participants away from a position of seeing the other side as homogeneous toward a heterogeneity perception of the outgroup. This new information should also lead to the discovery of cross-cutting categories (CCC) between the rival groups. These are important because, once the different groups learn what they share
in common, goodwill is created, which makes it easier to deal with the more painful issues when they arise. This CCC perception is believed to encourage cooperation toward superordinate goals. Making people dependent on each other forces them to learn more about one another and enhances the salience of CCC (Cook, 1984).

**The Human Factor**

*Leaders:* The home page of the website contains a request for group leaders. These leaders will be required to: (1) organize a group of participants from their ingroup; (2) organize a data bank on their group; and (3) facilitate the group during the contact.

Organizing the group will involve bringing together group representatives who are willing to participate in a net contact with the outgroup. The leader may recruit the participants from people in his or her own circle of acquaintances or he or she may use the website as a platform for recruitment (or a combination of the two). The leader is also responsible for building the data bank on the ingroup. The data bank will include information group members believe is important for the outgroup to know about them.

The leader’s role is to facilitate his or her group during the contact. He or she should attempt to inspire the group with the vision of solving the intergroup conflict. In addition, he or she will explain the code of behavior expected from participants. The leader has to be aware of the needs and feelings of the group and to discuss with members their feelings and fears with regard to the contact and to support their difficulties. The leader must be respected by the group members so that the messages can be transferred effectively.

*Platform supervisor:* The contact will be supervised by a social psychologist who is an expert with the field of intergroup conflict in general and the contact hypothesis in particular. The supervisor will also be familiar with the group dynamic. Before the supervision of any contact, the leader will learn about the conflict, including (1) the histories of the different sides to the conflict; (2) the main issues of conflict; and (3) past attempts to improve intergroup relations, both successes and failures. In addition, the supervisor will be expected to learn the cultural norms and etiquette of both sides.

The supervisor will guide the leaders from both groups. She or he will not participate in the contact sessions themselves, but will closely observe the dynamic. Following each session, the supervisor will hold discussions over the Internet with the group leaders. Should the supervisor feel the need to intervene during a session, he or she may do so by sending a message that may be read only by the leader and will not be accessible in the public arena. The supervisor is the website representative for the group leaders and will review any complaints regarding the platform. The group leaders are responsible for the behavior of the participants. If a participant behaves in a way that contravenes
the rules or the ethos of contact, by for example behaving aggressively toward the outgroup, the group leader should take appropriate action, either with a warning or by excluding the individual from the participating group.

Each group will comprise five to seven participants. Their participation is completely voluntary. They will either be familiar with the leader before the project or will have been recruited through the website. Those who are selected will be individuals who are willing to learn about the outgroup and are open-minded enough to listen to its members.

### Pre-Contact Process

To enhance the likelihood that the contact will be successful, a number of phases have to be carried out before the groups actually meet. This pre-contact stage might take from a few weeks to a number of months, but it is crucial to prepare for the contact properly.

The following steps should be followed:

1. **Initiating the contact**: Group leaders together with the NIC management will set up the contact project. A specific social psychologist is nominated as supervisor for the contact. It is likely that the NIC will have been approached by a leader of a group involved in a conflict. In such a case, the NIC management will attempt to find a group leader from the rival group who is willing to lead his or her group in the contact.

2. **Call for participants**: The leader takes responsibility for recruiting the group members. This includes advertising where necessary.

3. **Setting up the data bank**: Leaders are in charge of creating the interactive data bank.

4. **Behavioral code**: Group members sign an agreement explaining the behavior code expected from them. The agreement will also contain clauses pertaining to the degree of commitment expected from participants.

5. **Internet ingroup meeting**: Group members become familiar with other participants from their group.

6. **Questionnaire**: Group members fill out an online questionnaire dealing with their interests and hobbies.

7. **Learning about the outgroup**: Group members participate in an interactive introduction to the contact; this involves learning about the outgroup as a preparation for the contact.

8. **CCC**: Group members receive information on the outgroup members, including their interests and pastimes. Ingroup members will then find that they have hobbies and interests in common, and this will create CCC between the participants from both groups.

9. **Vision meeting**: Group members will hold a last session separately before contact. This session is supervised by the leader and the supervisor. The
supervisor will review the vision and values of the NIC and work to motivate the members before their first meeting.

At this stage, the groups are ready for the first contact.

**The Data Bank**

The data bank on each group will contain information arranged according to the following criteria: (1) information given by the group leaders; (2) information designated by the supervisor as crucial information on the group; (3) feedback from users: participants from both groups will be asked frequently to evaluate the information given: what is redundant, what is missing, and what should be extended.

The data bank will enable an interactive learning process to take place before the actual contact so that people will become familiar with the out-group (see Figure 9.2). It will also be available in real time during the contact. In this way, a participant who is unsure about whether a certain code of behavior is suitable will be able to find out by using the interactive data bank.

The data will be divided into several main sections:

1. The historical background of the group.
2. Successful milestones in the group’s history.
3. Major principles on which the group is based.
4. Cultural characteristics.
5. Behavioral codes.
6. Major issues of conflict between the groups.
The Contact Process

The contact process described here is recommended, but should be adapted to suit the individual contact because overly rigid guidelines might interfere with the dynamics of the specific contact process. The initial process we suggest is built on the following stages:

1. **The supervisor will meet with each group separately and learn their expectations and anxieties before the sessions start. She or he will be able to answer any questions participants may have.**

2. **Initial intergroup contact:** Five sessions to build familiarity between group members.

3. **Intergroup cooperation:** cooperating on a superordinate goal project.

4. **Areas of disagreement:** Five contact sessions will be held dealing with the major issues of the dispute.

The initial five contact sessions should set a positive tone for the whole process. At the start of the first session, the supervisor will be presented as the professional authority supervising the contact. Participants will then introduce themselves, giving their name, background, and their expectations for the contact. The supervisor will go on to explain the process in general and will attempt to create an understanding between the participants about the aims of the contact. Several group simulations will be used to encourage people to get to know one another. Participants will have received information on CCC with regard to themselves and the outgroup members. During the final two of the initial five introductory contact sessions, the participants together with their group leaders and the psychologist will choose the superordinate goal toward which the groups will cooperate. During these early stages, the issues over which there are disputes will be avoided, to be dealt with at a later stage.

Cooperation toward the superordinate goal stage aims to create interdependence between the participants. Before the contact, group leaders together with the supervisor will assess options for possible superordinate goals. Their assessment will take into account both their understanding of the psychological profile of the group members and the suitability of these projects in terms of practical considerations, including the time available for completion. The members of both groups will together choose one of the options. This will be the task that all members commit themselves to carry out. The task has to be broad and significant to create a deep involvement among members of both groups. The group leader will monitor the involvement and commitment of each participant. Many websites offer projects that fit the profile we seek to provide; see, for example, the online volunteering websites http://www.onlinevolunteering.org or http://www.volunteermatch.org.
These websites offer many possibilities for significant social projects that can serve as the context for cooperation between all group members toward the achievement of a superordinate goal.

After the completion of the project, the groups will move on to the third stage, dealing with the real issues in the conflict. By this stage, it is hoped that participants will feel comfortable with one another and will be more prepared to understand the other group’s point of view on the issues in conflict, even if they do not necessarily accept them. The principles of conflict management will be invoked here to encourage participants to listen to the other side.

This is the most fragile stage of the process. It is here that the group leaders and the supervisor will have to consult one another frequently. The pace at which the two sides move toward a solution will depend on many factors, including the needs and abilities of the participants, their negotiating style, and the complexity of the dispute. The number of sessions taken or the stage reached at the end of each session is of far less importance than the sustaining of the momentum in a positive atmosphere.

Obstacles to progress: Two major obstacles that could potentially seriously impede or even destroy a contact are (1) misusing the platform for flaming against the outgroup and (2) lack of commitment to the process.

Flaming: Anonymity can serve as a double-edged sword. On one hand, it allows people to express themselves more openly and honestly than they would if they knew they could be identified. On the other hand, this anonymity may be exploited and lead participants to become abusive, for example, by sending aggressive messages (Joinson, 2003). This has been found to be more common in Internet groups as compared with F2F groups (Orengo Castellá, Zornoza Abad, Prieto Alonso, & Peiro Silla, 2000), which, in turn may lead to an escalation of the intergroup conflict (Branscomb, 1995; McKenna & Green, 2002). To prevent this from occurring, a number of preconditions must be met before a candidate is accepted to participate in a contact. All candidates have to sign a contract that states they accept the rules of the website and will not use abusive language under any circumstances. The contact is supervised and group leaders are instructed to cool tempers should the debate become too heated. In cases of a blatant hostility, leaders are instructed to forbid the offender from staying in the group; the offender will be asked to leave immediately. In such a case, there is no place for leniency since flaming is likely to escalate extremely quickly (Douglas & McGarty, 2001) and place the project at risk. In case of mild hostility, a warning will be given to the offender, together with a caution that any repetition of this type of behavior will lead to his or her expulsion from the contact.

Lack of commitment: The fact that participants may be surfing from their homes and may not have met their group leaders or the other members of their group F2F may lead to lack of commitment to the process. This could lead to participants being absent from virtual meetings or leaving the process before
it is completed. Participants who are not fully obligated to the contact will create an atmosphere of lack of commitment and cause others not to see the contact as a serious enterprise. To counter this possible tendency, the commitment of candidates will be assessed carefully before they are permitted to take part in the contact. This increases the match between participants’ needs and group goals, which enhances commitment. To discourage passivity among group members, group leaders will encourage their members to increase the communication within the group using all possible channels. This was found by Kim (2000) to increase the level of commitment of an individual to the community. In addition, throughout the encounter, the leader will emphasize the benefits to members (based on the match between their needs and the group goal). During the pre-contact meetings and during the contact, it is vital to encourage members to express themselves (Rheingold, 1993) and to give them positive feedback for their contribution and endeavors (Shore & Tetrick, 1991).

Despite these concerns, we believe that the mechanisms in place on the Internet that allow for supervision of discussions, together with a proper understanding of joint expectations and a careful selection of both group leaders and members, should prevent these obstacles from occurring. Moreover, efforts will be made throughout the contact to make the participants feel part of a project and so increase their commitment. For example, the system allows those in charge of the contact to be in touch with group members individually (and vice versa). Participants will also be asked for their feedback at several stages throughout the process. In this way, we hope to enhance their feeling of belonging and of being significant members. Should a group member fail to attend a session without prior notice, the leader will contact him or her and find out the reason. In this way, we hope to increase involvement and prevent unaddressed resentments from building up.

**Future Software Development**

The NIC website as described here is a prototype. Below we describe some future possibilities that, we believe, would enhance this platform.

*Constant improvement of the NIC platform:* One of the great advantages of Internet contact is that every detail is automatically recorded and so data are automatically available for analysis. This analysis will highlight mistakes and also show organizers how to build on successes.

The feedback questionnaires that participants will be required to fill out at different stages in the contact will also give organizers an opportunity to learn from the responses and perceptions of the participants. The insights of group leaders and the supervisor, together with records of their discussions during the contact, will constitute another valuable source of information. In
this way, the NIC platform may be constantly improved and brought up to the highest levels of performance. We hope to be able to learn more about important components of the contact; for example: (1) those problems that are likely to arise during the contact; (2) the dynamic that occurs before a group member leaves the contact; (3) the profiles of successful and unsuccessful contacts. This and other feedback mechanisms create a system dedicated to constant improvement.

Bridging the language barrier: One issue that arises when coordinating meetings among groups with different native tongues is that of communication. Usually participants will be selected who can communicate through a common language – often one that is not native to either group; or translators will be provided. However, happily, software is currently being developed that will allow individuals interacting through a text-based environment to receive messages in their own language, even though those messages were originally written in another tongue. There are already a number of text translation tools currently available for use on the Internet. None has yet reached the point of refinement and accuracy needed for a successful exchange of ideas with all nuances included, but the translation programs are improving at a rapid pace (e.g., Climent et al., 2003; Coughlin, 2001). This will mean that potentially excellent participants who, because of a language barrier, are currently unable to represent their people as part of an intergroup contact, will be able to do so. Moreover, when each party is able to “speak” in his or her native language, feelings of similarity and kinship are generally enhanced.

Moving From NIC to F2F Contact: When participants feel ready to move from the NIC platform to F2F contact, this will be carried out using a graded approach. This step-by-step approach ensures a greater chance of success than an immediate transfer from online discussions to face-to-face discussions (Amichai-Hamburger & Furnham, 2006; Amichai-Hamburger & McKenna, 2006). Using this model, organizers can use a gradual process to help both the individual participants and the group become comfortable with the contact situation at each level of intimacy before moving to the next level and eventually meeting in person. The main steps in this graded contact are as follows:

1. Communicating by text only: This text-only interaction is the most common form of communication over the Internet. This stage will continue until the participant feels secure in this form of contact and his or her anxiety levels are negligible.

2. Text and image: Participants will continue to use the text method with which they feel secure, but will simultaneously view a live video image of the person with whom they are interacting. When low-level social anxiety has been established, participants will transfer to the next stage.
3. **Communicating by video and audio**: At this stage, people will still interact from their secure environment and still without physical proximity to their conversation partner. However, use of text messages by the participant will be reduced; instead he or she will communicate orally. In addition, a live image of the participant will be transferred to the other participant. Again, when a satisfactory level of comfort has been achieved, participants may progress to the next stage.

4. **F2F interaction**: This is the stage of regular F2F interaction. It is the last stage in the process that is predicted to bridge the gap successfully between text-only Internet contact and total exposure through a F2F encounter and do so in a way that continually preserves low levels of anxiety among participants. This approach has received strong backing from the research of McKenna and her colleagues (Bargh, McKenna, & Fitzimmons, 2002; McKenna et al., 2002). They found that when interactions initially start over the Internet and then move to a F2F environment, participants not only like one another more than they would were they to have initially begun their interaction in person, but when the F2F meeting does take place, it serves to heighten already strong feelings of liking and kinship.

**Emotions and contact**: Prejudice against different groups may be based on different types of negative affect; that is, different types of emotion, for example, anger, fear, guilt, envy, or disgust (Glick, 2002; Mackie & Smith, 2002). These different types of affects yield different kinds of discrimination against the outgroup: Prejudice based on fear is likely to cause a defensive reaction in order to defend the ingroup status (Neuberg & Cottrell, 2002), whereas prejudice based on guilt resulting from distress caused in the presence of the outgroup is likely to lead to avoidance (Glick, 2002). Any attempt to reduce prejudice must tackle the relevant affect. If efforts are concentrated on an irrelevant affect, for example, the diminution of outgroup fears, when the relevant affect is guilt, it is unlikely to prove effective.

When the Internet is used as a platform for contact between rival groups, it is possible to create the contact around a context that tackles the specific affect that is the basis for prejudice. If, for example, the dominant affect is disgust, the supervisor together with the teams may analyze its sources and ensure that the data bank addresses them explicitly. In addition, the supervisor and the group leader can work with the group to ensure that they transfer information to the other side, which will counteract this process.

**Building a community**: Our aim is to use the NIC platform to increase the number of Internet intergroup contacts throughout the world. The participants to these contacts will gradually become a virtual community. We plan to use our past successes to encourage our current intergroup contacts and, in a similar way, our successful graduate participants may act as role models or even mentors to our current group members. The increasing number of groups participating through the NIC will lead to a corresponding growth in the database,
so that this, too, will become an important source of information. The database will also serve as a major resource for research into intergroup conflict and may open significant opportunities for creating social change in different parts of the world.

Last Word

One of the most disturbing and harmful phenomena worldwide is that of intergroup conflict. Much needless suffering of innocent people is caught up in these disputes, and many resources and much energy are invested by those trying to either prevent these conflicts or fan them. The Contact Hypothesis was developed as a way to try to solve some of these disputes by bringing the warring factions together in an optimal environment. Despite these efforts, many difficulties have remained. We believe that the Internet will prove to be a vital tool in the effort to alleviate intergroup conflict. The Internet environment not only creates opportunities to alter perceptions, but also overcomes many of the practical difficulties involved in holding intergroup contacts. This chapter describes an innovative approach to finding solutions to intergroup conflicts through the Net Intergroup Contact platform, a website that is, at the time of writing, just ready to launch itself into this thorn-filled arena. The site was created to allow effective interaction between different groups with differing views and beliefs. The site calls on participants to follow one basic rule, to show respect for the other side through choosing their words carefully and considering the sensitivities of others. The NIC is in its early stages, and there is no doubt that it will face significant challenges in the future and will need to adapt accordingly. Our aim is to employ the NIC platform in real conflicts around the world. We see it as having a potentially important role in helping to find solutions for, for example, the Protestant–Catholic conflict in Ireland and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in the Middle East. Working together with experts in specific areas of conflict will help us to adapt the NIC platform, where necessary, to accommodate the needs of different groups. The fact that the system and the different encounters are fully documented will lead to efficiency and success in understanding the changes that need to be made to the platform and implementing them.

The Internet has created new possibilities for interaction between people and sophisticated ways to manage information. It is now our challenge to use these abilities to seek effective solutions to the intergroup conflicts around the world.

References


The Contact Hypothesis Reconsidered: Interacting Via Internet


