THE SCIENCE BEHIND KIN

Dr. Jonathan Kanter

The Science Behind Kin
Dr. Jonathan Kanter

The science of prejudice reduction has been a topic of study for over 100 years and is complicated. However, scientists largely agree that the single most powerful prejudice reduction tool is inter-group contact (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). To put it simply, prejudice reduction requires developing authentic intergroup relationships and social connections. We must spend time with each other in order to understand each other. Thus, our segregated society has created a major obstacle that prevents implementation of our most powerful prejudice reduction tool. However, even when cross-group interactions do occur, not all such interactions are equally effective at reducing prejudice, and some interactions make things worse (MacInnis & Page-Gould, 2015).

According to science, the interpersonal exchanges that form the basis of intergroup contact must be experienced as equitable by both groups (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). However, because of our highly segregated and oppressive society, much naturally occurring contact between people of color and white people is not equitable at all. For example, white police officers who patrol Black communities achieve frequent intergroup contact, but the white officer is almost always in a position of power in relation to the Black community member. This kind of contact does not predictably reduce police prejudice. Many other examples of inequitable contact exist across employment, legal, educational, and even volunteer settings. In all of these settings, frequent contact occurs, but the white person in the interaction is often in a position of power while the Black person is in a position of vulnerability, and such contact does not reliably reduce prejudice and discrimination.

This problem, which may be called lack of reciprocity in vulnerability, even occurs in spaces specifically designed to reduce prejudice! For example, diversity workshops are explicitly designed to reduce bias and improve communication, but there is little evidence that typical diversity trainings are effective (Bezrukova & Spell, 2012). It is typical in diversity workshops to invite participants of color to share memories and events from their lives in which they have experienced discrimination (or a workshop facilitator, who is a person of color, does so him/herself), in an attempt to educate the white participants by learning about real peoples' real experiences. Such efforts may be seen as attempts to implement intergroup contact but they often backfire. The problem is that the Black participants experience interpersonal vulnerability in the workshop when they share their stories, but this is not reciprocated by the white participants, and this can deeply and negatively impact the Black participants. This process can also inhibit the growth of the white participants, whose only task is to passively listen and bear witness to vulnerable stories shared by participants of color.

Discussing racially themed topics is particularly fraught with peril. White people are likely to underestimate the severity of ongoing discrimination and disparities experienced by people of color (Kraus, Rucker, & Richeson, 2017), and--in an effort to not appeared biased--present as racially colorblind (Apfelbaum, Norton, & Summers, 2012). This, however, backfires and is perceived as biased and off-putting by many people of color (Apfelbaum, Sommers, & Norton, 2008), who would benefit if the white participants were able to express more honesty and vulnerability about their experiences of race and racism.

Additional obstacles to successful intergroup interaction must be discussed. Because of segregation, many white people do not have authentic relationships with people of color in which they learn to appreciate them as individuals. Instead, their primary exposure to people of color is through biased media and the larger cultural milieu. These sources of information are infused with negative and inaccurate stereotypes of people of color, specifically related to being different, inferior, and dangerous (Devine, 1989; Dixon & Maddox, 2005). The end result, for many white people, is that when they are interacting with people of color they are at risk for expressing prejudice and stereotypes, such as being more likely to perceive anger in a Black person even when there is none (Halberstadt, Castro, Chu, Lozada, & Sims, 2018) or engaging in various microaggressions (Sue et al., 2007). The white person is likely to enter the interaction with some degree of inter-group anxiety and threat (Britt,

Bonieci, Vescio, Biernat, & Brown, 1996; Stephan & Stephan, 1985), including increased physiological markers of anxiety such as cortisol (Trawalter, Adam, Chase-Lansdale, & Richeson, 2012). This physiological arousal interferes with accurate empathy and perspective taking, which are crucial for successful social interaction (Elfenbein & Ambady, 2002).

The person of color in the interaction is likely to be negatively impacted by the anxiety of the white person (Holoien, 2016). Instead of displaying indicators that one is safe and open to the other person, the white person may be displaying subtle, non-verbal cues indicating bias and anxiety outside their own awareness, such as poor eye contact (Kawakami et al., 2014), less gesturing and more rigidity (Trawalter & Richeson, 2008), and less smiling (McConnell & Leibold, 2001). With such biases and difficulties likely in their interaction partner, the person of color in the interaction may be preoccupied by concerns about stereotype threat (Steele & Aronson, 1995), fears of being misunderstood (Shelton, Richeson, & Salvatore, 2005), or reasonable predictions that the white person will treat them in a biased and prejudiced manner (Shelton, Douglass, Garcia, Yip, & Trail, 2014). The end result is that these interactions are likely to be experienced as unsuccessful by people of color, to produce added stress and cognitive depletion (which can affect work quality and performance; Richeson & Trawalter, 2005; Richeson, Trawalter, & Shelton, 2005; Trawalter, Adam, Chase-Lansdale, & Richeson, 2012), and to contribute to feelings of exclusion and belonging in work settings (Shore et al., 2011).

Thus, while intergroup contact is critical for prejudice reduction, it must be implemented in intentional ways that establish equity, minimize other obstacles, and maximize the benefits. KIN does this. First, a key insight into the solution is provided by psychological science on how close and trusting relationships form. According to this science, equity in close and trusting relationships involves reciprocity: both members of the interaction must experience and express vulnerability (Sprecher, Treger, Wondra, Hilaire, & Wallpe, 2013) and both must respond well to each other's vulnerability (Reis & Shaver, 1988). Many research studies have documented that when this happens – when both members experience vulnerability and both members respond well to each other's vulnerability – then closeness develops between two people. One of the founders of relationship science, Harry Reis, has suggested that this process is so important to relationships it should be known as the fundamental principle of relationship science (Reis & Clark, 2013).

KIN implements this fundamental principle. In fact, KIN's procedure is remarkably similar to the key scientific studies that established this finding. Specifically, early research on the fundamental principle involved the "closeness generating" procedure, in which strangers reciprocally responded to 36 questions that prompted increasingly vulnerable responses on a turn-by-turn basis (Aron, Melinat, Aron, Vallone, & Bator, 1997). This procedure works to quickly produce feelings of friendship; in fact, it became known as the "fast friends" procedure. The key is that the vulnerability is staged and controlled - it starts with relatively easy questions which get incrementally more vulnerable and there is not a lot of opportunity for discussion of topics that are not in the prompted questions. This provides both vulnerability and safety at the same time, allowing participants to step up to increasing levels of vulnerability gradually and together, without unpredictable difficulties.

Importantly, this procedure works when the partners are of different races (Davies et al., 2011; Page-Gould, Mendoza-Denton, & Tropp, 2008; Shelton, Trail, West, & Bergsieker, 2010). For example, Page-Gould and colleagues found that three "fast-friends" sessions one week apart between white and Latinx college students produced increases in closeness, decreases in inter-racial anxiety for both groups, and decreases in prejudice for the white participants.

KIN smartly harnesses this procedure and adapts it for adults in online interactions in 2022. KIN's conversation guidelines provide a perfect framework for two individuals to get to know each other in a safe setting, with mutual sharing and vulnerability. Furthermore, KIN smartly avoids prompting the partners to talk about issues of race and racism until late in the process. This is an important innovation that will prevent the early harms that often occur when intergroup contact addresses these themes before safety and trust have been established.

Overall, KIN provides exactly what science suggests is important: To truly reduce prejudice, we must expand our social circles and create opportunities for real and meaningful contact and connections. The goal cannot be token exposure to another group or superficial relating. Said simply, the goal is to develop real relationships, and the key in doing so is to make sure, as KIN does, that exchanges are characterized by mutual sharing and vulnerability, not self-interest, power differentials, or one-sided sharing. Research documents that when this happens, prejudice reduction results, and both members of the relationship benefit. Such equitable and vulnerable contact facilitates closeness which in turn improves empathy and perspective taking (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2008).

- Apfelbaum, E. P., Norton, M. I., & Sommers, S. R. (2012). Racial color blindness: Emergence, practice, and implications. Current Directions in Psychological Science, 21(3), 205-209. doi:10.1177/0963721411434980
- Apfelbaum, E. P., Sommers, S. R., & Norton, M. I. (2008). Seeing race and seeming racist? Evaluating strategic colorblindness in social interaction. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 95(4), 918-922. doi:10.1037/a0011990
- Bezrukova, K., & Spell, C. S. (2012). Reviewing diversity training: Where we have been and where we should go. Academy of Management Learning & Education, 11(2), 207–227. doi:10.5465/amle.2008.009
- Britt, T. W., Bonieci, K. A., Vescio, T. K., Biernat, M., & Brown, L. M. (1996). Intergroup anxiety: A person x situation approach. Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin, 22(11), 1177–1188. https://doi.org/10.1177/01461672962211008
- Davies, K., Tropp, A., Aron, A. Pettigrew, & Wright, (2011). Cross-Group friendships and intergroup attitudes. Personality and Social Psychology Review, 15(4), 332-351. doi: 10.1177/1088868311411103
- Devine, P. G. (1989). Stereotypes and prejudice: Their automatic and controlled components. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 56(1), 5–18. http://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.56.1.5
- Dixon, T. L., & Maddox, K. B. (2005). Skin tone, crime news, and social reality judgments: Priming the stereotype of the dark and dangerous black criminal. Journal of Applied Social Psychology, 35(8), 1555–1570. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1559-1816.2005.tb02184.x
- Elfenbein, H. A., & Ambady, N. (2002). On the universality and cultural specificity of emotion recognition: a meta-analysis. Psychological Bulletin, 128(2), 203-235. doi:10.1037//0033-2909.128.2.203
- Halberstadt, A. G., Castro, V. L., Chu, Q., Lozada, F. T., & Sims, C. M. (2018). Preservice teachers' racialized emotion recognition, anger bias, and hostility attributions. Contemporary Educational Psychology, 54, 125-138. doi:10.1016/j.cedpsych.2018.06.004
- Holoien, D. S. (2016). Whites' desire to affiliate and perceived understanding in interracial interactions. Journal of Experimental Social Psychology, 62, 7-16. doi:10.1016/j.jesp.2015.08.004)
- Kawakami, K., Williams, A., Sidhu, D., Choma, B. L., Rodriguez-Bailón, R., Cañadas, E., … Hugenberg, K. (2014). An eye for the I: Preferential attention to the eyes of ingroup members. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 107(1), 1–20. doi:10.1037/a0036838
- Kraus, M. W., Rucker, J. M., & Richeson, J. A. (2017). Americans misperceive racial economic equality. Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, 114(39), 10324-10331.
- MacInnis, C. C., & Page-Gould, E. (2015). How can intergroup interaction be bad if intergroup contact is good? Exploring and reconciling an apparent paradox in the science of intergroup relations. Perspectives on Psychological Science, 10(3), 307-327.
- McConnell, A. R., & Leibold, J. M. (2001). Relations among the Implicit Association Test, discriminatory behavior, and explicit measures of racial attitudes. Journal of Experimental Social Psychology, 37(5), 435-442. doi:10.1006/jesp.2000.1470
- Page-Gould, E., Mendoza-Denton, R., & Tropp, L.R.(2008). With a little help from my cross-group friend: reducing anxiety in intergroup contexts through cross-group friendship. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 95(5), 1080–94.
- Pettigrew,T.F., & Tropp,L.R.(2006). A meta-analytic test of intergroup contact theory. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology ,90(5), 751–783.
- Pettigrew, T. F., & Tropp, L. R. (2008). How does intergroup contact reduce prejudice? Meta-analytic tests of three mediators. European journal of social psychology, 38(6), 922-934.
- Plant, E. A., & Devine, P. G. (2003). The antecedents and implications of interracial anxiety. Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin, 29(6), 790-801. doi:10.1177/0146167203029006011
- Reis, H. & Clark, M.(2013). Responsiveness. New York, New York: The Oxford Handbook of Close Relationships.
- Reis, H. T., & Shaver, P. (1988). Intimacy as an interpersonal process. In S. Duck (Ed.), Handbook of personal relationships: Theory, research and interventions (pp. 367-389). Chichester, UK: Wiley. doi:N/A
- Richeson, J. A., & Trawalter, S. (2005). Why do interracial interactions impair executive function? A resource depletion account. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 88(6), 934-947. doi:10.1037/0022-3514.88.6.934
- Richeson, J. A., Trawalter, S., & Shelton, J. N. (2005). African Americans' implicit racial attitudes and the depletion of executive function after interracial interactions. Social Cognition, 23(4), 336-352. doi:10.1521/soco.2005.23.4.336
- Sprecher, S., Treger, T., Wondra, J.D., Hilaire,N., & Wallpe,K. (2013). Taking turns: Reciprocal self-disclosure promotes liking in initial interactions. Journal of Experimental Social Psychology, 49(5), 860-866.doi: 10.1016/j.jesp.2013.03.017
- Shelton, J. N., Douglass, S., Garcia, R. L., Yip, T., & Trail, T. E. (2014). Feeling (mis) understood and intergroup friendships in interracial interactions. Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin, 40(9), 1193-1204.
- Shelton, J. N., Trail, T. E., West, T. V., & Bergsieker, H. B. (2010). From strangers to friends: The interpersonal process model of intimacy in developing interracial friendships. Journal of Social and Personal Relationships, 27(1), 71-90. Doi:10.1170265407509346422
- Shelton, J. N., Richeson, J. A., & Salvatore, J. (2005). Expecting to be the target of prejudice: Implications for interethnic interactions. Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin, 31(9), 1189-1202.
- Shore, L. M., Randel, A. E., Chung, B. G., Dean, M. A., Holcombe Ehrhart, K., & Singh, G. (2011). Inclusion and diversity in work groups: A review and model for future research. Journal of management, 37(4), 1262-1289.
- Steele, C. M. & Aronson, J. (1995). Stereotype threat and the intellectual test performance of African Americans. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 69, 797-811. doi:N/A
- Stephan, W. G., & Stephan, C. W. (1985). Intergroup anxiety. Journal of Social Issues, 41(3), 157–175. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-4560.1985.tb01134.x
- Sue, D. W., Capodilupo, C. M., Torino, G. C., Bucceri, J. M., Holder, A., Nadal, K. L., & Esquilin, M. (2007). Racial microaggressions in everyday life: Implications for clinical practice. American Psychologist, 62(4), 271-286.
- Trawalter, S., Adam, E. K., Chase-Lansdale, P. L., & Richeson, J. A. (2012). Concerns about appearing prejudiced get under the skin: Stress responses to interracial contact in the moment and across time. Journal of Experimental Social Psychology, 48(3), 682–693. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jesp.2011.12.003
- Trawalter, S. & Richeson, J. A. (2008). Let's talk about race, baby! When Whites' and Blacks' interracial contact experiences diverge. Journal of Experimental Social Psychology, 44(4), 1214-1217. doi:10.1016/j.jesp.2008.03.013
- Turner, R. N., Hewstone, M., Voci, A., Paolini, S., & Christ, O. (2007). Reducing prejudice via direct and extended cross-group friendship. European Review of Social Psychology, 18212-255. doi:10.1080/10463280701680297
- Welker, K. M., Slatcher, R. B., Baker, L., & Aron, A. (2014). Creating positive out-group attitudes through intergroup couple friendships and implications for compassionate love. Journal of Social and Personal Relationships, 31(5), 706-725. doi:10.1177/0265407514522369