

## **Intercultural Relations and Adaptation in Canada: The Role of Contact and Discrimination**

John W. Berry  
Queen's University, Canada, and  
National Research University Higher School of Economics, Russian Federation, and

Dmitry Grigoryev  
National Research University Higher School of Economics, Russian Federation

*The findings and interpretations expressed in this Insight are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of the Environics Institute for Survey Research or any of its survey research partners or sponsors.*

### **Acknowledgements**

*The authors are grateful to the Environics Institute for Survey Research for sharing their original raw data from their [Race Relations in Canada 2019](#) survey, conducted in partnership with the Canadian Race Relations Foundation. The further analyses for this study was supported by the Russian Science Foundation (project № 20-18-00268).*

*This brief report supplements the main report by Environics Institute, which should be read as background to it.*

### **Introduction**

In this report, we seek to explain how and why intergroup contact works to improve intergroup relations, using a representative sample that included racialized and non-racialized individuals in Canada. At the same time, we also examine the role of a negative aspect of this contact (i.e., discrimination) in undermining these relations.

The mutual adaptation of groups living together has been studied for decades by researchers from many disciplines including demography, economics, political science, sociology and psychology. The overarching framework used in many of these studies has been rooted in the concept of *acculturation*, which is a process of cultural, social and psychological changes that starts with contact between groups, and results in various outcomes, such as economic success, social engagement, cultural competence and

personal wellbeing. These different outcomes to living together in these intercultural settings have been classified as *psychological* adaptation ('feeling well') and *sociocultural* adaptation ('doing well'), and *intercultural* adaptation ('relating well').

## Contact

One way of conceptualising the consequences of contact has been formulated as the 'contact hypothesis'. The core idea is that the more intergroup contact individuals have, then the more they will develop and express positive attitudes and behaviours towards individuals in the groups with which they are in contact. The contact hypothesis is one of the most enduring ideas in the field of intergroup relations. A good deal of research has been carried out to test the contact hypothesis internationally. In a large meta-analysis of this work, researchers have examined hundreds of studies of the contact hypothesis, which came from many countries and many diverse settings (in schools, at work, and in experiments). Their findings provide general support for the contact hypothesis: intergroup contact does generally relate negatively to prejudice, and promotes mutual acceptance (*intercultural adaptation*) in both dominant and non-dominant samples.

However, less is known about any relationship between contact personal wellbeing (*psychological adaptation*). In this report we are also concerned with discovering a possible relationship between the intercultural contacts that individuals have, and their psychological adaptation, something that was not examined in the main Environics Institute report. One basis

for this possibility is the finding in much recent research on personal wellbeing that extensive social contacts and networks promote the psychological wellbeing of individuals in many settings.

## Discrimination

In contrast to a positive contact experience promoting adaptations, the experience of discrimination is known to undermine adaptations during intercultural encounters. The effects of such a negative contact have been studied frequently among non-dominant peoples, but less often among the dominant sectors of the society. For non-dominant peoples, research has shown that the negative outcomes are both social (such as exclusion from education, work and housing) and psychological (such as reduced self-esteem, lower life satisfaction and poorer mental health). Being excluded from the resources required for personal wellbeing limits life opportunities, including income, and access to health and social supports. However, for dominant group members, the experience of discrimination may be due more to feelings of resentment towards others in the society than to actual exclusion. This may lead them to develop higher levels of racism and lower acceptance of multiculturalism, as well as lower self-esteem.

## Findings in this Report

This report provides further analyses of findings in the original Environics Institute survey, using the raw data supplied to us. It concentrates on the role of intercultural contact in the quality of intergroup relations (intercultural adaptation) and in personal

wellbeing (psychological adaptation). It supplements the findings of the main report by using more complex statistics to show how these variables relate to each other, and to provide a framework for the explanation of these relations. The additional analyses explore these relationships in two main sub-samples: *racialised* peoples (such as Chinese, Black, South Asian and Indigenous Peoples); and non-racialised *others* (those of other, mainly European, backgrounds).

The Environics Institute survey sampled the population of Canada (over 18 years of age) online in April and May, 2019; the total sample was 3,111 (1,802 racialised, and 1,309 non-racialised individuals). The racialized sample included those of Chinese, Black, and South Asian backgrounds, as well as Indigenous Peoples; the non-racialised sample was made up of those of mainly European backgrounds.

For a positive contact, we included measures of contact frequency, contact quality and number of 'other' group friends. For a negative contact, we included the perception of discrimination against the individual and their group. We assessed intercultural adaptation with scales of modern racism and multicultural ideology, and for psychological adaptation we used scales of life satisfaction, and self-rated physical and mental health.

There were some significant differences in means between the two samples: higher means for the racialised sample for discrimination, contact frequency, multicultural ideology, contact number friends, and a marginally lower mean for contact quality.

The three contact variables were positively correlated, which is sufficient to create a single combined contact variable. The two discrimination variables were also combined into a single one. The adaptation measures showed the expected relationships between modern racism and multicultural ideology, and between life satisfaction and health; however these four measures are kept separate in our analyses.

The best way to obtain an overall picture of how all these variables are inter-related is to use a model with the combined contact variable, and discrimination predicting intercultural adaptation (made up of modern racism and multicultural ideology) and psychological adaptation (made up of life satisfaction and personal health).

*Contact.* Our main finding is that a positive contact (especially the quality of contact) supports and promotes *both* forms of adaptation. The fact that this is the case for both kinds of adaptation, constitutes a new set of findings in the corpus of research on the contact hypothesis. While it is common to find a positive relationship between this contact and positive intergroup relations (intercultural adaptation), the finding that this contact is also associated with better psychological outcomes is new. This benefit of a positive contact for both forms of adaptation means that 'relating well' and 'feeling well' go together, and can both flow from intercultural contact.

Of further interest is the finding that these relationships hold for *both* racialised and the non-racialised groups in contact, representing a mutuality in intercultural relations. This pattern shows that when one

group likes the other, the other reciprocates this positive affect. The finding that this outcome is the case for both racialised and the non-racialised groups in Canada indicates that there is no trade-off, or 'zero-sum' character to contact; everyone benefits from contact.

*Discrimination.* The experience of discrimination was assessed by discrimination as perceived as being directed to oneself, and as being directed toward ones own group; these were combined to yield a general discrimination variable. However, when looked at separately, group discrimination was a much larger contributor to adaptation in the racialised group, while personal discrimination was larger in the non-racialised group. This difference may be a consequence of institutional racism likely affecting the racialized group as a whole. Another possibility is that there is higher identification with the group (i.e., feeling of group affiliation) among the racialised group. As a result, the racialised group may likely perceive discrimination as due more to group inequality and exclusion, while the non-racialised group deals with this treatment in an individual manner.

## **Conclusion**

These findings provide support for the contact hypothesis, using the three individual measures of a positive contact. In addition to showing support for the usual relationship between this contact and mutual acceptance (intercultural adaptation), we also show that this contact is positively related to wellbeing (psychological adaptation). That is, contact promotes both more harmonious relations

between groups, and also promotes higher levels of psychological wellbeing.