Book Review
Inspired by Thomas F. Pettigrew


In the era of the twenty-four hour news cycle, reports of war, violence, and conflict have led researchers and policy-makers, as well as the general public, to becoming increasingly concerned with strategies to alleviate tensions between groups and promote intergroup harmony. In response to the growing need to understand the complex motives behind intergroup conflict and suggest strategies for social change, researchers have turned to the theories of Thomas F. Pettigrew. Raised during the time of institutionalized racial segregation, and influenced by the work of his academic mentor Gordon Allport, Pettigrew developed ground-breaking theories regarding the importance of positive intergroup contact that continue to be of use today. As a member of The Society for the Psychological Study of Social Issues (SPSSI) for over fifty years, Pettigrew was one of the early scholar-activists. In the spirit of Kurt Lewin’s “full-cycle” approach, Pettigrew applied his theories to prejudice and relative deprivation across the globe, examining Apartheid in South Africa and U.S. public school desegregation from the 1950s-70s. He continues to advocate for socially responsible research and interventions in the U.S., South Africa, and Europe. Inspired by Pettigrew’s life’s work, over forty prominent researchers, including Pettigrew himself, contributed eighteen articles to one book in the SPSSI series focusing on Social Issues and Interventions published Blackwell Publishers.

In the introduction to *Improving Intergroup Relations* the editors and historian Frances Cherry eloquently outline the scope of Pettigrew’s work, which is no small feat when you take into account the fact that his work spans over sixty years and includes over 400 publications. In addition to his contributions regarding contact theory, Pettigrew’s social psychology focuses on
topics such as relative deprivation, social identity, emotion research, prejudice, and power relations.

The editors divide the contributors’ essays into five sections. The progression of the content of each section guides the reader to a better understanding of how people identify, how identifying with a particular group in a particular context can affect intergroup relations, and how improving intergroup relations can lead to positive social change. The organization of the content in this manner enables readers outside of social psychology to gain a better understanding of how contact with diverse others can affect emotions, cognitions, and behaviors before delving into research on social action. For example, by first gaining insight into the effects of threat (see Stephan, Renfro, & Davis) and trust (see Tropp), the reader is better equipped to understand the complexities related to Pettigrew’s concept of “friendship potential” for intergroup harmony.

Parts two through five of the book provide the audience with an understanding regarding nuances of interventions, not just blanket statements as prescriptions for all situations and groups. What I find most interesting in this section is the authors’ descriptions of their own relationship to Pettigrew and his influence on their work. The chapter content serves as a testament to the growing body of scholarship and the advances in social psychological theory and research related to intergroup relations.

In the final chapter of the book, Pettigrew asserts that while his research can influence social policy and benefit the oppressed, he did not aspire to politicize social psychology. I appreciate the way Pettigrew acknowledged that there are value assumptions embedded in research and theory. He paid heed to the feminist epistemological approach of recognizing one’s own standpoint and the effect of his personal history on his research interests and desire to affect specific policy. In response to critics’ claims of potential subjective bias, Pettigrew stated that
pseudo-objectivity is “a disservice to the discipline, the researchers, their work, and the consumers of their work” (p. 285). Pettigrew argued for sound scientific research that simultaneously recognized researchers’ values and pushed for methodological and analytical innovation. He asserted that science and values have a place in scholarship. His final word is one of great optimism, “Hopefully, these empirically grounded insights will help shape policy for a world less torn by intergroup strife” (p. 299). He closes the chapter with a discussion of the six interrelated core themes he sees as emerging from modern research in intergroup relations.

As a social justice researcher urging students to become politically active, I often assign SPSSI publications and encourage students to review the SPSSI Advocacy Center online. Within much of this literature is the legacy of Thomas Pettigrew and his contemporaries. Young scholars can benefit from this book and others in the series because they provide a historical backdrop for present-day research. By starting with an understanding of the psychological roots of a social problem, we are able to develop theories and actions that are more appropriately suited to alleviating a particular social issue. Since first reading Improving Intergroup Relations, I have shared chapters with students seeking evidence-based suggestions for improving intergroup relations at service-learning sites, with student researchers attempting to better explain research findings, and with colleagues interested in improving campus collaborations.

In the SPSSI tradition, several of the authors explicitly outline the potential applications of their research. For example Van Laar, Levin, and Sidanius describe the importance of intergroup contact in campus housing, pointing to the WISE program at University of Michigan as successfully applying evidence-based practices. Jonas and Mummendey explain the importance of referencing a shared superordinate identity when collaborating with diverse others in order to facilitate positive intergroup relations and outsider support, which can assist in
shaping socially appropriate policies. Policymakers and practitioners will likely find the
descriptions of the research accessible and meaningful.

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