

Critique Paper:

Brewer, M. B. (1996). *Intergroup relations*. Pacific Grove, CA: Open University Press.  
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Marilynn Brewer's book *Intergroup Relations* is a textbook that seeks to provide structure to the social psychological study of intergroup relations, the "causes and consequences of the distinction between ingroups ...and outgroups...the apparently universal propensity to differentiate the social world into 'us' and 'them' " (p. ix, Brewer). This book provides a comprehensive look at major features of intergroup relationships including ethnocentrism, discrimination, prejudice, cooperation, and large scale conflict.

These major features, and cited supporting studies, are primarily framed within the binary distinction of 'us' and 'them' identified by Brewer in the preface to this book. While there are exceptions to this initial framing represented in brief sections on multiculturalism (Assimilation versus cultural pluralism: is multiculturalism possible?), dual identities and cross-categorization, these are exceptions to the binary model otherwise employed. Based on the construction of the text, it is difficult to know if this binary distinction is representative of existing studies, existing findings, or author selection. Coming from a self-professed multicultural country, Canada, I was surprised that Brewer did not cite field studies associated with this existing phenomena, instead raising the issue as an abstract theoretical question. The reason I question the emphasis on a binary positioning of ingroups and outgroups is that it is important to know if this is how groups understand their relationships or if this is rather a reflection of existing methods, measures and theoretical frameworks available to researchers. A coarse estimation of intergroup dynamics is necessary to move the field forward, but it is worthwhile to know if there is room for more sensitive measures to discover new aspects of intergroup relationships.

Overall, *Intergroup relations* reads like a narrated literature review. While Brewer provides summaries to the findings that she cites, there is little explicit synthesis between findings of cited studies and little attempt to derive new theory. Distinct models and frameworks are introduced that provide useful tools to understand how the social psychology field has approached intergroup phenomena, but in the attempt to summarize these models, Brewer has a tendency to generalize findings across groups that have potentially distinct cultural and historical characteristics. For example, when describing the recategorization model of intergroup contact, Brewer suggests that merging the group identities of two previously separate departments into a single functional unit is equivalent to integrating previously segregated male and female workgroups into a single unit. (p.101, *ibid.*). Evidence for this equivalence however is not provided in the research cited. This is also apparent in generalizations that occur between experimental studies of children at camp, i.e. the much cited Robbers Cave Study, and social-historical phenomena such as racism.

It appears to me that much of the book either overtly or indirectly refers to American race relations, almost exclusively relationships between African American and Caucasian people. However, there is little attempt to situate race relations within a cultural, historical, and economic framework would foregrounds slavery as a key component of these intergroup interactions. Additionally, there is little consideration of what intergroup dynamics look like when there are a multitude of salient groups. This consideration is necessary if the work is to move from a Caucasian-centric perspective to one that considers depth and breadth of America's immigrant culture and history.

Something that I had hoped to see in this book was a consideration of the role that media and consumer culture plays in the development of ingroup and outgroup dynamics. Recent framings of the American 2004 election pitted latte drinkers against SUV drivers, New York Times readers against Fox News watchers, those who watched *Fahrenheit 911* against those who watched *The Passion of Christ*. It appears in many cases that the salience of these ingroup/outgroup distinctions were externally generated and ascribed to by groups as a secondary mechanism. This may not be the case, but regardless, it is useful to know if media and popular culture do play a mediating role in intergroup dynamics.

This critique has been especially difficult to write as I am relying on this one book to be representative of work conducted on intergroup relations. As such, it is difficult to compare it to other work in this area. I do think that the book does an excellent job of preparing me to make future comparisons and investigations as the presented theoretical positions were clearly described and illustrated.

#### References:

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