

John Dixon's Key Note Address in the afternoon of Thursday 9th April

Title: The past, present and future of research on intergroup contact and social change

Abstract: The 'contact hypothesis' proposes that interaction between members of different groups reduces intergroup prejudice and discrimination, particularly when it occurs under favourable circumstances. Since the early decades of the last century, research based on this idea has informed interventions to promote social change in many societies. In this paper, I trace the history of this enterprise, discuss its major achievements, challenges and limitations, and propose some future directions for the field. In a world where globalization, migration and immigration – allied to the rise of new forms of social media and electronic communication - are bringing members of formerly isolated groups into new relations of proximity, intimacy, and interaction, intergroup contact is likely to remain a fundamental social psychological topic in the coming years. However, if contact research is to fulfil its original promise, I believe that we now need to develop the field in a number of ways. Among other things, we need to pay closer attention to: (1) the limitations of the prejudice reduction model of social change on which most work is based; (2) the experiences and perspectives of minority group participants, whose voices have often been marginalised in the literature; (3) the role of negative, instrumental and hierarchical intergroup encounters in everyday life settings; and (4) the social and psychological processes through which interventions to promote desegregation are often offset by countervailing practices of (re)segregation, marginalization, and exclusion. Perhaps most important, however, we need to reconnect contact research to the fundamental political problems of institutional change and social justice that inspired its earliest exponents.