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Intergroup Interventions as a STRATCOM strategy

Abstract

NATO's strategic communication is one of the most rapidly advancing tools in the field of information warfare in recent years. Its ability to act on the cognitive sphere makes it highly effective in reinforcing military power among civilians and military personnel. The interest in information warfare that has arisen since the invasion of Crimea has led to the development of strategic communication capabilities. Based on a review of some theories of social and group psychology, we will show a series of intergroup interventions that have proven effective in reducing prejudice and animosity between groups and thus advancing conflict management, in order to strengthen the capabilities of all the elements that make up NATO's action and in line with the narratives to be conveyed.

Keywords

Narratives, Cognitive, Group psychology, Prejudice, Information warfare.

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I Introduction

We find ourselves in a global environment marked by the speed of information, social polarisation and rapid technological change. Strategic communication (STRATCOM) has become a key tool for influencing, coordinating and projecting power and identity in the 21st century. The STRATCOM concept is a comprehensive approach that coordinates all media and communication channels to achieve long-term objectives, whether in civil or military contexts.

In the civilian world, STRATCOM is used by governments, international organisations and companies to build trust, manage crises, shape public perceptions and align communication with their strategic objectives of development, diplomacy or institutional reputation. In the military sphere, on the other hand, strategic communication is used as an increasingly common component of soft and hard power, supporting psychological operations, countering enemy disinformation and strengthening national and international support in conflict or security scenarios.

The need for STRATCOM is now more pressing than ever: hybrid wars, disinformation campaigns, terrorism, cyberattacks, geopolitical tensions and social challenges require responses that go beyond physical or diplomatic action, with effective, transparent narratives that reflect a deep understanding of the information environment. In this context, mastering strategic communication is not only useful but essential for the stability, security, and sustainable influence of any relevant actor on the global stage.

In the following pages, we will review STRATCOM capabilities and their relationship to the dissemination of narratives, the relationships between group psychology and the cognitive realm, as well as a review of studies of intergroup interventions that have been shown to generate positive influence and assist in the de-escalation of conflict between groups, which are the usual objectives of information warfare.

To this end, we will conduct a literature review that analyses, on the one hand, the current situation of narrative warfare and military applications in the cognitive sphere and, on the other, reviews studies that have addressed aspects related to intergroup psychology and prejudice, from their inception to the present day, in the civil and military contexts.

The methodology followed has been a systematic search through major databases such as SciELO, PubMed and Google Scholar.

The main objective of this research is to analyse the impact of intergroup prejudice on relations between groups in the context of war and non-war conflicts and to compare it with the current strategies of NATO's STRATCOM directive. Specific objectives include analysing STRATCOM's capabilities, reviewing narrative strategies and their influence on intergroup conflict relations, identifying other group psychology processes that influence intergroup relations, and exploring and detailing different intergroup intervention initiatives that have been carried out to date in war and non-war conflicts.

2 STRATCOM and its capabilities

The official definition of strategic communication or STRATCOM according to document PO(2009)0141 (NATO, 2009) encompasses the use of different information capabilities—such as Public Diplomacy, Public Affairs, and INFO OPS, among others—to support NATO's objectives.

Antolín (2017) goes even further in defining NATO's STRATCOM strategic objectives:

'[...] the planned, coordinated and integrated use of all communication capabilities and means available to the sender in support of their strategic objectives, whether political, diplomatic, economic or military, and in the pursuit of an improvement in image, reputation, perception or knowledge on the part of the receiver' (Antolín, 2017, p. 39).

It can therefore be deduced that, in STRATCOM, information and communication are neither neutral nor impartial, as they respond to corporate objectives. This type of communication takes place in a competitive environment, which implies that there are one or more agents with conflicting interests, trying to win the goodwill or influence of a third party. To this end, communication functions must be coordinated in the sense that there must be consistency in the different actions of an organisation and a single message must be conveyed. Finally, Silvela (2017) points out that there must also be consistency between the actions and the messages conveyed.

Within STRATCOM, there are various mechanisms that we will briefly detail in order to understand its capabilities:

Public diplomacy in NATO operates at the highest political level and is the set of strategies, activities and communications used to explain its policies, objectives and actions to the general public, with the aim of generating understanding, trust and support both within and outside member countries. To this end, it generates narratives through social media or media campaigns, conferences, the production of audiovisual material, reports or programmes of visits to NATO facilities, among others. This narrative seeks to convey ideas of identity or common objectives that seek to influence target audiences. Public diplomacy is led by the Public Diplomacy Division.

Unlike Public Diplomacy, which has a broader and more strategic focus, Public Affairs is primarily focused on the military and operational environment, without compromising security. It is NATO's official communication to the public and the media and reports on policies, decisions and strategic objectives. It is managed by the Public Diplomacy Division, this time at the civilian level, in Brussels.

Military Public Affairs refers to all information related to the Alliance's military activities, policies, operations, structures and capabilities that is officially and openly disclosed to the public, without compromising security or operational effectiveness. This disclosure takes place through press releases, official reports or documents, statements by the Secretary General or military commanders, social media, press conferences and official websites. Examples include the disclosure of joint exercises,

the number of troops deployed on missions on the eastern flank, and cooperation with international partners. Military public information in NATO is primarily directed by its military spokesperson and coordinated from the Alliance's military command structure at SHAPE (Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe) military headquarters. The difference between Public Affairs and Military Public Affairs in NATO lies mainly in who executes them, what they communicate, and which audience they target.

Information Operations (INFO OPS) are a military capability designed to integrate and coordinate the use of various information tools to affect, influence, protect or exploit the adversary's information and information systems in support of the Alliance's military objectives (NATO, 2018). These are operations aimed at acting in the information environment with objectives such as: protecting the freedom of action of Alliance countries in the information environment; generating behaviours, perceptions and attitudes approved by the NATO Council to reinforce, convince or encourage support for NATO objectives; and countering the adversary's propaganda and the command and control functions and capabilities that support their opinion-forming and decision-making.

Therefore, the objective is not only to communicate, but also to influence the perceptions, decisions and behaviours of key actors: adversaries, the local population, neutral actors or allies. INFO OPS are the responsibility of the Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR) and his staff at SHAPE and have an Information Operations Branch (J9), which is responsible for planning and coordinating these operations. In missions and exercises, each NATO military operation has an INFO OPS Officer who is part of the joint planning team.

As with all other STRATCOM actions, NATO INFO OPS must respect international law and the rules of engagement and follow ethical behaviour that is free from falsehoods or propaganda.

Psychological Operations (PSYOPS) in NATO are a military capability whose objective is to influence the perceptions, emotions, attitudes and behaviours of specific audiences in order to support military and strategic objectives (NATO, 2007). Specifically, they focus on the planning and execution of messages aimed at audiences such as enemy forces, the local population or neutral actors, in order to deter the adversary, gain support among the civilian population, promote stability and cooperation in conflict zones or weaken the enemy's will to fight. Messages can be distributed through print media (leaflets, posters), radio, TV, social media or even loudspeakers on the ground.

Overall responsibility lies with SACEUR, and the specialised team is located within SHAPE, under the Information Operations (J9) section, which coordinates PSYOPS as part of the information strategy. Some NATO member countries have specialised PSYOPS units that are integrated into multinational operations, such as the 1st NATO PSYOPS Group or PSYOPS units from countries such as the US, the UK and Poland, among others. These units can be deployed on missions such as KFOR (Kosovo) or the Enhanced Forward Presence on the eastern flank.

Civil-Military Cooperation (CIMIC) is the function that enables interaction and cooperation between military forces and civilian actors such as local governments, NGOs, the civilian population or international agencies, with the aim of supporting the objectives of the military mission (NATO, 2002). This function can support the civilian population in areas affected by conflict or disaster, coordinate efforts with local authorities and civilian organisations, facilitate mutual understanding between the military and civilians, and prevent interference between military operations and civilian activities. Some examples of these actions are the restoration of basic services (water, electricity, health), support for local hospitals or schools, coordination with NGOs for the distribution of humanitarian aid, advising local governments on restoring governance, and carrying out Quick Impact Projects. CIMIC actions are directed at the strategic level by SACEUR through SHAPE and a CIMIC section within SHAPE, which is responsible for doctrine, planning and multinational coordination. At the operational and tactical levels, specialised CIMIC teams are assigned to each NATO mission.

Key Leader Engagements (KLE) consist of meetings and direct contacts between Alliance military and civilian leaders and key leaders of local communities, civilian authorities, social groups or relevant actors in an area of operations (Popescu and Voinescu, 2021). These are planned and strategic interactions that seek to build trust and strong relationships with key figures in the area of operations, facilitate mutual understanding and cooperation, gather valuable information for the mission, reduce tensions or avoid conflicts to support the stabilisation and success of the operation. They are carried out in the context of peace, stabilisation or conflict operations and seek to promote security and stability in the area and to obtain local support for NATO forces, listen to the concerns and needs of the population and authorities, or adjust the operational strategy according to the local context.

KLEs are usually led by senior officers or mission commanders in the field. On some occasions, representatives from the Public Diplomacy Division or CIMIC participate, depending on the purpose of the meeting. Leaders may be brigade or division commanders, heads of mission, or CIMIC or public relations officers.

Finally, although not part of NATO's command structure, NATO's Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence is the main body responsible for countering disinformation and protecting against information warfare. It is accredited by NATO and works closely with it. Its functions are to analyse disinformation campaigns, strengthen the communicative resilience of member states, provide training, research and strategic recommendations, and support the coordination of strategic communications (NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, s. f.). Its publications, projects and frequently organised events are testimony to its ongoing efforts to contribute capabilities in the fight against disinformation.

3 Narrative in the field of information

Strategic narrative is a means used by political actors to construct a shared meaning of the past, present and future of international politics and thus shape the behaviour

of national and international actors (Miskimmon *et al.*, 2012). Narrative helps to structure reality and generate group identity, enhance social cohesion and consensus among peers. Furthermore, it has a significant influence on individuals subjected to such narratives, constructing individual and cultural identity and, therefore, favouring ideas and beliefs that will ultimately result in observable behaviours (Saari *et al.*, 2024).

The importance of narrative has been observed since the 1990s, when the progressive influence of information in warfare became evident. Since then, publications such as AJP-3.10 (NATO, 2007) and, in particular, certain situations of clear information warfare, such as that exhibited by Russia in Ukraine in 2014 following the 'Euromaidan Revolution', forced NATO to take notice and act in the field of strategic information.

In 2014, the Allied Joint Doctrine for Psychological Operations provided one of the first clear definitions of narrative, defining it as 'the translation of an organisation's mandate and vision into a fundamental and persistent story about who the organisation is, what its guiding principles are and what it aspires to achieve' (NATO, 2014, p. Lex-7).

The Alliance reinforces the idea that all its activities—public affairs, strategic communications, psychological operations, information operations and kinetic military actions—are based on the narrative established at the origins of the 1949 North Atlantic Treaty. In this way, NATO seeks to give meaning and unify the Alliance under a clear and easily recognisable narrative. Furthermore, this narrative not only serves as a tool to generate support and legitimacy, but is also considered a defensive asset against hostile information operations, disinformation and propaganda.

Recently, Du Cluzel (2020) coined the term 'cognitive warfare', an aspect directly related to narrative warfare. Cognitive warfare combines cyber, information, psychological and social engineering to influence, protect or disrupt cognition and gain a strategic advantage. This type of warfare is extremely important today, as it attacks rationality, exploits vulnerabilities and weakens defences, shaping perceptions and behaviours at the individual, group and social levels (NATO, 2023).

Strategic narratives can be classified into three types: identity narratives, problem narratives, and system narratives (Miskimmon *et al.*, 2022). Identity narratives seek to alter perceptions and promote a specific self-image regarding values, character, and goals. For example, NATO's identity narrative is based on the 1949 North Atlantic Treaty, which presents it as a strong shield of democracy. Problem narratives, on the other hand, seek to influence specific political decisions by shaping the entire discursive environment, as in the current situation regarding the invasion of Ukraine. System narratives focus on portraying how the international system works and, from NATO's perspective, this could mean emphasising the alliance's commitment to the rules-based world order.

For their part, narratives of destruction seek to undermine a state's capabilities, presenting it as weak, chaotic, incapable and lacking in internal cohesion, emphasising perceptions of realistic threats to its physical, economic and social security.

Suppression narratives, on the other hand, seek to discredit the moral image or legitimacy of a state, often presenting it as perverse and opposed to traditional and conservative values (Wagnsson and Barzanje, 2019). These narratives are linked to perceptions of symbolic threats: threats to the image, values, morals or norms of the ingroup (the group itself). Threats may include the feeling that traditions are being eradicated or that people are not allowed to follow their own culture. Perceptions of symbolic threats are the target of information and/or disinformation campaigns intended to polarise.

These narrative strategies have been observed in several studies, for example in Nordic countries and the Netherlands, such as in Hoyle *et al* (2023), Bouffard *et al* (2024) or Hoyle *et al* (2024). On the other hand, analyses of Russian media narratives about Latvia revealed a lower level of narratives of repression and an emphasis on narratives of destruction, which coincides with other similar studies on Estonia.

And why do these narratives work? The model posits that narratives work through a mechanism called ‘mediation’, which implies that the occurrence of certain effects depends on the prior occurrence of others. In models of narratives of destruction and suppression, it is predicted that people’s reactions to narratives occur because narratives serve to induce perceptions of threat; in other words, they target their feelings of security and insecurity.

4 NATO and the war of narratives

As we have seen, NATO is fully aware of the war of narratives that exists in the international arena and defines information threats as deliberate activities, with a certain degree of coordination and direction, aimed at manipulation or influence and with the capacity to affect the social fabric and mobilise public opinion. This influence is capable of damaging NATO or the political cohesion of its countries and can even generate doubt among citizens about their political leaders or institutions. Sometimes these threats do not consist of specific lies or narratives, but simply release contradictory information to generate confusion and mistrust.

To this end, NATO needs to understand the existing information environment and respond to threats by monitoring and identifying the sources of the threat as they emerge and spread. Once this initial process has been completed, the information must be shared to prevent and block the effectiveness of these threats, through public statements on websites, press conferences or specific campaigns that can anticipate the damage that the source of the threat wants to cause and prevent the false narrative from being accepted by the target society or group.

If the information attack has already taken place, NATO attempts to clear up the confusion or discredit the source through explanatory campaigns (counter-narrative function), discrediting the source or message and promoting a campaign or activity on its website, social media and through coordinated statements to the media and the public. An example of this is NATO’s repeated condemnation of the invasion of Ukraine.

A final tool proposed by NATO to tackle disinformation is through continuous learning and analysis of lessons learned about the strategies and procedures employed by the enemy and the development of faster and more effective responses for the future.

5 Ethics and legality in the use of psychological techniques in the field of security and defence

Although the use of psychological techniques in the military is long-standing, their use in the armed forces of democratic countries is relatively recent and is now standardised, subject to a series of rules derived from both international humanitarian law (IHL) and professional ethics, the latter being set by psychology organisations. Psychological techniques can typically include influence actions, strategic communication and psychological operations and therefore have the capacity to alter perceptions, beliefs and emotions. This requires control that distinguishes between legitimate influence and undue manipulation.

From a legal perspective, international humanitarian law (IHL) states that all methods of warfare must respect the principles of humanity and military necessity, expressly prohibiting the causing of unnecessary suffering or lasting mental harm to protected persons (Dörmann *et al.*, 2016). Thus, any psychological action directed at the civilian population that may cause panic, trauma or severe impairment of cognitive autonomy is not permitted under international law.

Similarly, human rights affect these restrictions. The United Nations (UN) Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (UN, 1966) specifically defend the right to freedom of thought, information and human dignity and prohibit practices that significantly limit autonomous decision-making capacity through coercion, systematic deception or exploitation of psychological vulnerabilities.

In democratic systems, public communication and influence aimed at legitimate ends—the prevention of violence or the de-escalation of tensions, as in this case—are permissible provided they are proportionate, transparent and traceable. To this end, there is a clear and accessible doctrine within NATO that provides oversight and accountability (NATO, 2012). Specifically, STRATCOM ethics emphasise the importance of avoiding the instrumentalisation of human groups as mere means to military ends, especially when interventions may generate or increase intergroup tensions or instigate perceptions of threat (Miskimmon *et al.*, 2013). STRATCOM's actions reiterate its commitment to institutional transparency and message control so as not to undermine democratic legitimacy and public trust. On the contrary, covert actions or systematic deception directed at populations violate these conditions and are therefore practices incompatible with NATO's STRATCOM actions.

Finally, the American Psychological Association (APA), one of the world's leading scientific and professional references in psychology, in its document *APA Professional Practice Guidelines For Operational Psychology* (APA, 2023), establishes and delimits

the scope of psychologists' actions in the area of security and defence, respecting the rights, dignity, autonomy and well-being of all parties affected by security dilemmas. This document is in line with the APA EPPCC Code of Ethics (APA, 2017) and with the main European professional associations.

Therefore, although the boundaries between legitimate influence and undue manipulation in military environments can sometimes be confusing to the public, there are laws and mechanisms for controlling psychological operations and STRATCOM by NATO institutions that ensure their ethical and proportionate use.

6 Group psychology and the cognitive sphere

The cognitive sphere is related to 'the will, perceptions, attitudes, values and motivations, thoughts, decision-making and behaviour of human beings' (Donoso, 2020: p. 21). This cognitive domain is one of the fields of information warfare in which influence is exerted. To understand the implications of this influence, there are several mechanisms that interact with narratives that we must take into account when addressing the information challenges of the 21st century.

On the one hand, narratives, as we have seen, are based on a process of social influence from the ruling class towards social groups. Normative and informational dependence can explain this fact when it comes to generating the desired impact of the ruler's communication strategy. In the former, the individual is motivated to maintain a positive relationship with the other members of a group and wishes to receive their approval or avoid their rejection and, therefore, will accept the norms of the majority group. This means that, in general, government discourse and narratives tend to have an influence on individuals who feel called upon to be 'good citizens' or to follow the dictates of the ruling group (if they support the current government). Asch's experiment in the 1950s is the quintessential example of influence based on normative dependence, which explains that the responses given by the subject are motivated more by external reasons (e.g., not deviating from the rest of the group or being accepted by it) than by personal critical reflection. Informational dependence consists of the influence that a person receives from others when making decisions in an ambiguous situation. The individual accepts the opinion of the majority as the most accurate and adapted to reality. This type of behaviour has been particularly prevalent in recent times during the pandemic (Morejón, 2021), where the media, social networks and interactions within peer groups have determined group behaviours of social conformity, which diminishes individual critical thinking.

Internal debate within groups often results in group polarisation, which is an intensification of the initial tendency that is amplified as a result of the sharing of news or opinions within the group (Moscovici and Zavalloni, 1969). Therefore, debates between people with similar attitudes often intensify their initial positions towards even more radical positions. This mechanism works thanks to the normative and informational dependence discussed above. Therefore, groups that interact a lot with each other, feel very cohesive, and consume biased, undiverse, and prejudice-based information will have an opportunity to become more radical in their thinking

and more prejudiced towards other options. This is the case with communities that are divided and closed to cultural diversity.

Another principle to consider in the impact of narratives is Tajfel's Social Identity Theory (1974), which indicates how belonging to a group justifies the individual moving from 'considering oneself as an "I" to an "us"' through depersonalisation, emphasising their similarity with group members and highlighting differences with those outside the group. The criterion of certainty, therefore, is agreement with the group. Ultra-nationalist or ethnocentric messages tend to exploit this common identity of 'us versus them'.

Finally, a concept that, although it seems simple, overly basic or inappropriate for civilised people, is that of suggestion, imitation or contagion, in which individuals are infected by the emotions around them and allow themselves to be carried away by them without critical analysis (Le Bon, 1895), especially in situations of uncertainty. Outbursts of hatred following real incidents or rumours that generate a great deal of indignation and anger, or situations of excessive hoarding (remember the demand for toilet paper during the pandemic) may explain these unreasonable group behaviours.

Minority influence is the ability to influence a source that lacks the power of the majority. When we talk about the NATO environment, we consider that majority influence is exercised by pro-NATO governments through official channels and the majority social conformity seen above, and minority influence comes from both official and unofficial, national and foreign anti-NATO entities.

Moscovici (1980) explains some of the processes by which minorities (in this case, the anti-NATO minority tendency in NATO member countries) can generate conflict within the majority. The principle of 'synchronic consistency' occurs when members of a group agree in their responses, creating a sense of unanimity within the minority group. Thus, the view that an anti-NATO president is strongly supported by his political, social or state group gives validity and strength to his arguments *vis-à-vis* the majority group (in this case, NATO countries). Diachronic consistency consists of the same individual systematically repeating the same narrative at different times to explain a situation: the 'denazification' of Ukraine, Russia's defence needs, etc. It has to do with statements or narratives repeated in a similar way by the same actor.

Papastamou *et al* (1982) point to the style of negotiation based on rigidity or flexibility to determine how this affects the persuasion of majorities. It is the degree of flexibility or rigidity in verbal or non-verbal expression that actors use to influence a particular group. Rigidity is characterised by the degree of extremism, unconditional support and intransigence in defending one's own position and the refusal to make concessions to the other side. When a rigid style predominates in the majority group (in this case, the tough rhetoric of an anti-NATO government directed at its own citizens), dialogue is blocked, its beliefs and values are imposed, and minority discourses (such as rapprochement or negotiation with NATO) are delegitimised in its country. Furthermore, it reproduces the status quo and, if its own narrative is one of defensive and anti-NATO identity, this attitude reinforces its power. This is the case with some political leaders who repeatedly express their rejection of NATO and are recognised as guarantors of independence and absolute leaders of their country.

On the other hand, when minority discourses adopt a flexible style (in this case, when the discourse of an anti-NATO country is directed at the population of NATO countries through the media or social networks), it brings a sense of greater possibility for dialogue between countries, delegitimises the pro-NATO country's defence narrative and provides discursive resilience, i.e., the ability to adapt and reformulate their messages for different audiences in minority contexts. According to Moscovici, this is the 'process of content validation', as the minority group creates an intellectual conflict in the majority (the Western audience) to undermine their self-confidence in their narrative and generate interest in considering minority propositions.

A final mechanism of minority influence that can be applied to narratives is Nemeth's (1986) decentring. This is a process in which the individual perceives no internal violence or incompatibility between their position and that of the minority, thereby increasing the minority group's capacity for influence. This is achieved through the use of innovative and creative proposals by the minority group, attempting to shift the individual's focus away from their own position without having to choose between the majority and minority groups, i.e. based on new and non-dichotomous arguments. The use of narratives from anti-NATO countries advocating the transmission of universal and common values of peace, democracy, security and defence, shared regional customs or traditions are a good example of how a minority discourse can shift the focus away from the conflict and create a rift in the identity narrative of a majority. Some speeches by Russian President V. Putin addressed to European audiences before the invasion of Ukraine serve as an example (Díaz, 2022).

Finally, it is worth monitoring audiences in the different news media available to the population, since, as we have seen, narratives feed on them for the dissemination of narratives.

According to the *Digital News Report 2024* (Reuters Institute, 2024), the survey conducted (almost 95 000 interviews in 47 markets covering half of the world's population) indicates that the majority of respondents use social media, search engines and aggregators as their main source of online news. Only 22% mention official media websites or apps as their main source, which is a drop of ten percentage points compared to 2018. There is a growing focus on commentators, influencers and young creators, especially on YouTube and TikTok, although there are still news brands and professional journalists who publish on networks such as Facebook and X. A final interesting aspect of this report applicable to narratives concerns selective attention to news. That is, there is an increase in the avoidance of certain news items that prevent users from seeing the full picture of current events. Almost four out of ten respondents (39%) say they 'sometimes' or 'often' avoid the news, an increase of three percentage points over the previous year's average. The report refers to comments made in the survey itself, which indicate that the conflicts in Ukraine and the Middle East may have influenced this fact. In addition, the report notes that the proportion of users who feel 'overwhelmed' by the volume of news has risen significantly since the previous survey in 2019, by up to eleven percentage points.

That said, we can conclude that the war of narratives is a complex and multi-variable issue that transcends the capabilities of institutions and countries, and that the population is increasingly prone to shared emotion and social contagion. All this, combined with the fact that today's news media are increasingly beyond the control and supervision of governments and that platforms are generating growing group polarisation, makes the impact of narratives difficult to control and, at times, of little use to a population or group that is informed by media of its own ideology, which are biased and reinforce its own and others' stereotypes.

Therefore, in the following section, we propose addressing real and direct intergroup relations as one of the most efficient and transparent tools for eliminating prejudice, negative stereotypes, and animosity between groups.

7 Prejudice in intergroup relations

In his work *The Nature of Prejudice*, Allport defines prejudice as “a hostile or prejudiced attitude towards a person belonging to a group, simply because they belong to that group, thus assuming that they possess the objectionable qualities attributed to the group” (Allport, 1954, p. 22). This prejudice, according to Allport, is not simply an opinion or a feeling; it is an attitude that affects behaviour and interpersonal relationships. It is based on the tendency of humans to make categories or generalisations that are an oversimplification of their world of experiences. The division into categories of ingroup membership (the group to which the individual belongs) and outgroup membership (the group that is foreign or different from the ingroup) is necessary as a natural tendency to distinguish between the known and familiar and the strange or unknown. Thus, mistrust, discomfort or, in some extreme cases, hostility towards the unfamiliar is a natural instinct for survival, security and trust in the family, ethnic or racial group. The need to belong is one of the most basic and universal human motivations (Baumeister and Leary, 1995) as it provides emotional well-being to the individual in the form of self-esteem, social identity, emotional health, and the satisfaction of basic needs such as mutual care, security and protection from threats, and certainty.

This positive relationship towards the ingroup generates an attitude called ‘ingroup favouritism’, characterised by a tendency to interact regularly with members of the ingroup, a sense of positive self-esteem for belonging to that group, altruistic behaviour, acceptance of common norms as one's own, etc. In return, this favouritism uses mechanisms such as social comparison, which seeks to establish a favourable difference for one's own group in a dimension that is positively valued by social consensus compared to other different groups (Tajfel and Turner, 1979), generating inevitable discrimination.

Thus, it can be understood that intergroup relations can be accompanied by emotional feelings that are sometimes tense or distant. In addition, there are factors that can generate greater discrimination or distance between groups, such as: differences in behaviour, differences in norms or non-compliance with common norms, the perception of the other as a threat to one's own status (very common in

narratives and political strategies) or the use of social emotions that favour extreme behaviour. One of the models that best captures this difficult relationship between groups is the 'Intergroup Anxiety Model' (Stephan, 2014), which suggests that contact with another group can generate a series of negative consequences related to prejudice, i.e., before actual contact, both in anticipation of a negative personal experience and fear that one's own group will reject them for interacting with members of the outgroup or even identify them with it.

The negative consequences in relations between different groups can be:

- Behavioural: such as avoiding contact with members of the other group, amplifying norms to criticise or discredit the other group, or preventive aggression.
- Cognitive: a tendency to seek only information that confirms negative expectations, ultimate attribution error (blaming members of the outgroup for their negative behaviours without considering positive behaviours or possible external causes), motivational biases aimed at justifying negative behaviours towards the outgroup or justifying intragroup favouritism.
- Affective: excessive emotional reaction to negative events involving the outgroup or extreme evaluative reactions.

This intergroup anxiety will be greater the fewer previous relations both groups have had, if the group's cognitions about the other have been negative (myths or rumours, lack of knowledge of the other, beliefs of superiority, negative expectations, etc.) or if the structure of the contact situation is negative (differences in status, absence of need for interdependence, differences in size or composition).

A final theory that is useful for understanding and improving intergroup relations is Realistic Conflict Theory (Sherif, 1967), which is very common in international politics and national policies (immigration). This theory points out that behaviour between groups is the result of positive or negative functional relations between them. Functional relationships are affected by the reciprocal goals and interests of the groups (security threats, economic interests, political advantage, military considerations, prestige). If the goals of two groups are compatible, there will be cooperation and good relations. If not, there will be competition for goals or resources and therefore conflict will arise. The greater the competition for limited resources, the more intense the intergroup rejection behaviours will be, with feelings of prejudice, discriminatory behaviour and hostility.

More specifically, the Instrumental Model of Group Conflict (Esses *et al.*, 1998) follows this theory and is applicable to societies that receive immigrants. The perception of stress or resource limitation and the salience of a particularly conspicuous foreign group gives rise to competition and attempts to eliminate it. Zero-sum beliefs suggest that the resources consumed by immigrants are subtracted from the goods that individuals in the host society can obtain, arguments that are widely used today to single out social or ethnic minorities in each country or even outgroups or foreign countries.

8 Interventions in intergroup relations

The theory that intergroup experiences help to significantly reduce prejudice comes from Allport (1954). This author observed that when interrelating groups had the same status, common goals and intergroup cooperation, the experience improved greatly. If, in addition, there was support from the authorities, a sense of justice for both groups or a search for similar traditions, the reduction in prejudice was even greater. This view has been empirically supported over the years by numerous studies, such as those by Dovidio *et al* (2017) and Hewstone and Swart (2011).

The Intergroup Interventions (IIGs) that have been tested so far are of two types, direct and indirect:

Direct interventions include those that seek face-to-face interaction in person or virtually. The first studies on face-to-face experiences are by Allport (1954). There are also studies using technology and online applications (Amichai-Hamburger and McKenna, 2006) or even virtual reality avatars (Tassinari *et al.*, 2022). As this type of contact is very direct, it aims to bring about profound and obvious changes in intergroup relations, which means that the social context must be minimally prepared for this.

Indirect contacts are used to generate less obvious, scalable and progressive changes when intergroup rapprochement is very complex socially or politically, and are usually made through radio, television and social media. Examples of this type of approach are: extended contacts, which are strategies in which people know or are informed that people from their own group have dealt with people from the outgroup (Wright *et al.*, 1997); vicarious strategies or observing people from the group dealing with people from the outgroup (Vezzali *et al.*, 2014); social practices, which is indirect contact with real or unreal people through social media (Schiappa *et al.*, 2005) or in an imagined way, where fictional interactions with people from the outgroup are visualised (Turner *et al.*, 2007).

8.1 Consequences of IIGs

The main consequence of intergroup contact is, as Allport pointed out, increased knowledge of the other group. This consequence, in itself, helps to find the much-needed similarities between both parties in order to eliminate prejudices and negative stereotypes of the outgroup.

Another consequence of intergroup contact is that it reduces anxiety about such contact, normalising it and leading to habituation and familiarity with contacts that previously did not exist or were very infrequent (Stephan and Stephan, 1985). Each encounter can generate small gestures or behaviours of empathy and a more integrative perspective.

Likewise, contact between people from different groups helps to reduce perceptions of threat (Hewstone *et al.*, 2014), which are common in intergroup anxiety between traditionally opposed groups.

These activities allow the ingroup to assimilate the outgroup as part of their self-concept at the interpersonal level and downplay the salience of the foreign group identity or even recategorise members of foreign groups as their own.

At the level of social norms, these activities can change the perception that the outgroup has social norms that are strange, very different or threatening to the ingroup.

In general, numerous meta-analyses recognise the positive effect of intergroup contact. Examples include those by Pettigrew and Tropp (2006), Lemmer and Wagner (2015) and Paluck *et al* (2019).

8.2 Contexts in which intergroup interventions have been effective

Numerous studies have been conducted showing a reduction in prejudice between groups after 20th century conflicts in settings such as Northern Ireland (Ginty *et al.*, 2007), reconciliation after the interracial conflict in South Africa (apartheid) in the 1990s (Gibson and Claassen, 2010), the war in Rwanda, and 21st century conflicts such as the civil war in Sri Lanka (Malhotra and Liyanage, 2005), the current conflicts between Jews and Palestinians in Israel (Lazovsky, 2007), the internal struggles in Nigeria over land use between 2014 and 2019 (Grady *et al* 2023) or, more recently, relations between social groups in Iraq following the period of domination by the Islamic terrorist group ISIS, some of which will be discussed in greater detail. In addition, these interactions have also been investigated in the absence of armed conflict, as in the case of intergroup attitudes in various European countries (Schmid *et al.*, 2012; Binder *et al.*, 2009).

8.3 Precautions in IIGs

There are some general guidelines regarding intergroup relations that should be taken into account (Littman *et al.*, 2023).

Intergroup interventions will be effective in reducing prejudice if the emotions they generate are positive for the groups involved. Obviously, intergroup contacts being associated with positive emotions is a basic condition for their benefit.

In addition, it is necessary to assess the possible influence of other members of the same group, as this can have an impact even if the interaction is positive overall. Being exposed to social norms that punish contact with the outgroup can generate internal prejudice towards individuals in the ingroup, such as the 'black sheep effect' (Marques *et al.*, 1988). This is a mechanism of control within the group itself, characterised by the demand for maximum loyalty to the group and favouritism towards those who comply with the norm and have characteristics that are desirable for the group, and denigration of those who are undesirable or who do not comply with or disagree with the group's norms. Especially in the case of competition between two groups, dissent or internal disagreement can facilitate the idea that the individual within the ingroup may be a traitor for expressing criticism in such tense moments,

whereas if there were no social competition between two groups, the same criticism might not be considered so harmful or damaging to the ingroup, or might even be considered positive (Ariyanto *et al.*, 2010; Brander and Hornsey, 2006). This last aspect is interesting for study because it shows the difficulty groups have in accepting reasonable internal criticism or reflection in environments of intergroup conflict, categorising all their own members as good and isolating those who disagree or think differently from the group as enemies.

Another possible danger for intergroup actions is that the first-hand experiences of some group members should not be generalised to the majority. One explanation for this could be that the individuals from the outgroup who interact with the ingroup do not meet the typical characteristics of groups considered strange or foreign. This can be interpreted as an exception to the rule—in the case of Muslims, dealing with Christians who are less prototypical or less religious than others. Therefore, it will not produce a change in opinion or a reduction in prejudice towards that group. Another explanation for this phenomenon is that the effects of this positive involvement only apply to the specific group or a specific experience and not to other similar groups. Some mechanisms that may intervene in this case to avoid deviation from the norm are those of conformity or group polarisation, as seen above.

8.4 Applications of IIGs in conflict zones

There are numerous possible applications: in schools, through the media, or in conflict zones. To observe the importance of these activities in reducing prejudice, we will consider several extreme cases of intractable conflicts where empathy and perspective-taking have been sought through real and direct contact rather than virtual or indirect contact.

Onuki *et al* (2022) examined the effect of face-to-face contact between three groups of ex-combatants (national army, former national army, and armed group) and civilians with disabilities in Rwanda. In a study of more than four hundred people, they found differentiated effects of intergroup contact in post-conflict contexts, highlighting the role of the degree of personalisation in intergroup outcomes. The findings indicate that, in interactions between former national army combatants and civilians with disabilities in Rwanda, low levels of personalisation (less focus on personal aspects) generated more positive outcomes in terms of interpersonal preference, reduced evaluative biases, and perceptions of the other group, compared to conditions of high or no personalisation. In contrast, when contact occurred between the three groups of ex-combatants—who were direct adversaries during the conflict—high levels of personalisation proved to be more effective in promoting positive intergroup outcomes. This suggests that deeper, more personal contact may be necessary to reconcile former adversaries.

The results suggest that the impact of personal contact varies significantly depending on the previous relationships between the groups involved. Therefore, reconciliation and peacebuilding strategies in post-conflict societies must be tailored to the type of relationship and history of confrontation between groups, avoiding

generalised approaches. This research highlights the importance of careful design of contact-based interventions, especially in contexts of high historical and social sensitivity.

Seeds of Peace is an international organisation that organises summer camps in the United States, where Israeli and Palestinian teenagers (along with young people from other conflict contexts) live together for several weeks, participating in shared activities, dialogue workshops and coexistence dynamics.

Lazarus's study (2015) sought to assess whether intensive and prolonged contact in this type of environment helped to reduce prejudices and stereotypes, increase empathy towards the other group, or promote more conciliatory and peaceful attitudes in the long term.

The results showed that immediately after the camp, participants had significantly more positive attitudes towards the other group, including greater empathy and less dehumanisation. However, over time, many of these effects diminished once the young people returned to their highly polarised social environments, with more lasting effects observed in those who formed close friendships with members of the other group.

It was concluded that intensive and meaningful contact can reduce prejudice, but the effects do not always last if the subsequent social context reinforces negative views. Meaningful personal relationships (real friendships) are key to the sustainability of change. The social environment to which one returns can reinforce or weaken the effects of contact.

A final interesting case of intergroup intervention is that of Mousa (2019). On this occasion, the impact of a sporting activity in Iraq was evaluated after the war that ravaged the country and the fall of Saddam's regime in 2014, which led to the persecution of Christians by the Islamist terrorist group ISIS. This research randomly assigned Iraqi Christians displaced by ISIS to one of two types of football teams: exclusively Christian teams or mixed teams with Muslims. The results show persistent changes in Christians' behaviour towards Muslims, as they were more likely to sign up for a mixed team in the future, more likely to vote for a Muslim player (who was not on their team) to receive a fair play award, and more likely to train with Muslims even six months after the intervention ended. In addition, players on mixed teams were more likely to believe that coexistence is possible, with a statistically significant effect (+0.63 standard deviations, $p < 0.01$).

These results seem to be explained by several factors, such as a change in social norms regarding intergroup contact with the outgroup (greater permissiveness and less restriction) or the generation of shared positive experiences (empathy and decreased intergroup anxiety), especially in teams that performed well, which showed a greater willingness to frequent a restaurant located in Mosul, a predominantly Muslim city.

However, the study also found that contact was less effective in changing generalised tolerance towards unknown Muslims (outside the specific context of the team), so this experiment suggests that meaningful intergroup contact can foster coexistence after

conflict, even when general prejudices persist. Interventions based on cooperative and structured activities (such as sport) can modify behaviours and perceptions towards individuals from the rival group, although they do not necessarily transform attitudes towards the entire group in the abstract.

If, therefore, intergroup experiences are capable of achieving these results among populations that are so historically, culturally and socially divided, we can say that IIGs are a good tool for eliminating or reducing prejudice in other equally divided societies, both in the absence of conflict and in its presence.

9 Discussion

We have seen that STRATCOM's need to communicate narratives is met by various mechanisms that work intensively and in different ways at different levels. However, the excessive saturation of information in today's media and social networks generates mistrust and concern in some citizens, apathy or absolute and unthinking adherence to official communications in others. The war of narratives and counter-narratives converges in a situation of deadlock that is difficult to overcome from an informational point of view.

What we propose in this study, supported by the latest research in group psychology and intergroup conflict, is to focus on activities that generate an experience based on real-life experiences in the target audiences, through personal contacts, with different intergroup activities that lead to knowledge of the other and the stranger and eliminate the bias and prejudice that harmful narratives seek to spread. In this way, through the mechanisms we have discussed (KLE, CIMIC, Public Affairs and Public Military Affairs), a reliable, accessible narrative based on real interaction between insiders and outsiders can be conveyed. Undoubtedly, reinforcing STRATCOM's usual outreach activities with a programme of activities involving interaction with socially or politically distant populations can help to convince and reinforce NATO's narrative as an agency of peace and democracy in the face of discourses of fear and hatred.

Initiatives such as those proposed—cultural, social, sporting or religious activities—serve as a link and a means of bringing groups closer together, so promoting them through CIMIC, PSYOPS, KLE or INFO OPS actions can be—and, in fact, already are—a form of action for military detachments. We emphasise the importance of the Armed Forces General Staff considering these initiatives as first-rate communication strategies, as effective as or even—in some cases—more effective than the usual narratives based on identity-based ideas, because, as we have seen, these narratives reinforce their own audience—especially the population that already views the Alliance positively—more than they do the external audience, whether foreign or domestic but anti-NATO.

We therefore argue that narratives based on intergroup outreach actions may be more widely accepted and have a greater positive impact in the cognitive sphere than institutional campaigns. Furthermore, they could facilitate informational resilience in

the face of disinformation campaigns from third countries. To this end, the strategy departments of the General Staff must promote and enrich the in-depth study of the opposing groups, their customs and traditions, values, common behaviours and group norms of action, in order to understand all the variables of each operational scenario. In this way, communication strategies can be designed based on rapprochement and shared real experiences, as well as a growing normalisation of the acceptance of other foreign or opposing groups, the main enemy of prejudice and intergroup conflict.

10 Conclusions

The main objective of this study was to analyse prejudice in relations between different groups in the context of social conflicts. As we have seen, this has been one of the main challenges in the experiences between different groups. The theories found help to explain the great internal force of the media, people and structures on each side when it comes to creating, maintaining or escalating prejudice against outside groups or individuals. The analysis of NATO's STRATCOM capabilities shows the current interest and concern for these strategies. As evidenced by one of the specific objectives of this document, NATO's ethically justified and legally controlled narrative management operations are fundamental in supporting military operations and defence policies when it comes to generating support, deterring or preventing disinformation campaigns. Through the analysis of the main studies of intergroup interactions carried out in the field of social and group psychology, it has been found that these are scientifically valid tools for combating prejudice, hostility and hatred between different groups, which are common targets of disinformation campaigns and narratives from opposing countries. Specifically, interactions based on bringing groups closer together are the most useful when it comes to generating closeness and social empathy. Although we observe that these strategies are already being used on a more local scale through KLE, PSYOPS or INFO OPS actions, we propose that these Intergroup Interventions should occupy a prominent position within STRATCOM, directed from the strategy departments of the General Staff. In this way, communication actions will gain even greater momentum in guiding will, perceptions and emotions towards a coherent narrative in messages and actions.

Limitations to this study include the difficulty of conducting this type of research between groups in conflict due to the great physical and emotional distance between them: security conditions that separate the groups, the lack of positive or neutral interactions, mistrust and prejudice between both sides, and the absence of organisations that have the support and recognition of both sides, as well as the capacity to carry out this research. On the other hand, we encounter the difficulty of evaluating the impact of different actions without cultural or political bias.

Therefore, for future research, we propose exploring the possibility of conducting longitudinal studies at different stages of each conflict, combining quantitative and qualitative methods to measure the impact of campaigns through NATO and STRATCOM structures, and including a greater number of IIGs as part of military campaigns.

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