

MEDIA RELEASE

5 June 2006

CONTACT BETWEEN ETHNIC GROUPS LIKELY TO INCREASE, NOT REDUCE TENSION

Politicians and authors of social policy around the world may be forced to change the way they attempt to solve inter-racial and religious conflicts, based on the research of an internationally renowned and Australian-based psychologist.

Social psychologist Dr Stefania Paolini of the University of Newcastle is studying the impact of contact between different groups – such as members of groups of different ethnicity, age or religion - on relationships between those groups.

The University of Newcastle's School of Psychology is one of 12 members of the Psychology Foundation of Australia, a non-profit nation-wide organisation established to promote public awareness of scientific psychology.

Traditionally, social policy has been based on the idea that contact between groups - such as the Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland - is the best way of improving relations. But Dr Paolini's research, combined with data from an increasing number of international studies, suggests that such contact is more likely to increase conflict than to improve relations.

Best known internationally for her work in examining intergroup relations in Northern Ireland, Dr Paolini has been invited to discuss her research with 50 of the world's leading social psychologists at a conference in Johannesburg, South Africa, on July 6-9. Such is the significance of the gathering that it is expected that a special volume of the *Journal of Social Issues* will be devoted to papers presented at the conference.

"Social policy has been hugely influenced by work that suggests that people from different groups, when in contact together, will improve their relationships," Dr Paolini says. "We do not invoke group segregation. However, our data tells us that contact is likely to worsen rather than improve intergroup relations – and that in some situations, contact can be quite dangerous."

For example, she says, the encouragement of "unsupervised" and "unstructured" contact between groups of Muslims and non-Muslims at Cronulla in NSW - where members of each group already harboured preconceptions of the other - may have triggered and inflamed conflict. "The strength of our work is that it explains when, and more importantly, why contact might sometimes be bad for groups".

"We now believe there is a huge discrepancy in the positive feeling about contact in the literature and what we see in the real world," Dr Paolini says. "What we see if we look outside our windows is that there's actually an increase in conflict between groups – for instance, in the friction between Muslims and non-Muslims since 9-11. There is no harmony, even though there is a lot more contact between these groups in multicultural societies."

Dr Paolini says research for which she has submitted an Australian Research Council proposal will attempt to identify reasons for why intergroup conflict is dominant, even when contact is more frequent.

The findings could be “powerful”, she says, in influencing how experts in fields as diverse as government, social policy and psychology drive future efforts in intergroup reconciliation.

Dr Paolini’s research indicates that, for example, an Anglo-Saxon Australian may encounter a Lebanese Australian at a barbecue, and report that the Lebanese Australian was “a nice bloke”. However, such feelings would be attributed to the individual, and not to Lebanese Australians in general.

However, if the same encounter was negative, the Anglo-Saxon Australian would attribute his feelings about it to “him being Lebanese” and to Lebanese Australians generally, rather than to a personality conflict with one person.

The result is that an unpleasant chat around the barbecue could worsen Muslim-nonMuslim relations, but a pleasant one would make no difference to broad group attitudes.

For further information, or interviews, contact Dr Stefania Paolini at the University of Newcastle’s School of Psychology, on 02 4921 5938, or Stefania.Paolini@newcastle.edu.au

The Psychology Foundation of Australia is a non-profit organisation consisting of 12 psychology departments in universities across the country. It aims to promote public awareness of scientific psychology, its relevance and usefulness in many areas of human performance and in solving human problems.