

The breakfast club and contact hypothesis



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Don't You, Forget About Contact Hypothesis, Don't Don't Don't Don't What does a brain, an athlete, a basket case, a princess, and a criminal all have in common? Much more than just a required Saturday detention. The Breakfast Club gives viewers a first hand look at Gordon Allport's Contact Hypothesis and it's effect on high school students. The Contact Hypothesis is one of the best ways to improve conflict among inter and outer groups experiencing conflict and is exemplified throughout The Breakfast Club as the five students are forced to sit through a Saturday detention.

The Contact Hypothesis is an important theory to understand before analyzing The Breakfast Club. The Contact Hypothesis Theory, which is credited to Gordon Allport, is about understanding other groups whether they are minority or majority and reducing stereotypes and prejudice acts (Ward). In 1954, Allport looked for ways to reduce intergroup conflict from the perspective of the majority group using direct contact with those groups. Along with his theory, Allport came up with four conditions that play a part in Contact Hypothesis which are equal status, cooperative independence, common goal, and appropriate normative contexts.

Based on over 500 Contact Hypothesis studies, effects of reducing inter and outer groups were stronger when optimal conditions were all apparent (Ward). Equal status is stressed within the situation because it is important for all groups to have the same expectations (Pettigrew). When there is a common goal to be reached, optimal effect will occur because everyone is working towards the same purpose. In order to achieve this common goal, all the groups must cooperatively work together (Pettigrew). Without the

bonding intimate relationships or friendships, a shared objective will not be achieved.

The last condition needed is the support from the environment or authoritative figure, which eventually helps promote intergroup cooperation (Pettigrew). Each of the optimal conditions of the Contact Hypothesis is demonstrated in some way throughout the film *The Breakfast Club*. As a classic 1980's film written and directed by John Hughes, *The Breakfast Club* is a prime example of Allport's Contact Hypothesis Theory. Although all of the main characters throughout the film are of the same race, they are all part of very different social cliques.

There is Andrew the jock, Brian the nerd, Clair the popular girl, Bender the delinquent, and Allison the basket case, all high school students forced to sit in a library together for an entire Saturday detention only to follow three orders; no sleeping, talking, or moving seats. The assistant principal, Vernon, assigns each student a 1,000-letter essay about who he or she thinks they are, in which they all must complete by the end of the day. Until the students start to interact, they all believe that they each have absolutely nothing in common.

Although the students are not part of minority or majority groups, they each begin by having preconceived notions about one another. Equal status is shown as the common ground they are start from; they are all in detention for a punishable act they made. The jock was found bullying a student in a locker room, the geek was caught with a flair gun in his locker, the princess

skipped class to go shopping, the criminal pulled the fire alarm, and the basket case just had nothing better to do with her Saturday.

The students have a common goal of getting through the almost nine hour day as quickly as possible. To pass the time, they smoke marijuana, dance, and open up and share their inner secrets. As a whole, they realize that their detention would go by a lot quicker if they cooperate with each other. Claire gives Allison a makeover, which helps Andrew notice her true beauty while Bender continues to mock Claire until they eventually end up vulnerable and alone in the supply closet together. As the students share their deepest secrets, they realize that they are not as different as they thought they were.

Andrew constantly is seeking his father's approval, Allison is a compulsive liar, Bender comes from an abusive household, Claire is secretly a virgin, and Brian struggles with depression so much he contemplates suicide. Once all their problems are out in the open, the students are able to get along much easier. Principal Vernon serves as the authoritative figure however in the case of the Contact Hypothesis Theory, his lack of support is what promotes the students to resolve their conflicts. By telling them what they are not allowed to do, he pushes them to do the opposite.

In the end, the students volunteer Brian to write one letter to the principal from all of them as opposed to the 1000-letter essays that were assigned to each of them individually. The students started at an equal status common ground level and were able to willingly work together towards a shared goal while building friendships all with the help and motivation of their evil

assistant principal. In my opinion, the Contact Hypothesis Theory can be useful in any conflict situation involving more than one group of people.

I experienced first hand what it is like to be part of a minority in high school and experienced plenty stereotypical judgments. Growing up a Jewish student in a majority Christian high school was not very easy for me and it was something I struggled with daily. Students who did not even know me would make assumptions that were not at all accurate. High school students in particular seem to form preconceived notions about others just by the way they dress, what type of people they hangout with, and even their cultural or ethnic background.

The Breakfast Club was Hughes' way showing that everyone has a story and "we're all pretty bizarre, some of us are just better at hiding it". Hughes uses the Contact Hypothesis Theory in a way that a younger audience can understand. Although Andrew the jock and Claire the popular princess are both higher up on the high school food chain, they still were judged based on preconceived notions. Whether part of the minority or majority group, everyone has struggles and everyone is at equal status. When striving towards a common goal, by being cooperative towards one another, that objective will be reached sooner.

With the help of authoritative figures, especially in a high school setting, that goal will be reached. Conflicts between groups of people can occur anywhere in daily life even outside of high school and it is important to know how to correctly and cooperatively handle the situation. The Contact Hypothesis Theory is ideal, however is it not as easy as it sounds. As shown in the film,

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getting a group of people to interact and cooperate with each other was not a simple task. There was tension and hostility and even tears were shed. With time came acceptance and with acceptance came respect towards one another.

The Contact Hypothesis Theory illustrated through The Breakfast Club teaches viewers that when faced with their preconceptions head on with direct contact, there can be a positive outcome. Gordon Allport's Contact Hypothesis Theory is thoroughly presented throughout the movie The Breakfast Club. When all four optimal conditions are presented, there is a positive outcome within the group. Although the students meet each other with preconceived notions, by the end of the film they were able to break free of their social group stereotypes and create friendships with people they would have least expected.

They each started the day at an equal status as all of them were stuck in a Saturday detention. After realizing they all had the same goal, to make the day go by as fast as they could, they began to pass the time together. Some were able to form friendships while others formed relationships and by the end of the day, they had all learned something surprising about one another. The ending to The Breakfast Club sums up the story and the Hypothesis effect perfectly by reading aloud the letter Brian wrote to the principal, answering the question " who do you think you are? which he also reads at the beginning of the film.

In the opening dialogue, the letter is more direct using the phrase " you see us as..." but as the second half of the letter is read, that phrase changes to "

we found out...". Which offers the audience to recognize that the perspective the students had when they came into the detention was altered. " You see us as you want to see us... in the simplest of terms, in the most convenient definitions. But we found out that each of us is an athlete, a basket case, a princess, a criminal. Does that answer your question? Sincerely yours, The Breakfast Club. "