Tackling Xenophobia through the Visual Arts

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In recent years, xenophobic sentiments have resurfaced as a strong political force across the world. To devise effective interventions against xenophobia, social scientists have tried to understand the conditions under which people embrace racial diversity. One of the most acknowledged approaches regarding intergroup conflicts is embodied by the ‘contact hypothesis’. Recent work has suggested that observing positive interracial contact in others can also help to reduce xenophobia, regardless whether contact is witnessed in real life or via media portrayals, e.g. the fine arts.

During the 20th century, movement of artists across borders changed traditional notions of racial identity. The project hypothesizes that the content of interracial depictions changed throughout the 20th century, with portrayals of interracial friendships/partnerships becoming more common. The project therefore hypothesis that these portrayals can be used to help to reduce xenophobia.

Aim:

● To explore 1) the depiction of and 2) response to, interracial encounters as portrayed in 20th century painting.

Methodology:

● Catalogue

The project identified and catalogued interracial paintings in the 20th century. The catalogue was comprised of over two-hundred paintings which depict interracial relationships – both positive and negative.

● Focus Group

A focus group was run of four White British students, who, when prompted with specific questions, examined and discussed two paintings selected from the catalogue.

● Matrix Coding

Data analysis was conducted in the form of matrix coding, which mapped patterns in the answers of the focus group members.

Results:

● Results from the catalogue show that artists from many different western nationalities depicted interracial relationships. The main nationalities of the artists whose paintings include this subject matter were British, American, African American and German.

● Results from the Focus Groups and common patterns found in the Matrix Coding suggested that participants were unwilling to discuss race until the moderator prompted them to do so. However, once prompted, participants discussed thoroughly the artistic and cultural reasons and implications of the artists’ choices. These findings correspond to current scholarship.

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