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Child's Presence Shapes Immigrant Women's Experiences of Everyday Intergroup Contact

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Abstract

Research on intergroup contact has considered how the occurrence and experience of contact is affected by ingroup members. Qualitative studies of contact in real-life settings have additionally highlighted how multiple actors can affect the manifestation of contact. This article shows how the presence of one's child can shape immigrant mothers' contact experiences in multi-ethnic neighbourhoods. Ten immigrant mothers living in Helsinki, Finland, were interviewed twice over a six-month period about their intergroup interactions in their locale. Using a thematic analysis, we identified three themes depicting immigrant mothers' experiences of intergroup contacts in their child's presence: i) feeling visible to others, ii) seeking harmonious contact, and iii) anticipating problems. The results illustrate how a child affords unique opportunities for an immigrant mother to engage in interethnic contact, but also brings distinctive threats. This suggests the need to further consider how different types of intragroup dynamics can shape intergroup contacts.

Keywords

intergroup relations, contact hypothesis, direct contact, indirect contact, triadic contact, minority experience, immigrant mothers

Over the past two decades, a variety of research has been undertaken to consider how the occurrence and effects of intergroup contact are shaped by other group members. Quantitative studies of contact have shown that fellow group members provide opportunities for indirect contact, while shared ingroup norms of contact have been found to shape expectations and experiences of intergroup interaction (e.g., Christ et al., 2010; De Tezanos-Pinto et al., 2010; Turner et al., 2008). Similarly, qualitative and observational studies have highlighted the role of multiple actors in shaping contact encounters in everyday life. As Dixon, Durrheim, and Tredoux (2005) and Connolly (2000) have observed, intergroup contact in everyday life typically occurs between various ingroup and outgroup actors and is shaped by existing relationships and bonds. The constant in all these accounts is the recognition that contact is embedded in the social complexity of everyday life and is facilitated or inhibited by existing social relations.

This article combines these insights and explores the ways in which the presence of one's child can shape immigrant mothers' lived experiences of intergroup contact situations—an issue that is yet unexplored. The special interdependence between a mother and her child as also the diverse expectations of parenting can produce improvised intergroup contact situations for an immigrant mother. We analyse how immigrant women with a child experience these situations and how these contacts shape their expectations of future contact. This context provides an excellent opportunity to

deepen the understanding of intergroup encounters in everyday life—especially "triadic" encounters (a mother, her child, and the outgroup member(s)). The analysis of such encounters is still atypical in contact research.

We review the evidence showing the importance of other group members in the occurrence and consequences of contact, considering the degree to which this captures the complexity of the lived experience of everyday contact. We offer a rationale for our study of the experiences of immigrant mothers as a theoretically significant, as well as socially important, focus of investigation. Finally, we present the results of our study, pointing to their resonance with much prior research and to the uniqueness of the experiences of these women with a child, which require further thought about the ways contact arises and its effects.

Intergroup Contact as a Collective Accomplishment: The Influence of Ingroup Members on the Occurrence and Effects of Contact

In the contact literature, much attention has been devoted to analysing how other ingroup members shape the occurrence and effects of intergroup contact. While the effects of intergroup contact on any single individual are limited, other group members afford the potential to accrue positive contact experience indirectly. Of the various forms of identified indirect contact, "vicarious contact" – which refers to the direct observation of other ingroup members' intergroup contact (Mazziotta et al., 2011; Vezzali et al., 2014) – is a likely everyday contact situation for mothers with young children within a multi-ethnic environment.

The effects of positive indirect contact are well established in studies showing improved attitudes towards the outgroup (e.g., Vezzali et al., 2014; Zhou et al., 2019). Indirect contact can change the intergroup attitudes and contact expectations by altering the perceived group norms and reducing anxiety (De Tezanos-Pinto et al., 2010; Gómez et al., 2011). Several studies have shown that indirect contact increases the willingness to engage in further direct intergroup contacts and enhances their effects (Christ et al., 2010; Mazziotta et al., 2011; Wölfer et al., 2019). However, while most of indirect contact research has focused on positive contact, the negative indirect contact can have detrimental effects on outgroup attitudes (Vezzali et al., 2014). Previous research has not always clearly separated the different forms of indirect contact (i.e., vicarious contact as observing and extended contact as knowing about ingroup member's intergroup contact) and has usually focused only on positive indirect contact (Mazziotta et al., 2011; Vezzali et al., 2014).

In addition, prior studies have typically considered fellow ingroup members who shared similar status and power in relation to each other. These studies have shown, for instance, that poor intergroup relations predispose group members to negative expectations, experiences, and evaluations of intergroup encounters, while positive group norms of contact can reverse these effects (Stephan, 2014). A recent study of two contrasting neighbourhoods in the UK showed how the communities' respective support and reassurance was found to reinforce contact self-efficacy of their members, who develop confidence in their ability to be in contact with outgroup members (Stevenson et al., 2021). What still remains unstudied is how the asymmetric power and status among fellow ingroup members or their special bond – such as the interdependence between a mother and her child – may affect their intergroup contacts and their confidence in contact.

Furthermore, other commentators have drawn attention to the ways in which the methods and concepts underpinning contact research have limited its ability to capture the complexities of intergroup contact (Connolly, 2000; Dixon et al., 2005). The contact hypothesis proposes that interaction between members of different groups reduces intergroup prejudice, especially under certain conditions (Allport, 1954; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). Although supporting the contact hypothesis in principle, many authors (Connolly, 2000; Dixon et al., 2005; McKeown & Dixon, 2017) have critiqued some of the predominant research practices in the field, such as (a) studying interactions that occur under rarefied conditions, (b) reformulating lay understandings of contact in terms of a generic typology of ideal dimensions, and (c) using shifts in personal prejudice as the primary measure of outcome. These authors argue that these practices have limited the analytical range of contact hypothesis as an explanation of the intergroup dynamics of desegregation and as a framework for promoting social psychological change.

More specifically, they argue that the methodological individualism that characterizes experiments and surveys, as well as the tendency to abstract the experience of intergroup contact from its social context, is unable to capture the essentially multi-layered nature of contact (see also Stevenson & Sagherian-Dickey, 2016). As a result, this approach is unable to capture the multiple perspectives, actions, and outcomes that often characterize real-world encounters. In

contrast, Dixon et al. (2005) suggest a complementary programme of research on contact and desegregation that can produce a "thick description" of mundane contact situations in everyday life settings to fully appreciate how intergroup contact is accomplished as a social interaction. In line with this perspective, we also aim to study contact as it occurs and is understood by lay people in their everyday contexts (see also McKeown & Dixon, 2017).

Capturing the Complexity of Contact in Everyday Life

Taking everyday life as a starting point permits a rather different vantage point on the complex nature of intergroup contacts. Studying everyday intergroup encounters allows an appreciation of what kinds of encounters matter to people themselves, which ones are noticed by them, and what the immediate and distal consequences are for their daily lives (Dixon et al., 2005; Keil & Koschate, 2020). In particular, attending to the embeddedness of contact in the fabric of everyday life and the multiple people present there can elucidate the range of local interests and concerns which shape social actors' engagement in intergroup contact, and its impact within their lives (Connolly, 2000).

In everyday settings, contacts are often superficial and momentary and subjective definitions of intergroup contact have been shown to be disparate and diverse (Dixon et al., 2005; Keil & Koschate, 2020). Contingent upon the local context of the occurrence of contact, the frequency and intimacy of encounters, and even the very distinctions between groups can be flexibly comprehended by group members (Dixon & Reicher, 1997; Dixon et al., 2005). The minority and majority group members' motivations and experiences of contact encounters may differ systemically as well (Binder et al., 2009).

Amidst this variability, the study of contact in everyday life affords an insight into its significance and meaning from the perspectives of those involved. An early ethnographic study by Connolly (2000) showed how intergroup contact among teenagers at youth clubs in Northern Ireland, against a background of political conflict, was not primarily understood as a political act. Their contacts served more local, pragmatic purposes than the higher goals of intergroup conflict or reconciliation (for similar findings, see Dixon & Reicher, 1997; Durrheim & Dixon, 2001).

Of greater significance to the present study is the emphasis on everyday life which shows how contact is rarely experienced as an individual-level phenomenon (Dixon et al., 2005; Stevenson & Sagherian-Dickey, 2016). Interview studies of intergroup contact consistently show that intergroup encounters are often reported to involve the co-presence or the indirect influence of multiple other actors. A study of intergroup mixing in residential areas of Northern Ireland, for example, showed how the importance of contact experiences with outgroup members was marked by the reaction, support, or sanction of other ingroup and outgroup members (Stevenson & Sagherian-Dickey, 2016). Similarly, the study of contact between groups of local and migrant workers and their White employers in South Africa illustrates that intergroup contact occurs within a matrix of multiple groups and social relations (Kerr et al., 2017). Both sets of studies problematize the understanding of contact as a primarily dyadic phenomenon and draw attention to the role of fellow group members, observers, and other "third parties" in shaping the occurrence and outcomes of contact encounters.

What is clear from the current research is that contact is demonstrably shaped not only by the pre-existing relations within and between groups but also by the social and spatial contexts of its occurrence. With this analytical frame in mind, we consider the contact experiences of ethnic minority mothers within residential neighbourhoods.

Context and Focus of the Study: Immigrant Mothers in Finland

The transition to motherhood is a significant and often stressful process in women's lives. They need to learn to take care of their infants' well-being at the same time as experiencing radical changes in their social networks (Mercer, 2004; Miller, 2005; Seppälä et al., 2021). For immigrant mothers, the intersections of different social categories, such as motherhood, "immigrant" identity, ethnicity, gender, class, and religion produce qualitatively novel and distinct experiences (Bettencourt et al., 2019), which can greatly affect their social contacts and produce barriers to their integration with the host society. In addition, mothers with immigrant backgrounds may experience less parenting self-efficacy than the majority group mothers (Ali, 2008), possibly reflecting a conflict between the cultural meanings of motherhood within their ethnic group, which may differ markedly from those shared by the majority group (Miller, 2005). Compared to the majority mothers, mothers with an immigrant background can also experience the extra challenge of social isolation from their homeland family networks, and problems in receiving social support from peers and professionals in their

host society (e.g., O'Mahony et al., 2013; Ornelas et al., 2009). Therefore, becoming a mother can be an even bigger life change for immigrant women (Tsai et al., 2011).

However, motherhood also offers opportunities for integration into the host society. For ethnic minority members, most of the everyday contacts in institutions, public spaces, and services are intergroup contacts, usually with ethnic majority group members. For a mother with child, such encounters may become even more common, as everyday life with a child brings new contact opportunities. Beyond the social psychological contact literature, research has shown that school-aged children of immigrant families have the potential to play an important role in their parents' social contacts. The role of immigrants' children as language brokers – as the family's informal interpreters – has been well documented, though this research typically concerns children of 8 years and above (Kam & Lazarevic, 2014). Children can also have an initiating role in enhancing their parents' inter-ethnic contacts especially at parks, playgrounds, and schools (Schaeffer, 2013; Wilson, 2013), and children's cross-group friendships may require their parents' involvement leading to intergroup contacts (Windzio, 2018). Most of the prior studies have focused on school-aged children and their parents.

Despite the evident social isolation of immigrant mothers and the potential for their children to afford contact, immigrant mothers' intergroup contacts in their child's presence have not been investigated in social psychological research. This article addresses the gap in existing literature by considering how immigrant mothers' everyday lives provide a unique context to explore the role of a fellow group member (the child) in shaping the experience of intergroup contact in real-life settings. In other words, we analyse how the presence of one's child produces intergroup contact situations for an immigrant mother, how the mother experiences these situations, and how these experiences shape the mother's expectations of future contacts. We consider this a "triadic" contact (after Zagefka 2019) as not just between three people but three parties: the self, the ingroup member(s), and the outgroup member(s). We approach the intergroup encounters from the immigrant mother's perspective, who is often at first an observer of a direct contact between an ingroup member (her child) and ethnic outgroup member(s). We focus on immigrant mothers with small children (under 3 years old), considering that the younger the children are, the stronger the intergenerational interdependence of contacts (see Windzio, 2015).

This study was conducted in Finland where caring for young children at home is popular, as parents are eligible for a home care allowance until the child is 3 years old—most of which is paid to women (92% in 2020; Official Statistics of Finland, 2021a). Finland has a relatively short history of modern immigration, and ethnic diversity began to increase only in the last 30 years. Current figures show that first- or second-generation immigrants constitute 8% (444,000 people) of the population, with half of those residing in the metropolitan area of Helsinki (Official Statistics of Finland, 2021b). These immigrants come from a variety of different ethnic backgrounds, with the biggest groups of foreign-language speakers by mother tongue in Helsinki being Russian (17%), Somali (11%), Estonian (10%), Arabic (8%), and English (7%) (City of Helsinki, 2021). Thus, the everyday life context of our study is a multi-ethnic environment within a larger city context where ethnic minorities are a relatively small proportion of the population and where the history of multiculturalism is short relative to most other European states.

Method

This study is part of a larger ethnographic study conducted in two ethnically diverse, adjacent neighbourhoods in Helsinki, Finland. The ethnographic study consisted of an 11-month participant observation conducted in everyday spaces of mothers and children and three rounds of individual interviews with 14 majority Finnish mothers and 10 mothers from a variety of different immigrant backgrounds (see the section titled Respondents). This study covers first two rounds of interviews conducted 6 months apart for the mothers from a variety of immigrant backgrounds, which provided rich data of mothers' experiences and understandings. The respondents were recruited in the studied neighbourhoods from different formal groups for families (N = 7) and by snowballing (N = 3). The selection criteria of these two adjacent neighbourhoods based on their ethnic diversity (at least 30% of 0–3-year-old children had a foreign mother tongue and there were more than 100 of them), having a typical minority–majority group balance (predominant mother tongue was Finnish/Swedish), good local services for families (e.g., public child health care

clinic and playgrounds) to be able to make the daily life in the neighbourhood comfortable, and a close-to-average socioeconomic status of the neighbourhood as per Helsinki standards.

The interviews were conducted in the respondents' homes, in libraries, cafés, and in the neighbourhood community centres. In the interviews, the respondents were asked about their everyday life with the child in the neighbourhood and about their social relations and related experiences. The interviewees were encouraged to share their personal experiences. In the second interview, we also used some activation materials to elicit more explicit talk on diversity and interethnic relations (for the interview guides and the description of activation materials, see Appendix in the Supplementary Materials). The interviews were conducted by the first author (a White majority Finn), with whom many respondents were familiar because of her ethnographic fieldwork in these neighbourhoods. The interviews were conducted in Finnish, English, or Spanish depending on the respondents' preferences and relying upon the interviewer's competences and were recorded for verbatim transcription. The first author translated the presented Finnish and Spanish extracts into English. The duration of the interviews ranged from 39 to 172 min with an average of 100 min per interview.

Respondents

In total, 10 immigrant mothers were interviewed (age = 23–38 years; see Table 1). The ages of the youngest children were between 4 and 27 months at the time of the first interview. A total of 3 respondents were first-time mothers and 7 had more than 1 child (2–4 children; age = 3–10 years). Respondents came from different ethnic backgrounds (Asian, African, Eastern European, and Latin American) and had lived in Finland from 16 months to 18 years before their first interview. A total of 7 respondents had a university degree and the other 3 had upper secondary education, and they all lived with their spouses and children. The research has received ethical statement from The Ethics Committee of the Tampere Region, Finland. To protect the privacy of respondents, the data were pseudonymized and are not publicly available.

Table 1

Respondents

Pseudonym	Age	Ethnic background	Children	Years living in Finland
Fatima	over 30	Africa	3 or more	more than 5
Joy	over 30	Africa	1	more than 5
Lin	30 or under	Asia	1	5 or less
Liza	over 30	Africa	2	5 or less
Mai	over 30	Asia	2	more than 5
Manuela	over 30	Latin America	2	more than 5
Maryam	30 or under	Africa	2	more than 5
Nadja	over 30	Eastern Europe	2	5 or less
Vera	over 30	Eastern Europe	2	more than 5
Yasmine	over 30	Africa	3 or more	more than 5

Analytic Approach

To analyse the variety of ways which children's presence shaped immigrant women's intergroup contact experience, we conducted a reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke 2006, 2019, 2021). Our research interests emerge from intergroup contact research and in the continuum of inductive and deductive analysis, our study situates more on the deductive side. Based on prior contact research, we focused on the understudied types of contact (namely, triadic contact including one's child) but then generated the codes inductively from this selected material to grasp the complexity of such contact situations. We combined the data from the two waves of immigrant mothers' interviews to one data set (about 200,000 words). The data were not analysed longitudinally because we were not interested about the possible change processes in mothers' experiences. However, conducting follow-up interviews with each mother afforded a deep-

er exploration of the personal experiences and expectations of each one of them. Longer involvement with respondents also helped in developing trust between the respondents and the interviewer, which was further established through their shared experiences of parenthood.

The analytical process was conducted in close collaboration by the first and second authors, and the analysis was regularly discussed with the third and fourth authors. This afforded shared reflexivity and more nuanced interpretation of data (see Braun & Clarke, 2019). First, after careful familiarization with the data, we produced the data set by collating all respondents' accounts of their intergroup contact situations which included their child. For *contact*, we considered all direct (between mother and outgroup member) and indirect (via child) forms of intergroup interaction. The interaction could be verbal (e.g., saying hello) or non-verbal (e.g., gazing). The contact was defined to be *intergroup* when the respondents explicitly defined a contact situation between different ethnic groups (e.g., "Finns" and "people speaking other languages"). We then chose only those accounts of intergroup contact in which the child was physically present with the mother and the outgroup member(s) (about 9,000 words). We did not specifically ask the respondents about their intergroup contact experiences in their child's presence, but we found the topic interesting as it was commonly raised in the interviews. These spontaneously produced accounts evidently represented meaningful contact experiences to the respondents and are worthy of consideration by themselves. We excluded accounts which were too fragmented or where the intergroup nature of encounters was unclear.

Our analysis advanced as an iterative process, beginning with theory-informed, data-led coding of extracts. Then, we collated the codes and developed them into themes that described the key experiences in these contacts. We understood the themes as patterns of shared meanings united by a core experience which could have multiple facets (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Our reflexive analysis process was continued until the identified themes were coherent and distinctive, the relations between them were clear, and the themes were named (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019). We continued this process until the end of writing the final report (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

Results

We identified three themes which capture immigrant mothers' experiences of intergroup contacts occurring in the presence of their child. The first two themes describe how the child's socially passive (Theme 1) or active (Theme 2) presence facilitated positive, negative, or ambivalent intergroup contacts for the immigrant women, while Theme 3 reflects how past negative contacts in the child's presence led to the mothers' anticipation of problems in intergroup contacts in the future. We named the themes based on their key experiences: i) feeling visible to others, ii) seeking harmonious contact, and iii) anticipating problems with contact.

Theme 1: Feeling Visible to Others

Immigrant mothers frequently described how their accompanying child attracted the attention of others, making them feel more visible to outgroup members. These occurrences happened in public spaces such as playgrounds, libraries, public transport, or shops. They included instances where an outgroup member commented on the child's appearance or behaviour, expressed their feelings about the mother and the child, or started mundane everyday interaction (e.g., casual conversation). These unplanned encounters were accompanied with both positive and negative feelings, such as delight, frustration, and uncertainty. The visibility caused by the child's presence had two facets: either the mothers *felt conspicuous and vulnerable* to an outgroup's approaches for contact or, in contrast to prior "invisibility" (Leinonen & Toivanen, 2014; Settles et al., 2019), they experienced *being recognized* by the outgroup. The contact situations under this theme were predominantly experienced by non-White minorities such as African or Asian mothers, some of whom were wearing a veil.

Yasmine, a mother from an African background, talked during the interview about her ingroup as "Black(s), foreigners" and referred to the outgroup as "White". After Yasmine had given a lengthy description of the prejudice she had experienced from her new, mainly White majority Finnish neighbours, the interviewer asked whether she had noticed such behaviour in other contexts as well. Yasmine answered by describing an encounter with an older Finnish woman

while she was returning home with her children by bus. The majority Finnish woman was initially sitting at the back of the bus; later, while walking towards them to alight from the bus, she looked them "from head to toe". The experience of *being conspicuous and vulnerable* became clear when Yasmine explains her thoughts and interpretation of the situation:

Extract 1: Yasmine, an African mother of three or more children

[T]hey usually do that a lot, especially when you are pushing the pram. When you are pushing the pram, they usually look at you with some kind of dissatisfaction. We attribute it to the fact that they are thinking maybe 'you are here, you are not working, you are just having babies, and you are, the state is spending money, on you' and all those kind[s] of things. And me, when it happens, I feel very bad, because sometimes I'm like 'you don't even know that, my tax, the tax that I'm paying even though I'm a mother of [three or more children], the tax that I'm paying, is what they are using to feed you'. But you don't have maybe the opportunity to explain to the person [. . .] something like that.

In this extract, Yasmine reflects her familiarity with the incident, implying that it is common for women in her ingroup to be exposed to the majority group's unwanted attention in this way. In a dominantly White context, she is easily spotted as a "Black" or "immigrant" mother with her children, which makes her feel especially vulnerable to the negative stereotypes about immigrants not being productive citizens but taking advantage of state benefits. Thus, being conspicuous to the outgroups as an immigrant mother of several children exposes her to their gaze ("they usually look at you"), which questions her belonging to the community without social space to defend herself against the "dissatisfaction" she associates with such gazing. The fleeting encounter is soon ended, but Yasmine feels intruded upon and unjustly disapproved, which consolidates her thoughts about the majority group's attitudes towards her ethnic group.

As mothers felt conspicuous when their child drew an outgroup's attention, their imperfect language skills intensified the experiences of ambiguity and uneasiness. During the second interview, respondents were encouraged to discuss their and other groups' belonging and non-belonging to their everyday spaces (see Appendix in the Supplementary Materials). Mai, a mother from an Asian background, stated that "it's difficult for a migrant to adapt to Finnish life" and explained that immigrant mothers do not know where to go and what to do with their children in Finland. Mai had taken her preschool-aged child to a free music performance and explained her contact experience there:

Extract 2: Mai, an Asian mother with two children

So, yes, then [my] son was just fine sitting there, or was there for an hour, [. . .] [laughs] not so. Then, after the playing, one [person] behind me, a man sitting in the row, maybe when the violin was playing, my son, well at least there was some noise, noise with a chair or a piece of paper. Then, on the break, the man sitting behind [us] came to say, then I didn't hear so closely. [. . .] like I had heard really a- right this word, adults' right or something else? [. . .] unsure what he means, but then I didn't bother to ask more because it was so quiet in the event. But after that [. . .], I told my son, "Let's be quiet here".

In this extract, Mai describes how a majority Finnish man from another row gives her verbal feedback, which seems to make her feel conspicuous. Without fully understanding what the man was saying, she assumes her son had made "some noise" that disturbed him. The situation could be common for any mother, but for Mai the foreign language and the uncertainty of local norms caused confusion and discomfort; she kept thinking what the man really said and meant. Yet, Mai did not feel secure enough to ask for clarification in the quiet space as it would make her even more visible. Instead, she tried to resolve the situation by becoming "invisible" again by silencing her child and deciding to avoid such events until "he is bigger" and "there will be no noise". Here, the somewhat unfamiliar social context combined with communication problems resulted in an enhanced experience of being conspicuous, which finally led to the decision to avoid further exposure to such unsolicited attention.

However, sometimes the experienced visibility generated by a child produced unexpected but positive approaches from an outgroup. One of these positive experiences was described by Maryam, a Muslim mother from an African background who had lived most of her life in Finland but mostly spent time with her fellow ingroup members. In the beginning of the second interview, she was asked whether her toddler had started to say some words already. As

a response to this question, the first thing she described was a sudden, positive encounter with an outgroup woman prompted by her 2-year-old son's behaviour on a bus:

Extract 3: Maryam, an African mother with two children

Yeah [he] speaks well, that three-word sentences [he] has begun to say already, just like that, probably a couple of months ago started talking a lot and, the Finnish language, probably has learned from [his] sister, I don't know, just a couple of weeks ago [he] counted from one to seven on the bus, I was like "what, when did he learn?" [laughs]. There was a woman on the bus that was like "wow, he counts nicely", I was like "yeah I'm surprised, I didn't even know he can count".

Here, the child's behaviour works as a trigger for an intergroup encounter between strangers. By counting numbers in the majority language, the toddler attracts the attention of an outgroup woman whose admiring comment to Maryam made her feel *recognized* by an outgroup member (Settles et al., 2019). While the outgroup member's approach is unsolicited, its positive tone encourages Maryam to respond, and, in the interview, she recounted this positive contact experience as a confirmation of her current feeling of "there are no problems, everything's fine". Therefore, Maryam experienced this encounter reaffirming as she was *seen* and thus *recognized* by an outgroup member in a positive manner, which reinforced her feeling of belonging in the wider social surroundings (see Settles et al., 2019).

As the immigrant mothers could never be quite sure whether the visibility was due to their visually recognizable group membership (e.g., race, clothing, etc.) or their motherhood, these situations were particularly ambiguous and could create intergroup anxiety. These situations were imposed by outgroups and at times were unwanted, but at other times the mothers were pleased to be (positively) visible for others. Common for all experiences in Theme 1 was the immigrant mothers' lack of control over a situation: the decision of establishing contact with the immigrant mother was always based on her child's presence or behaviour and was made by outgroup adults. This highlights the wider power relations between groups (see Settles et al., 2019).

Theme 2: Seeking Harmonious Contact

In the first theme, the child was passively present in a situation facilitating an intergroup contact, while in the second theme, the child's active contact seeking (e.g., child playing with an outgroup child) drew the mother into an intergroup interaction. A common experience in the second theme is seeking harmonious intergroup contact, making the mothers become attentive to their child's contact situation. This experience of being responsible for promoting harmonious intergroup contact had two facets: either the mother felt she was *on solid ground* and simply nourished the positive contact to maintain harmony when there was a smooth intergroup contact started by her child – or the mother felt she was *on a knife-edge* when she perceived that her child's contact was negative or ambivalent and that she needed to turn the direction of the contact by instructing the child, asking for help from others, or intervening with the contact (e.g., apologizing). In both cases, the mothers began to engage in intergroup contact themselves, and their key experience was that of actively seeking harmonious contact.

Respondents often described scenes in which their children were playing with outgroup children in various public spaces. In these contexts, the contact between children frequently resulted in interaction among the accompanying parents. Respondents habitually reported that their child's amiable interactions with outgroup members led to an amiable contact experience for the mother as well. In the following extract, Liza, a Black English-speaking woman, who recently moved from Africa, describes the evolution of a fleeting intergroup contact via preschool-aged children at a bus stop:

Extract 4: Liza, an African mother with two children

Interviewer: *Can you tell me more examples of where [you get to know new people], for example?*

Liza: *We're at the bus stop waiting for the bus, and there's this girl with my daughter, and they start playing hide and seek there at the bus stop. I give the mother a smile, she gives me a smile back. She tries to talk to me. I start talking and discover that we are [living] just a street apart. She doesn't speak*

English; she's a Finn. So, we have to speak Finnish to one another, and we have to make each other understand. That was very nice.

This extract illustrates how children's spontaneous intergroup contact drew the mothers into interaction. This easy start produced in Liza a feeling of being *on solid ground* to further support the well-started positive contact of the children by being active herself. Even the absence of a common language is not considered a hindrance, as both mothers have the common goal of making the effort to understand each other. In Liza's example, we see how a positive interaction between children could flow into a relaxed interaction between mothers, as no intervention was needed, and mothers could develop their mutual contact in peace and gain confidence in it (see Stevenson et al., 2021). The mothers' parental responsibility ensures that they are active observers of the children's interaction, making the step towards direct contact of similar valence shorter for both of them.

While several respondents in our study reported experiences similar to Liza's, there were many accounts of a child's negative contacts that required the mothers to seek change in the course of interaction. Then, the mother's active role was needed to correct her child's unwanted behaviour, such as poking or pushing their outgroup playmate. On such occasions, the respondents' experiences varied from compassionate collaboration with outgroup adults to encounters which exposed them to negative experiences, such as racism or conflict. Maryam, who has an African background, described a difficult contact situation initiated by her toddler at a library's story-time event among majority Finns and her attempt to include the outgroup in resolving the situation:

Extract 5: Maryam, an African mother with two children

Then my son went to see and, then my son poked that boy [. . .] I was scared [and] I told my son that "hey, don't hit, don't poke, don't touch, apologize to the boy". Then I said, I don't know wha-, it's always difficult, you know, when I want him to learn to apologize, and then I wonder that okay, should I, in that situation, say to him in Finnish that "go now to say you're sorry", even though I always speak in [mother tongue] [with my child]. Then I apologized and told my own [child] not to poke.

In this example, Maryam sought to repair the negative contact situation by forbidding her child and by presenting her apologies to the outgroup child. The contact situation was further complicated by the language barrier: using her mother tongue, the language she used to communicate with her child, would have constrained her simultaneous communication with the local Finns and positioned her as "the other" in reference to them (see Petrjánošová, 2012). To defuse the situation, she makes an exception and uses the majority language to apologize to the outgroup child herself to turn the course of the situation towards harmonious contact. Maryam's account was typical for this theme, as it illustrates the mother's experience of being frightened and *on a knife-edge*; if a child's contact with outgroup members took a negative turn, the mothers felt a heavy burden of resolving the situation quickly. How a child's contacts were affectively experienced by mothers was especially visible in this extract. Such situations could further aggravate a mother's intergroup anxiety and contact avoidance. Just like Mai (Extract 2), Maryam too reported that she would not go to story-time events again until her son was older and would "know how to behave".

While all parents may experience stress as their young children are still learning the social rules and often behave in unfortunate ways, such situations posed an additional threat for immigrant mothers. Mothers are often considered the principal caretakers of their children, but in addition, our respondents' categorization as ethnic minority group members exposed them to further scrutiny. The mothers experienced strongly the intergroup situations produced by their children; they actively looked for harmonious contact under the threat of negative encounter. In the worst case, failing to have positive contact could result in (self-) segregation in future.

Theme 3: Anticipating Problems

The final theme focuses on our respondents' tendency to anticipate problems in potential intergroup contact situations in the child's presence. The characteristic of the accounts in this theme is that mothers are afraid of future intergroup contacts in the presence of the child and anticipate negative outcomes. While the first two themes focus on the mothers'

lived experiences on how child's being and behaviour generates contact, which is then experienced in varied ways, the third theme's focus is only on the direct contact that has not yet (fully) realized.

Several respondents described how negative expectations led to increased self-consciousness around outgroup members; stricter control over their child's behaviour, especially in intergroup contacts; and contact avoidance. Mai's account in Theme 1 (Extract 2) and Maryam's report in Theme 2 (Extract 5) illustrate how negative contact experiences led them to avoid certain public places until their children's behaviour would supposedly not cause problems with outgroups. Thus, the children's intergroup contact often caused anxiety for their mothers, especially if they anticipated conflict between the children.

In her first interview, Maryam described her anxiety about situations where her toddler had behaved incorrectly and outgroup adults had commented on it. After telling this to the interviewer, she burst into tears and explained her feelings: "I didn't even know it [had] affected [me] so much". In the second interview, the interviewer encourages her to reflect on the meaning of different backgrounds in contacts between mothers. Maryam's response illustrates how the prior negative intergroup contacts affected on her preference to spend time with other ingroup mothers and on her parenting in public spaces in the presence of majority children and their parents.

Extract 6: Maryam, an African mother with two children

[Within ethnic ingroup] I feel more secure, also with [my] children, that if we're for example sitting in the park with friends, and there's a Finnish child, well yes I am more attentive to what my children are doing, more than if there is [ethnic ingroup] children there, because I feel that if my child takes something from an [ingroup child], well it won't maybe become such a big problem between the children, when often, and this is a generalization again, but often that if, one touches a Finnish child's things, [. . .] if my child touches some Finnish child, that child is then like, [I'm] just like "okay, be careful now beside them".

Maryam describes being more attentive to her children's actions when outgroup children are present. Her account illustrates the negative expectations from intergroup contacts and was typical of the other accounts of the third theme: immigrant mothers often become increasingly self-conscious around outgroup children and their parents and consequently increased their control over their children, as conflicts were expected to arise more easily. Maryam seems to be aware of her own negative stereotype when she explicitly says, "this is a generalization", but nevertheless passes her anxiety to her children by warning them when playing in the vicinity of majority group children. Therefore, her anticipation of problems in contact becomes clear also for her children and may be noticed by outgroup members too, potentially influencing their interpretations of the desirability of the contact (see Stephan, 2014).

Another typical reaction to anticipating negative contacts was contact avoidance. To prevent the anticipated conflict or awkwardness in contact and to manage their own anxiety, mothers could, for instance, encourage their children to play only with ingroup children. The intergroup contacts with children were often experienced as energy consuming. At times, they were avoided by planning carefully when and where to go with the child. Fatima had lived in Finland all her adult life, including several years as a mother, and had gathered experience in parenting and about contacts with other parents in Finland. She reported some prior negative experiences such as majority group parents speaking harshly to young children and their parents on a playground. Fatima described how she had "needed to collect some strength" before going to the playground again with her younger children. In the following extract, she gives an account of how this kind of contact avoidance affected her use of public playgrounds.

Extract 7: Fatima, an African mother of three or more children

The playground we visited sometimes in the afternoon so that one child, who is two years old, [--] we went just two of us and the baby was at home. Then I would have free hands. And I'm in fact distressed that I don't want my child to make [even] a small mistake and then someone just gets angry. That some people, think you can't, raise [your] children well and you can't, instruct [them] properly. That is something I can notice, that kind of message.

As this extract showcases, it was typical among our respondents to dread negative responses from outgroups, as they could never really know for sure whether they were targeted towards their mothering, their ethnic background, or both. Here, Fatima opts to expose herself to such risky contacts only when she has more resources to face them, namely being attentive and having "free hands" to intervene, if necessary. Her distress over any possible "mistakes" by her child withholds her from casual encounters with outgroup members. This example shows how anticipating problems incites Fatima to control every possible contact situation the child may become involved in, even if doing so limits her opportunities to go out with her child and may eventually result in self-segregation.

In conclusion, the third theme shows how prior direct or indirect negative contact experiences of mothers and their children can make them anticipate negative outcomes of future contacts with accompanying child. This anticipation may become a self-fulfilling prophecy, as intergroup contact is avoided and outgroups may interpret this behaviour as rejection or aversion and respond to it accordingly (see Stephan, 2014).

Discussion

The aim of this study was to explore how a child's presence in intergroup contact situations shapes immigrant mothers' experiences of intergroup encounters, as also how these experiences frame mothers' expectations of future contacts. Using reflexive thematic analysis, we identified three themes. The first theme depicted how the immigrant mothers' accompanying child often attracted the outgroup adults' attention, eliciting unanticipated intergroup encounters accompanied by the experience of being visible to others as an ethnic minority mother. There were two facets to this experience: negative/ambivalent contact valence could make mothers feel conspicuous, but positive/neutral valence made them feel recognized. The second theme described how a child's active searching for contact drew the mother into intergroup contact and to seek harmony. Also in this theme there were two facets: in easy-going contact situations, the mothers felt they were on solid ground to nourish the positive valence of contact, or, in ambivalent or negative interactions, the mothers experienced being on a knife-edge, with pressure to support a positive change in the interaction. The final theme described how prior negative and ambivalent contact experiences elicited negative expectations of future contacts, which resulted in increased levels of self-consciousness among outgroup members, heightened control over their own child, and contact avoidance.

In the last two decades, scholars have increasingly criticized contact theory for overlooking social context (Connolly, 2000; Dixon et al., 2005; McKeown & Dixon, 2017) and the complexity of real-life contacts (Dixon et al., 2020; Zagefka, 2019), as well as given more attention to the diverse ways in which indirect contact may act (Mazziotta et al., 2011; Vezzali et al., 2014). Therefore, our findings contribute to this literature in a number of ways.

First, much of the prior contact studies have focused on positive intergroup contacts in rarefied conditions (see Dixon et al., 2005; McKeown & Dixon, 2017) and superficial but meaningful everyday contacts have often been disregarded (but see Blackwood et al., 2015; Lee, 2000). Our results contribute to this area by showing that for immigrant mothers with young children the fleeting encounters were the most prevalent form of intergroup contact, while the accounts of more substantial cross-group friendships were almost missing. Passing encounters were meaningful and pivotal to our interviewees' understanding of their place within their local neighbourhoods and within their society more generally.

Second, our analysis shows how the special intragroup bond between a mother and her child affords a rather unique form of indirect intergroup contact. Previous literature has stated that indirect contact can be experienced less threatening than direct contact (Wright et al., 1997). Prior studies, however, have not considered how the quality of the intragroup relation may shape the indirect contact experience. Our study shows that vicarious contact through one's child often produced heightened anxiety and stress in our respondents. Immigrant mothers could never be quite sure whether the outgroup's behaviour was due to their ethnic group membership or for some other, more general reason. This was especially emphasized in negative encounters. Thus, we suggest that this increased anxiety not only arises from intergroup contact itself but is also affected by the close bond between a mother and her child—mothers often felt they were likely to be held personally responsible for the actions of their child. Prior negative contact experiences in a child's presence seemed to strengthen anxiety, which in turn heightened the respondents' vigilance of their own

parenting and their child's behaviour. This could lead to a negative circle of reducing their cognitive resources during the contact and leading to burdensome contact experiences (see Stephan, 2014).

Third, the unique indirect intergroup contact explained above illustrates the importance of analysing the "third parties" in intergroup contacts (see Zagefka, 2019). In our study, we respond to this growing interest for triadic or more complex constellations of contact (see also Dixon et al., 2020; Kerr et al., 2017). Following the recent systematization of Zagefka (2019), the triadic intergroup contacts reported by our respondents included two types of constellations: a) the mother was an observer, the child was a recipient, and the outgroup member was the actor (e.g., Extract 3) and b) the mother was an observer, the child was the actor, and the outgroup member was the recipient (e.g., Extract 5). Thus, our research on real-life triadic contacts afforded descriptions of lived experiences in such constellations. Our study confirms how pivotal studying contact beyond dyads can be and thus suggests further contact studies to take the same challenge of considering the complexities of encounters in everyday life.

Fourth, our findings suggest that direct and indirect contact often occur within the same encounter, particularly when the scene involves multiple actors with varied bonds and relationships (see Dixon et al., 2005, 2020; Zagefka, 2019). The fluctuating changes from indirect to direct contact presented in our analysis illustrate how difficult it is to separate these two forms of contact in real life. In a close intragroup relation, vicarious contact can act as an important route to direct contact *during* the encounter. While prior studies have shown that indirect contact can facilitate future direct contact (Turner et al., 2007; Wölfer et al., 2019), to our knowledge, shifts between indirect and direct contact *during* contact situations have not yet been studied. Based on our study, we suggest that different relationships between fellow ingroup members entail varied expectations of their behaviour in vicarious contact situations (e.g., the relational roles of parent and child or romantic partners).

Our study also has practical and policy implications. It shows that children's presence offers immigrant women regular opportunities for intergroup encounters. Prior studies have already shown this (Schaeffer, 2013; Wilson, 2013; Windzio, 2018), but through viewing the contacts from the perspective of minority experiences, we have illustrated how increased opportunities for contact via children do not necessarily translate into positive intergroup encounters. Negative contact accounts were typically related to moments that could also be familiar to majority mothers with young children. For our respondents, insufficient language skills and the lack of knowledge of local norms also made the encounters confusing and evoked anxiety or feelings of being "othered" (Petrjánošová, 2012; Stephan, 2014). More longstanding and deeper contact with majority mothers could afford minority mothers many resources to tackle these barriers for positive contact. Thus, programmes helping immigrant mothers to form friendships with majority mothers are highly recommended; this could happen, for example, in places already known by many mothers of different backgrounds (e.g., playgrounds, libraries). Similarly, promoting the confidence of both minority and majority mothers in these contacts (on both personal and group levels) and emphasizing their shared identity as mothers is likely to generate greater social cohesion in mixed neighbourhoods and confer important benefits for the well-being and integration of immigrant mothers and their children.

The strength of our study is its rich data about everyday intergroup contacts as experienced by minority members. Interviews are a collaborative project between the interviewer and the interviewee; the longer engagement with interviewees during the research created trust and thus facilitated openness, as also did the shared experiences of parenthood with the interviewer. While the respondents described various positive and negative contact experiences, the interviewer's position as a researcher and as a majority group member may have affected their willingness to speak openly. There are also other potential limitations that future studies could overcome. While our study focused solely on mothers, future studies could broaden the focus to other dyads (e.g., father–child, spouses, etc.) or more complex constellations (e.g., both parents with the child) in intergroup contacts. Further complexities beyond ingroup–outgroup dichotomy could be explored by studying mixed couples (outgroup companion) and people with dual identities (e.g., second generation immigrants). Moreover, future studies could adopt a longitudinal perspective to follow the changes in immigrant mothers' direct and indirect intergroup contacts as their children grow up and start having more personal relationships outside the family. Finally, instead of focusing on contact situations in a child's presence, a broader focus on motherhood could reveal even more perspectives on how motherhood may affect immigrant women's outgroup contacts and related experiences. For example, becoming a mother can enhance immigrant women's motivation to seek outgroup contact to receive the needed company, support, and services.

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To conclude, our study offers novel insights into immigrant mothers' experiences of intergroup contacts. The child, as a fellow ingroup member, shapes the mother's opportunities, experiences, and expectations of intergroup contacts. If successful, these contacts represent an important opportunity for the mother to experience belonging, support for her child's development, and integration into the host society, all contributing to the well-being of both. The results recognize the importance of studying contact as it occurs in real life, including many participants, category memberships, and shifts between direct and indirect contact.

Supplementary Materials

The Supplementary Materials contain the interview guides and a description of the activation materials used in the interviews (for access see Index of Supplementary Materials below).

Index of Supplementary Materials

Paajanen, P., Seppälä, T., Stevenson, C., & Finell, E. (2022). *Supplementary materials to "Child's presence shapes immigrant women's experiences of everyday intergroup contact"* [Interview guides and description of activation materials used in interviews]. PsychOpen GOLD. https://doi.org/10.23668/psycharchives.8127

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