

# Negative contact, collective action, and social change: Critical reflections, technological advances, and new directions

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## Abstract

Intergroup contact research has expanded exponentially in the last few decades, with researchers employing a widening range of methods to offer new insights into the effects of both positive and negative contact experiences. In this commentary, we discuss the contributions of three papers to this special issue of the Journal of Social Issues on advances in intergroup contact research, namely Schäfer et al.'s (2021) review of research on negative intergroup contact experiences, Hässler et al.'s (2020) review of research on intergroup contact and social change, and O'Donnell et al.'s (2021) review of technological and analytic advances in contact research. Having outlined the key arguments of each paper, we then offer some theoretical and methodological reflections, also discussing potential gaps, connections, opportunities, and future directions along the way. We end by reflecting on a common theme that permeates our commentary: the need to contextualize adequately the dynamics of intergroup contact across a range of everyday settings. Here we argue that to fully understand how to promote beneficial forms of intergroup contact, we need to consider more carefully how contact is experienced, enacted, and evaluated “on the ground” by

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participants themselves. This requires work of both theoretical and methodological innovation.

#### KEYWORDS

discrimination, groups/intergroup processes, intergroup relations

This commentary discusses the contributions of three papers to this special issue of the JSI advances in intergroup contact research, namely Schäfer et al.'s (2021) review of research on negative intergroup contact experiences, Hässler et al.'s (2020) review of research on intergroup contact and social change, and O'Donnell et al.'s (2021) review of technological and analytic advances in contact research. Having outlined the key arguments of each paper, we offer some theoretical and methodological reflections and also discuss potential gaps, connections, opportunities, and future directions.

## THE NEGATIVE-POSITIVE CONTACT ASYMMETRY AND BEYOND

### He, Too

Returning to the US, he asks  
my occupation. Teacher.  
*What do you teach?*  
Poetry.

*I hate poetry, the officer says,  
I only like writing  
where you can make an argument.*

Anything he asks, I must answer.  
This he likes, too.  
I don't tell him  
he will be in a poem  
where the argument will be  
anti-American.  
I place him here, puffy,  
pink, ringed in plexi, pleased  
with his own wit  
and spittle. Saving the argument  
I am let in  
am let in until

### Solmaz Sharif

Solmaz Sharif's poem about her encounter—as an Iranian-American woman returning to the United States—with a U.S. Customs and Border Protection officer provides a powerful, nuanced

example of so-called “negative contact.” The poem shows how such encounters may involve experiences of authoritarian coercion and paternalism, the affirmation of status differences and dependencies, but also counter-reactions and resistance (in this case poetic). As Schäfer et al. (2021) have noted, the contact literature has tended to overlook the significance of such experiences by emphasizing our positive encounters with others. Since Allport’s (1954) review, researchers have been driven mainly by the goal of identifying what kinds of intergroup contact reduce prejudice, how they do so, and why. They have looked on the proverbial bright side of life, studying contact experiences that approximate Allport’s (1954) optimal conditions or include other beneficial features such as intimacy, self-disclosure, and friendship (cf. Dixon et al., 2005). Though early researchers of course recognized intergroup contact experiences can be negative—and sometimes outright hostile—only “belatedly” (Dovidio et al., 2017) has the theme of negative contact emerged as a systematic object of research.

Schäfer et al. (2021) offer an up-to-date, comprehensive, and thoughtful review of this emerging literature, most of which is based on research conducted over the past decade. As they point out, early work was focused on the positive–negative contact asymmetry. This work was driven by Fiona Barlow, Stefania Paolini and colleagues, whose research showed that negative contact may have stronger effects on intergroup attitudes than positive contact (e.g., Barlow et al., 2012; Paolini et al., 2010). Although negative contact is typically less frequent, they argued, it may pack a heavier social psychological punch, possibly because it heightens the salience of intergroup categories and differences and its effects are thus readily generalized. Having both grown up in Northern Ireland, we can attest to the power of negative contact experiences—direct, indirect, and vicarious—and to their role in sustaining, in the case of our own society, sectarian divisions.

Assessing the more recent literature, however, Schäfer et al. rightly argue in their review that the positive–negative contact asymmetry may be more complex than is sometimes assumed (though note that some early research recognized that this asymmetry was unlikely to be contextually invariant; e.g., see Paolini et al., 2010, 2014). They highlight how emerging findings have been complex and sometimes inconclusive, with some research confirming that negative contact has more powerful effects on intergroup attitudes than positive contact, other research showing the opposite pattern, and still other research presenting mixed or qualified findings. At the very least, current evidence suggests that the positive–negative contact asymmetry displays contextual plasticity and clarifying this issue is a matter for future research.

Two related contributions of Schäfer et al.’s review merit emphasis. The first concerns the *interactive* effects of positive and negative contact experiences on intergroup attitudes, stereotypes, and other relevant outcomes. It is easy to presume that positive and negative contact can be measured on a bipolar continuum, that is, that for any individual more frequent positive experiences of contact implies, by definition, less frequent negative experiences. However, evidence suggests that this is not the case. Correlations between quantitative measures of these constructs are often, perhaps surprisingly, modest. Participants may, for example, report experiencing high, intermediate, or low levels of both types of contact. Moreover, the two types of contact may involve qualitatively distinct experiences (McKeown & Dixon, 2017), and may correlate differently with different outcomes (for a recent example see Barlow et al., 2019). As such, how positive and negative contact experiences interact to shape intergroup relations over time has emerged as another important question for future research. Schäfer et al. usefully summarize what we know so far about this question, exploring, for instance, the possibility that positive early encounters with others offset the effects of later negative encounters.

The second point concerns what Schäfer et al. frame as the strongest and most consistent finding in the emerging literature on negative contact, namely that it occurs infrequently. They suggest this as a matter for optimism for those seeking to reduce prejudice and to promote social change,

especially as "... more prior [positive] contact experiences buffer against the impact of negative contact" (p.x). Their point is that questionnaire based or related generic self-report measures (e.g., Barlow et al., 2012; Graf et al., 2014) have consistently found that negative intergroup encounters are reported as rarer than positive encounters. However, as Schäfer et al. recognize, this point needs to be interpreted cautiously and with due respect for the specific experiences that may be hidden by such generic measures.

The poem on which this section opened exemplifies one such experience—the routine, if not institutionalized, negative contact experiences of some minority group members as they pass through airport security into the US in the current climate. Such experiences have also been captured in research conducted in the United Kingdom. Blackwood et al.'s (2013, 2016) studies of Scottish Muslims' experiences passing through British airports, for example, have explored closely related experiences of hostile surveillance, lack of acknowledgement of citizenship rights, and identity "misrecognition." Revealingly, they have also explored the strategies that Muslim travelers use either to avoid negative contact or to mitigate its worst consequences.

Sadly, it is not difficult to imagine many similar examples of routine forms of negative contact, particularly those experienced by members of disadvantaged groups. For reasons of space, we invite readers to fill in this list for themselves with respect to their own communities. Our broader point is that the global indices suggesting that negative contact experiences are the exception rather than the rule should not blind us to the fact that such experiences are a recurring and sometimes involuntary feature of everyday life for some people. Indeed, some researchers have been considering just that. For example, Graf et al. (2014) examined both the frequency and effects of negative contact together and Paolini and McIntyre (2019) stressed the importance of examining the interplay between the asymmetries in the prevalence and impact of negative contact experiences. Identifying how, when, and with what consequences negative contact experiences unfold, then, is another task for future research.

We end this section on some broader observations that seek to expand themes that are implicit in Schäfer et al.'s paper. First, if we accept that negative contact cannot be defined simply as one pole of a quantitative positive to negative contact continuum, then we require methods that are able to capture its situated meanings in their own terms. In our view, that means conducting qualitative research in which the emotions, thoughts, and behaviors of ordinary participants are captured and analyzed in context. To give an example on which the first author is currently working with colleagues: in some intergroup encounters, negative contact may invoke powerful feelings of humiliation and these feelings, in turn, may lead to a sense of dehumanization, a feeling that one is being treated as "less than human" (see Murray et al.'s, 2021, work on domestic service relationships in South Africa). The interactional dynamics through which such experiences unfold require careful qualitative analysis and contextualization. They also require a program of work that does not simply reduce negative contact to general quantitative indices but recognizes that negative contact experiences may vary across different types of social relationships. The experiences of homeless people on the street, for example, may be quite different to the experiences of Palestinians at Israeli Checkpoints, to women's experiences of sexual harassment in the workplace, or to gay couples' experiences of homophobia in public spaces. Indeed, we would predict that such a research program will eventually complicate the simplistic binary distinction between "negative versus positive contact," revealing the complexities and ambivalences of social interactions across group boundaries. Anticipating this development, for example, Durrheim et al. (2014) found that ostensibly positive interactions (e.g., involving helping behaviors) between Black domestic laborers and their White bosses in post-apartheid South Africa also served to reproduce racialized status and power differences between them.

A second broad observation concerns the importance of exploring further online and mediated experiences of negative contact. Until relatively recently, the contact literature has tended to privilege face to face interactions and arguably this form of contact is still treated as paramount. However, there is now a rich and growing literature on other forms of contact (see Dovidio et al., 2017; Hasler & Amichai-Hamburger, 2013), as illustrated by other papers in this issue (e.g., see White et al., 2020). In our view, mediated and online forms of communication may be particularly significant in understanding the nature and consequences of negative contact, an issue that is still relatively under-researched. While some features of online environments may create opportunities for more friendly, self-disclosing, and equal communication between groups (e.g., see Hasler & Amichai-Hamburger, 2013), other features may work in the opposite direction (see White et al., 2015, p. 7–8). Conditions of anonymity and a (sometimes) reduced sense of accountability, for example, make online spaces arenas where negative contact experiences may unfold in manifold and sometimes extreme ways. Perhaps crucially, they may unfold in ways that do not normally occur in face-to-face settings. We are only just beginning to understand the implications of such processes.

A final observation concerns the need to explore negative contact outcomes beyond prejudice reduction. As our above example of humiliation and dehumanization suggests, experiences of negative contact may have damaging health implications, an idea that resonates with work linking experiences of intergroup discrimination to the deterioration of physical and mental well-being (e.g., Carter et al., 2017; Major et al., 2018). As anticipated in Schäfer et al.'s (2021) review, the related question of how negative and positive contact experiences *interact* to shape such health outcomes also warrants further attention (see also Dovidio et al., 2017). Last, and again moving beyond simple prejudice reduction outcomes, the importance of exploring how negative contact is associated with wider political attitudes, perceptions, and actions merits further attention. This theme is developed in Hässler et al.'s (2020) review, which proposes an integrative model of intergroup contact and social change that encompasses the role of both positive and negative contact experiences.

## COLLECTIVE ACTION AND SOCIAL CHANGE REVISITED

Research on the contact hypothesis is informed largely by a prejudice reduction model of social change. By reducing negative intergroup stereotypes and fostering positive emotions towards others, contact is presumed to combat wider forms of discrimination and inequality (Dixon et al., 2012). However, as Wright and Lubensky (2009) highlighted, positive contact may sometimes decrease the willingness of members of historically disadvantaged groups to recognize social injustice, to support policies of redress, or to engage in collective action to change historically unequal societies. Such outcomes have been variously labeled the “ironic” (Saguy et al., 2009), “sedative” (Cakal et al., 2011), and “paradoxical” (Dixon et al., 2010) effects of positive contact. Substantive evidence now confirms that such effects emerge across a range of cultural contexts and types of intergroup relations (e.g., see Carter et al., 2018; Dixon et al., 2017; Glasford & Calcagno, 2011; Tropp et al., 2012; Saguy & Chernyak-Hai, 2012; Sengupta & Sibley, 2013).

However recent commentators, including Hässler et al. (2020), in their review have rightly highlighted that the proposition that positive contact is antithetical to progressive change is simplistic. First, research suggests that such contact does not invariably reduce the political resistance of disadvantaged groups. Specifically, if during positive contact experiences intergroup inequalities and injustices are explicitly acknowledged, then their sedative effects may not occur.

Becker et al.'s (2013) work, for example, demonstrated that contact only decreased disadvantaged group members' motivation to engage in collective action when dominant group members either defended the legitimacy of the status quo or did not voice their political opinions. When they explicitly acknowledged the *illegitimacy* of social inequality, then the sedative effects of positive contact disappeared. Second, positive contact has been shown to foster historically advantaged group members' support for social and political change, increasing the likelihood they will act as allies of the historically disadvantaged (e.g., Di Bernardo et al., 2018; Droogendyk et al., 2016; Reimer et al., 2017; Di Bernardo et al., 2019). According to Tropp and Barlow (2018), it does so by encouraging members of such groups "...to become psychologically invested in the perspectives, experiences, and welfare of members of disadvantaged groups." (p.194).

Hässler et al.'s (2020) review contributes to these recent developments by proposing a new integrative model. This model is useful in that it attempts to grapple with the complexities of current debates and offer a heuristic framework through which to understand some individual and contextual factors that moderate the association between contact experiences and participation in collective action. Their model is distinguished by its breadth of application: it covers both advantaged and disadvantaged groups, both negative and positive contact experiences, both violent and non-violent expressions of collective action, as well as a variety of potential moderating variables.

Hässler et al.'s (2020) inclusion of the contact experiences of *both* advantaged and disadvantaged group members is important as most research on the "sedative" effects of positive contact has focused on the political resistance of disadvantaged group members. Moreover, most empirical studies have focused on the experiences of *either* advantaged or disadvantaged group participants, with relatively few studies investigating both (though see Reimer et al., 2017; Di Bernardo et al., 2019, for exceptions). Yet contact experiences are always interactive and relational, impacting on both parties to a given exchange and producing consequences that affect both. (Indeed, as we highlight below, such consequences may sometimes involve more than two groups.) In this sense, Hässler et al.'s model also resonates with recent work on the dynamics of allyship, prosocial behavior, and social change (see Louis et al., 2019).

Likewise, Hässler et al.'s (2020) inclusion of *both* positive and negative contact experiences in their model is important because existing research has focused mainly on the relationship between positive contact and collective action. However, as Schäfer et al. (2021) argue, positive forms of contact cannot and should not be viewed in isolation from negative contact experiences. The question of how these two forms of contact might interact to shape the collective action tendencies and behaviors of both dominant and subordinate groups is intriguing and, in our view, still relatively under-explored (though see Reimer et al., 2017, for an important exception).

Hässler et al.'s (2020) inclusion of multiple potential moderators and collective action outcomes is valuable in orientating researchers to two important themes. First, it emphasizes how the contact-collective action relationship is itself shaped by varying individual and contextual factors. For example, if contact with a historically advantaged group occurs in a context that encourages common identification, then it may well exercise sedative effects on the collective action orientation of the disadvantaged (see also Dovidio et al., 2009). However, if such contact unfolds in a context that encourages dual identification, and primes recognition of differences and inequalities between groups, then such effects may not emerge or may even be reversed.

Second, by drawing attention to the distinction between violent and non-violent collective action, Hässler et al.'s (2020) model highlights how such action may take varying forms that are associated in varying ways to contact experiences. We highlight here a point of potential theoretical connection with a related strand of psychological research, which explores the distinction between so-called *normative* and *non-normative* collection action (e.g., see Shuman et al., 2016;

Tausch et al., 2011; Teixeira et al., 2020). Normative collective action is typically characterized as non-violent protest that works within the dominant norms of a society. Examples include peaceful marches, legal sit ins, and the signing of petitions. Non-normative collective action, by contrast, is typically characterized as violent, radical, or extreme forms of protest that violate the dominant norms of society. Examples include riots, blockades, and the destruction of public or private property. Emerging research suggests, among other things, that the emotional and cognitive pathways through which participants opt to engage in these distinct forms of collective action may differ (see Becker & Tausch, 2015). The related question of how intergroup contact—whether negative or positive—may shape such processes and outcomes is another potentially promising avenue of research.

We end this section with two critical but we hope constructive observations. First, Hässler et al.'s (2020) integrative model is focused on moderating variables—the variables that shape the intensity and direction of the contact-collective action relationship—but the question of how the model fits with wider social and psychological *explanations* of collective action remains unclear. To give an obvious example, much of the literature on collective action has focused on mediating processes such as a perceived sense of injustice and relative deprivation, collective anger, contempt and moral outrage, or participants' sense of empowerment and collective efficacy (e.g., Van Zomeren et al., 2008, 2012, 2018). It is not entirely clear to us how the list of moderators that feature in Hässler et al.'s model (e.g. see Figure 1 and 2 in their paper) relate to these mediating variables that underpin established theories of collective action. By implication, it is not entirely clear why different forms of contact might predict different levels of support for collective action under different conditions. We recognize, however, that this omission may be due to space constraints and envisage that future reviews and empirical tests of Hassler et al.'s model will expand to consider these important mediating mechanisms.

Second, Hässler et al.'s (2020) model is predicated upon a binary distinction between the contact experiences of “historically advantaged” and “historically disadvantaged” groups. This approach has the considerable advantage of heuristic simplicity. However, as some recent commentators have highlighted, contact dynamics often involve more complex forms of relationality (see Dixon et al., 2020, pp. 54–56, for a review). To give a few examples: (1) the positive “secondary transfer” effects of contact may facilitate political activism that extends beyond the social groups immediately involved in contact, encouraging support for collective action for other “secondary” groups (e.g., Tee & Hegarty, 2006); (2) equally, positive contact with an advantaged group may shape the tendency of members of a disadvantaged group to support collective action that benefits another disadvantaged group (Dixon et al., 2017)—a more complicated example of the “sedative effect.” We would add that the relationship between contact and collective action for groups who occupy “intermediary status” in a social hierarchy remains largely unspecified in the literature, though the work of Caricati et al. (2018) has laid a valuable foundation on which contact researchers might build. In our view, this is an important direction for future research not least because the contact experiences of such “in between” groups are sometimes critical to the project of social change (see Dixon et al., 2020).

## TECHNOLOGICAL AND ANALYTIC ADVANCES

Evidenced across the previous two review papers, contact researchers have traditionally explored the questions of how, why, and when contact reduces prejudice by using cross-sectional survey and experimental methods. This research has concluded, for the most part, that contact “works”

in reducing prejudice amongst a wide range of groups and across a range of contexts (see Pettigrew & Tropp's, 2006 meta-analysis). As we have argued previously (McKeown & Dixon, 2017), however, asking participants to self-report interactions or testing interactions with fictitious groups in laboratory settings does not necessarily capture the complex, dynamic, and context-dependent nature of interactions that individuals experience in their everyday lives. In other words, contact does not happen in a vacuum and may involve social practices that are not easily examined through our traditional methods (see Durrheim & Dixon, 2005).

In our own work, we have tried to address this problem by exploring intergroup contact as it occurs in everyday contexts, using observational methods and geographical measures of segregation in settings such as beaches (Dixon & Durrheim, 2003), university cafeterias (Clack et al., 2005; Schrieff et al., 2010), and schools (McKeown et al., 2015, 2017). Our findings have consistently shown that even when there is opportunity for intergroup contact in physically shared spaces, individuals and groups often choose not to interact with one another and instead spend their time with those who are similar to themselves—an idea supported by sociological research on the homophily principle (see McPherson et al., 2001, for an overview). While this research offers an alternative way to examine contact in the real-world, we cannot claim that it is a novel method or that it stems from any technological advancement—researchers were using similar methods in the 1960s (e.g., Campbell et al., 1966; Davis et al., 1966). Rather, our point here is that to develop a comprehensive account of how intergroup contact manifests (or not) its effects and how we can facilitate it, we need to think beyond the self-report surveys and experimental methods to which we have become accustomed. We need to take advantage of the wider range of methodological and analytical tools at our disposal.

In their review, O'Donnell et al. (2021) rightly point out the limitations of our traditional approaches to examining intergroup contact centered around three main “problems”: the need to consider contact over time, the need to examine contact “on the ground” and the need to recognize the sociological contexts where interactions occur. The authors then provide a timely and welcome overview of six new technological and analytical advances that offer exciting opportunities to move intergroup contact research forward to address each of these “problems.” We comment on each of the proposed advances outlined by O'Donnell et al. and then, consider some broader points that extend the arguments they make.

O'Donnell et al. (2021) begin by presenting the promises and pitfalls of using longitudinal research techniques to examine the temporal nature of intergroup contact processes. After a brief overview of longitudinal intergroup contact research, O'Donnell et al. provide an important in-depth discussion of the strengths and weaknesses of two traditional approaches to analyzing longitudinal data: cross-lagged panel models and latent growth models. Here they urge contact researchers to use robust analytical approaches to capture causality, change, and within and between person variation in longitudinal designs. We of course agree with this assertion. In our view, however, the use of longitudinal designs also raises additional questions around the theoretical premises for the predictions we make when testing for contact effects over time. To give an example, O'Donnell et al.'s call for the examination of both between and within subjects effects points to the need for us to recognize that intergroup contact should be considered as taking place within a socio-ecological system in which the individual sits in the center and in which processes occur in context over time (see Kauff et al., 2020, and McKeown et al., 2019, for proposed socio-ecological approaches). This does, however, require use of new and more sophisticated statistical approaches as O'Donnell et al. recommend.

Moving beyond analytical approaches, O'Donnell et al. (2021) turn their attention next to a second “problem” in contact research—the need for contact researchers to better examine everyday





**FIGURE 1** Mapping shared and divided spaces in Belfast (see also Dixon et al., 2019) [Color figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/josi.12429)]

intergroup contact experiences. Here, the authors focus on the potential in intensive longitudinal self-report techniques. The authors provide a timely overview of both traditional (e.g., beeper and diary studies) and more recent advances in this area (e.g., Keil et al.'s, 2020, "Contact Logger" app and Thai and Page-Gould's, 2018, "ExperienceSampler" app). We are, of course, proponents of examining contact on the ground because, as O'Donnell et al. rightly point out, such approaches enable researchers to not only capture in the moment contact but also how individuals use the social spaces in which interactions unfold (or are avoided). A recent example of this is the Belfast Mobility Project. Bringing together geographical approaches with psychology, Dixon et al. (2020) explored the complex interrelations between contact, threat, and everyday mobility patterns in the historically divided city of Belfast, Northern Ireland's capital city, exploring how and why residents either maintain patterns of sectarian segregation or use shared spaces and pathways (see Figure 1). This interdisciplinary and methodological novel research has led to a greater understanding of the nature of intergroup contact and segregation over time and in everyday life spaces.

A second methodological approach advanced by O'Donnell et al. (2021) is the use of virtual reality. Here, O'Donnell et al. argue that virtual reality offers an ecologically valid way of examining contact within laboratory environments because it aims to replicate the real-world experiences: individuals may not be environmentally present in a full sense, but they have the subjective feeling of presence within a virtual world. As O'Donnell et al. note, virtual reality thus enables researchers to create and manipulate a virtual world and has potential for exploring processes that cannot otherwise easily and safely be examined in laboratory settings, such as negative contact experiences. While there is clear value in exploring virtual intergroup contact, we believe this comes with caveats. First, virtual reality contact is an ethical and moral minefield. The onus

is on researchers to ethically create and manipulate a virtual world that does not result in negative intergroup relations but at the same time offers a “real” experience—a point that O’Donnell et al. discuss in detail. Second, in attempting to extrapolate from virtual reality experiences to real-world experiences, it is crucial to remember that virtual reality contact is still a type of contact free of the potential “real” implications, good or bad. By contrast, interacting with someone from “the other side” can have significant implications for both individuals and groups in real world settings. Nevertheless, virtual reality contact may act as an important precursor to real world contact in the same way as other forms of online and imagined contact have been shown to achieve (see White et al., 2020, for an overview of indirect contact effects).

The final “problem” addressed by O’Donnell et al. (2021) is the need to contextualize intergroup contact research. The authors then go on to argue for the need to consider the effects of press-based information on intergroup contact, recognizing that the media can both act as a place for indirect contact and as source of information about groups. In our view, O’Donnell et al.’s focus on media frames is particularly interesting. Here, they explore how the interactive space of the media enables individuals to communicate with diverse others and engage with content covering wide range of perspectives—sometimes supporting, sometimes contesting, and sometimes neutral with respect to their own attitudes or opinions. These different perspectives, or *frames*, help us to determine how we feel about a particular issue, including the issue of contact between groups. While contact researchers have already developed a nuanced understanding of the effects of media on intergroup relations, studies examining the dynamic effects of media frames are sparse, as O’Donnell et al. point out. One notable exception, albeit not focusing on intergroup contact, is Townsend et al.’s (2016) study examining the connections between macro-systemic effects of media frames over time on measures of state-level political violence and sectarian hate crimes in Northern Ireland. Here, the authors coded two leading Northern Irish newspapers over a period of seven years to determine how they represented (1) political tensions and (2) positive relations between communities and then, (3) mapped these against measures of state-level political violence and sectarian hate crimes over time. The results demonstrated variation between these measures and over time. For example, in the years 2010–2011 state-level measures showed lower levels of sectarian crime and political violence than previous years, while the newspaper coding suggested an increase in political tensions framed in the media in these same years. This example clearly shows the importance of considering intergroup contact at different levels of analysis and offers an example of how contact research might examine media frames in the future.

Next, O’Donnell et al. (2021) offer a further approach to directly examine the dynamic interaction between relationships amongst individuals within a given context, the use of (longitudinal) social network analysis (SNA). The benefit of SNA is that it enables an understanding of not only the impact of direct and extended contact on intergroup attitudes as O’Donnell et al. note, but it also has the potential to help researchers to better understand the link between social network properties and broader constellations of political attitudes and associated collective action. Carter et al. (2018), for example, examined how the ethnic composition of close friendships affected perceptions of relations and engagement in collective action amongst university students. They demonstrated that having a higher percentage of minority group friends was positively associated with perceiving injustice and self-reported engagement in collective action, whereas having a higher percentage of white friendships was negatively associated.

As O’Donnell et al. highlight, longitudinal SNA would offer further opportunities to understand how social networks influence actions and intentions. This seems particularly timely given that recent movements have been mobilized via complex networks of online and face to face contact (e.g., the Black Lives Matter movement). Social network research also offers a unique

opportunity for researchers to understand more about the individuals who act as bridging ties in social networks—that is, who act as the people who connect across divides—as well as how different network structures and strengths of ties within them might affect political attitudes and behaviors. This point is illustrated by Zisman and Wilson's (1992) mixed-methods study of “table hopping” in school cafeterias in the United States, which found that more loosely tied social networks facilitated interactions across racial divides. That is, young people in loose peer groups moved amongst tables more often than young people in more strongly tied peer groups. Knowing more about these individuals who cross boundaries may have important implications for intervention, as O'Donnell et al. outline.

We end this section by adding two broader thoughts that stem from our reading of O'Donnell et al.'s (2021) paper. First, the call for longitudinal research requires us to move beyond a focus on methods and technology and to develop a theoretical understanding of the temporal dimensions of contact. This means going beyond the basic tenets of contact theory—that is, that contact under certain conditions is associated with more positive intergroup attitudes—to consider in depth how and why we would expect changes over time and for whom (see also MacInnis & Page-Gould, 2015; Paolini et al., 2016; Pettigrew, 1998). It is only when we have a strong theoretical rationale about how and why contact processes emerge and change over time that we can fully capitalize on the advances offered by longitudinal methods.

Second, and relatedly, we reiterate a point made earlier in this commentary that there is an urgent need for in-depth qualitative studies to examine intergroup contact. We raised this point specifically in relation to negative contact, but it has broader applicability. Discursive, participatory, and narrative methods offer researchers the opportunity to explore how participants themselves make sense of contact experiences across a range of settings and forms of intergroup encounter. Other innovative methodological approaches may likewise lend themselves to capturing intergroup contact processes. One example is PhotoVoice—a participatory approach to elicit narratives where individuals take photos and are tasked with discussing their relation to the topic of focus as well as sharing these narratives with relevant stakeholders. While PhotoVoice has been used to explore intergroup relations (e.g., Suffla et al., 2012), to our knowledge, no studies have examined everyday intergroup interactions. Bringing together quantitative and qualitative research will provide a more holistic understanding of intergroup contact; without doing so, our understanding of intergroup contact will always be limited.

## CONCLUSION

In this commentary, we have discussed Schäfer et al.'s (2021) review of research on negative intergroup contact experiences, Hässler et al.'s (2020) review of research on intergroup contact and social change, and O'Donnell et al.'s (2021) review of recent technological and analytic advances in contact research. Each of these reviews has developed themes that are at the vanguard of research on the contact hypothesis and each has highlighted conceptual, empirical, and methodological developments that can drive the field forward.

We want to end our commentary on a brief reflection on the importance of adequately *contextualizing* the dynamics of intergroup contact, a theme that has run throughout our paper. The general approach that has dominated contact research—at least in psychology—has been described by Brewer & Miller (1984, p.1) as a “laws and instances” approach, which assumes that “... many basic factors that determine the success or failure of intergroup contact are essentially the same

across times and places, provided that the processes are conceptualised at an appropriate level of abstraction.” (p.2).

While we agree that this approach has yielded valuable insights, we would advocate it is complemented by research informed by what Miller and Brewer (1984, p.1) call a “cases and interpretations” approach, which emphasizes the local meanings, social practices, and behaviors that comprise “contact” within *specific social, historical, political, and cultural contexts*. This means that, for example, the exploration of negative contact cannot be fully captured by questionnaire items that measure abstract ratings of “ridicule,” “unfriendliness,” or “disrespect,” which inevitably reframe widely differing experiences across types of social relationships in generic terms. Similarly, the project of devising abstract frameworks to explore the factors that mediate or moderate the relationship between contact and outcomes such as collective action should be complemented with a robust empirical approach that treats the problem of social change as contextually rooted—using both quantitative and qualitative methods. Such an approach might begin by treating the affordances, opportunities, and obstacles to social change as a contextually specific as well as theoretically abstract issue. We end, then, with a call to contact researchers to take up this challenge.

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