Promoting Peace Amidst Group Conflict: An Intergroup Contact Field Experiment in Nigeria - Introduction

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1 Introduction

Violent conflicts are one of most crucial phenomena for humans to overcome. As of 2018, violent conflicts caused 2 million deaths since the year 2000 (Sundberg and Melander 2013), were responsible for forcibly displacing over 70 million people from their homes (UNHCR 2019), , threatened food supplies in numerous countries (Verwimp and others 2012), and extracted a psychological toll on participants and victims (Schomerus and Rigterink 2018). Despite extensive research, violent conflict is still common and methods to prevent violent conflict between groups are elusive.

There exists two main perspectives about group conflict. One perspective, coming from psychology, identifies group conflict as a problem of emotion and group identity. This perspective emphasizes things like perceived threat (Riek, Mania, and Gaertner 2006; Stephan and Mealy 2011), anger and aggression (Claassen 2016; DeWall, Anderson, and Bushman 2011; Halperin 2011; Schaller and Neuberg 2008), ethnic or religious hatred (Cikara et al. 2014; Petersen 2002; Staub 2001), perceptual biases (Duncan 1976; Hewstone 1990; Ward et al. 1997), and dehumanization (Haslam and Loughnan 2014; Kteily, Hodson, and Bruneau 2016) as the drivers of group violence. This perspective points to intergroup contact (Allport 1954; Paluck 2009; Scacco and Warren 2018), perspective-taking (Simonovits, Kezdi, and Kardos 2018; Todd and Galinsky 2014), and expert appeals (Chang and Peisakhin 2019) to reduce violent conflict.

The second perspective, coming from rationalists in international relations (IR), identifies group conflict as a bargaining problem (Fearon 1994, 1995; Powell 2006). Two groups want some resource – land, power, etc – and must decide how to distribute that resource. Violent conflict occurs when one or both sides expect their utility from fighting to be higher than their utility from bargaining. This perspective emphasizes two factors: the *bargaining range* (i.e. the number of bargaining outcomes preferable to fighting) and *trust* that the other side will honor bargained agreements (Colgan and Weeks 2015; Kydd 2000; Lake 2003; Powell 2006; Reed et al. 2016). This perspective points to third party mediation (Doyle and Sambanis 2000; Fearon 1998; Kydd 2006) and costly signals of trustworthiness (Kydd 2000; Rohner, Thoenig, and Zilibotti 2013) to reduce violent conflict.[1]

The psychological perspective and the international relations perspective each make valuable contributions to the study of group conflict, but each is incomplete without the other. The IR perspective provides a model that elucidates the fundamental causes of group conflict: few agreements acceptable to both sides and low trust that the other side will honor those agreements. It is portable, parsimonious,

[1] chris: Two psych-oriented theories are similar to formal theory of conflict. (1) Realistic group conflict theory from Campbell 1965: group conflict because groups compete for resources and have "incompatible goals". (2) Nisbett and Cohen 1996 about a reputation for toughness. I am not sure if I should bring those

and provides a basis to understand how other factors affect group conflict by influencing the bargaining range or the formation of intergroup trust. The IR perspective, however, does not always consider the myriad non-material factors that influence bargaining ranges or trust formation.

The psychological perspective theorizes about the non-material factors that influence group conflict, like emotion and perceptual bias. Feelings of hatred and dehumanization decrease the allure of peace; biased perceptions of outgroup behavior exaggerate feelings of injustice and prevent potentially trust-building behaviors from being noticed and reciprocated. The psychological perspective is comprehensive and provides keen insight into the non-material factors that influence a group's decision to engage in violent conflict. It does not, however, provide a model of group conflict to formalize how these various factors contribute to violence.

These perspectives work together to provide a more complete understanding of group conflict.[2] Violent group conflict occurs when two groups fail to bargain, and bargaining fails when there are few agreements acceptable to both sides and low trust that the other side will honor their agreements. The number of agreements acceptable to both sides depends on psychological factors like outgroup dehumanization and hatred; those factors provide non-material costs to bargained compromises that limit the number of compromises preferable to fighting. The formation of intergroup trust is affected by perceptual biases that distort outgroup behavior; perceptual biases prevent one side's costly signals of trustworthiness from being perceived as such by the other side. In short, the IR perspective tells us group conflict is a bargaining problem where bargaining fails due to lack of mutually-acceptable agreements and lack of trust; the psychological perspective tells us that emotions and perceptual biases exacerbate issues that cause bargaining failures.

Synthesizing these perspectives, we argue that cooperative intergroup contact can reduce group conflict by increasing the bargaining range and building intergroup trust. Cooperative contact – interactions in which both groups cooperate to fulfill joint goals – humanizes the outgroup, promotes positive affect towards outgroup members, dispels stereotypes/misperceptions that drive perceptual biases, and provides opportunities for unequivocal signals of trustworthiness. Humanizing the outgroup and promoting positive affect increase the bargaining range by reducing the psychological costs of bargaining with the other side. Cooperative contact can also demonstrate to groups the material benefits of cooperation, increasing the expected utility of peace. Correcting perceptual biases and providing opportunities for costly signals helps foster intergroup trust and ensures each side that the other will honor bargained agreements. What's more, cooperative contact for some group members can diffuse throughout the entire group through the process of indirect contact (knowledge of friendships between ingroup and outgroup members) and changes to social norms.

To test the ability of cooperative contact to reduce violent conflict, we conducted a field experiment with conflicting farmer and pastoralist communities in Nigeria. More than an occupational difference, farmers who cultivate crops and pastoralists who graze cattle define a major social cleavage in many parts of the world. These groups conflict over land rights, which define both of their livelihoods. Farmer-pastoralist conflict has escalated throughout the Sahel in recent years, and nowhere more than in Nigeria. The most recent conflict escalation has caused 7,000 deaths from 2014-2019, displaced hundreds of thousands of people from their homes, and costs $13 billion annually in lost economic productivity (Akinwotu 2018; Daniel 2018; Harwood 2019; McDougal et al. 2015).

We randomly assigned communities with ongoing farmer-pastoralist violence to receive a contact-based intervention or serve as a control group. The intervention formed mixed-group committees and

[2] chris: I don't like this sentence. Would it be better as "…work together to provide a model of group conflict and understanding of how psychological factors work within that model."?

provided them with funds to build infrastructure that would benefit both communities; committees then collaboratively chose and constructed infrastructure projects.[3] The program also provided mediation training to each community's leaders and held forums where the groups discussed the underlying drivers of conflict. To measure the effects of the intervention, we conducted pre- and post-intervention surveys, a post-intervention natural public goods behavioral game,[4] and twelve months of systematic observations in markets and social events during the intervention.

We find that the program increased intergroup contact, intergroup trust, and perceptions of physical security. We see signs of the positive effects in fieldwork as well as in data – in one of the treatment sites, farmers defended pastoralists from a group of anti-pastoralist vigilantes, rather than assist the vigilantes in removing the pastoralists and claiming their land. Our results also show that the intervention affected communities as a whole, not just community members directly involved in the intergroup contact. Individuals who directly engaged in intergroup contact changed the most positively from baseline to endline, but we also observe positive spillovers of trust to group members for whom we did not exogenously increase intergroup contact.

This study expands our knowledge about group conflict in several ways. First, this study synthesizes psychological and rationalist explanations for violent group conflict, demonstrating how the two perspectives complement each other. Rationalist explanations teach that group conflict is a bargaining problem and violence is caused by incompatible incentives and mistrust; psychological explanations teach that emotions and group biases cause violent group conflict. We synthesize these perspectives to explain how psychological factors affect intergroup conflict by increasing or decreasing the likelihood of successful bargaining.

Second, this study teaches us about the capacity of intergroup contact to improve intergroup relations and reduce conflict. Peacebuilding organizations implement numerous contact-based interventions in violent contexts each year (Ditlmann, Samii, and Zeitzoff 2017), but its efficacy to improve intergroup attitudes amid real-world conflict is an open question (Ditlmann, Samii, and Zeitzoff 2017; Paluck, Green, and Green 2017). To our knowledge this is the first field experimental test of a contact-based intervention implemented during an active conflict. The results suggest that contact-based peacebuilding programs can effectively improve relationships between conflicting groups and is especially relevant to conflict resolution in the cases of intergroup and intercommunal conflicts.

Third, this paper teaches us about settling disputes between sedentary peoples and nomadic peoples. Violent conflict between settled peoples and nomadic peoples is on the rise throughout Africa (Kuusaana and Bukari 2015; Mwamfupe 2015; Nnoko-Mewanu 2018). This study focuses on the Fulani, the largest semi-nomadic people on Earth (Encyclopedia 2017). Their way of life makes them targets for violence throughout Africa. Along with this conflict in Nigeria, Fulani in Mali have been the targets of violence so severe that researchers at Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project called it "ethnic cleansing" (Economist 2019). Understanding how to prevent violent conflict between Fulani and settled peoples can help prevent violence that targets other nomadic and semi-nomadic peoples, such as the Tuaregs in West Africa, Uyghurs in Central Asia, Kochi in Afghanistan, and Khoisan of Southern Africa. Preventing such violence could help preserve a dying way of life.

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[3] The communities built boreholes, market stalls, primary health care facilities, etc.

[4] In a public goods game (PGG), research subjects are given money and told they can keep the money or donate it to a public fund. Money donated to the public fund is multiplied by some amount and then shared with all subjects. Our PGG is *natural* because it was conducted in a natural setting, rather than a lab. The funding for the PGG came from the National Science Foundation under Grant No. 1656871.

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