Improving Intergroup Relations Amid Group Conflict: An Intergroup Contact Field Experiment in Nigeria - Introduction

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1 Introduction

How can groups in conflict improve intergroup relations? Conflict between groups has caused 2 million deaths since the year 2000 (Sundberg and Melander 2013), forcibly displaced over 70 million people from their homes in 2018 (UNHCR 2019), threatens food supplies in numerous countries (Verwimp and others 2012), and extracts a psychological toll on participants and victims (Schomerus and Rigterink 2018). Intergroup animosity perpetuates conflict long after the original grievance is immaterial or forgotten (Deutsch 1973; McDonnel 2017; Tajfel and Turner 1979), so improving intergroup relations is vital to stem the human, economic, social, and psychological costs of violent group conflict.

Scholars and policymakers/practicioners consider cooperative intergroup contact one of the most effective tools for improving intergroup relations. The hypothesis that cooperative contact improves intergroup relations – known as the contact hypothesis (Allport 1954) – motivates many interventions, from integrated sports teams and public housing to roommate assignment in college dorms and location settlement of immigrants (chris: add cites) to peacebuilding programs (Ditlmann, Samii, and Zeitzoff 2017). Through these types of interventions, intergroup contact has improved relations between white people and black people in the U.S. South Africa, and Norway (Burns, Corno, and La Ferrara 2015; Carrell, Hoekstra, and West 2015; Finseraas and Kotsadam 2017; Marmaros and Sacerdote 2006), Christians and Muslims in Iraq and Nigeria (**???**; Scacco and Warren 2018), Jews and Arabs in Israel/Palestine (Ditlmann and Samii 2016; Weiss 2019; Yablon 2012), and Hindus and Muslims in India (Barnhardt 2009).

Despite these successes, scholars know little about the effects of intergroup contact for groups engaged in a violent conflict. Cooperative intergroup contact has only recently been tested in the field and never with groups engaged in violent conflict (Maoz 2011; Paluck, Green, and Green 2017). If one of the goals of cooperative contact is to mitigate violent conflict, interventions based on cooperative contact must be tested between groups in a violent conflict.

Many of the conditions present during conflict could interfere with the mechanisms through which contact improves relations. Scholars theorize that contact improves relations mainly through providing information that dispels stereotypes, increasing empathy and perspective-taking, reducing anxiety about interacting with outgroup members, and making salient a superordinate identity that includes both groups (Broockman and Kalla 2016; Dovidio et al. 2017; Gaertner and Dovidio 2014; Page-Gould, Mendoza-Denton, and Tropp 2008; Pettigrew and Tropp 2008). These mechanisms assume that negative attitudes result from unfamiliarity, and that "familiarity breed[s] liking" (Pettigrew and Tropp 2006, 766). But the animosity of groups in conflict is driven more by opposing interests and

negative experiences than inexperience. By preventing these mechanisms, violent conflict could dull, prevent, or even reverse the predicted positive effects of contact.

Moreover, contact can only meaningfully improve group relations – as opposed to interpersonal relations between members of opposing groups – if several conditions are met. First, cooperative contact with individual outgroup members must cause ingroup members to update about the entire outgroup. Second, the newly positive attitudes of ingroup members who interacted with outgroup members must diffuse to other ingroup members. And third, intergroup attitudes must improve for both groups. Due to opposing group interests, negative experiences, existing grievances, and power differentials, groups involved in violent conflict may not meet these conditions. For these reasons, some scholars believe group reconciliation cannot begin until their conlict is resolved (Bar-Tal 2000).

To learn about whether cooperative contact can improve intergroup relations amidst violent group 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 provided them with funds to build infrastructure that would benefit both communities; committees then collaboratively chose and constructed infrastructure projects.[1] 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,[2] 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 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

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

[2] 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.

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.

Second, we contribute to the literature about informal structures, such as social norms, in solving collective action problems. Conflict between farmers and pastoralists is a collective action problem in that both groups would be materially better off avoiding violence through compromise and cooperation, but each has the incentive to take advantage of the other. Individuals within each group face the same dilemma: they prefer a compromise, but their incentives are to free-ride and allow others to bear the cost of compromise. In rural Nigeria, as with many contexts, no formal institutions exist to encourage cooperation and so groups must develop informal structures to achieve collective action (Ostrom 2000). This intervention showed how informal structures to solve collection action problems can naturally develop through repeated intergroup interactions. Our intervention only engaged a small percentage of each community, yet its effects diffused to other community members. Creating informal structures that diffuse the attitudinal effects of cooperative contact are a way of scaling up contact-based interventions.[3]

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] chris: this paragraph is too long and not focused enough. Would appreciate comments.

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