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

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0.1 Introduction

Group conflict is responsible for many of the worst displays of human nature. It claims lives, threatens food supplies, creates refugees, and extracts a psychological toll on participants and victims. Despite extensive research, no consistent means of preventing group conflict has been found. To understand why some groups engage in violent conflict and others maintain peaceful relations, we use the framework of group conflict as a bargaining failure, which highlights trust problems as the primary obstacle to peace between groups (Fearon 1995; Kydd 2000; Rohner, Thoenig, and Zilibotti 2013). Groups in conflict have few opportunities to build trust and many to degrade it. We argue that providing opportunities for trust-building through cooperative intergroup contact improves the prospects for peace. Intergroup trust ameliorates bargaining problems and increases the likelihood of the groups resolving disputes through bargaining instead of violence.

Treating intergroup conflict as a bargaining failure is common in conflict studies (Fearon 1994; Powell 2006). Both groups want some resource – land, power, etc – and must decide how to distribute that resource. Groups can either bargain and split the resource, or groups can fight to claim all of the resource or to increase their later bargaining position. Fighting is costly, so both groups are better off finding a bargained solution than fighting. However, bargaining fails if neither group trusts the other side to be truthful or to honor bargained agreements (Kydd 2000; Rohner, Thoenig, and Zilibotti 2013). Without a reason to trust each other, groups are likely to fight despite the costs to both sides.

A number of psychological mechanisms complicate bargaining amidst conflict. First, conflicting groups hold biased perceptions of their own behavior and the behavior of the other side (Duncan 1976; Vallone, Ross, and Lepper 1985; Ward et al. 1997). Groups perceive their own belligerent actions as defensive and justified, and perceive the defensive actions of the other side as belligerent and gratuitous. These perceptual biases create and reinforce negative outgroup stereotypes (Hewstone 1990). Second, groups in conflict derive psychological benefits from feelings of moral superiority over the outgroup (Fein and Spencer 1997; Tajfel and Turner 1979). These feelings of moral superiority add costs to improving attitudes about the outgroup and to cooperating with the outgroup. Together these two psychological mechanisms sabotage intergroup bargaining by causing the groups to have inaccurate beliefs about each other and by limiting peace agreements acceptable to both sides.

Many peacebuilding organizations utilize peacebuilding approaches focused on improving intergroup attitudes. One such approach, intergroup contact theory, hypothesizes that interactions in which group members cooperate to achieve shared goals will improve intergroup attitudes. Cooperative contact provides positive personal experience with the outgroup, and those experiences reshape outgroup attitudes (Allport 1954; Pettigrew and Tropp 2008). This type of structured face-to-face contact also

provides groups the opportunity to send costly signals about their trustworthiness and preference for peace (Kydd 2000; Lupia, McCubbins, and Arthur 1998; Rohner, Thoenig, and Zilibotti 2013). Intergroup contact is especially good at reducing intergroup conflict when groups cooperate to achieve superordinate goals – goals that require the cooperation of both groups and benefit both groups – because groups experience the material benefits of cooperation (Gaertner et al. 2000; Sherif 1958).

Although research shows support for intergroup contact theory generally (Pettigrew and Tropp 2006), its efficacy to improve intergroup attitudes amid real-world conflict is an open question (Ditlmann, Samii, and Zeitzoff 2017). Negative experiences with outgroups worsen intergroup relations, and individuals with the most negative attitudes are most likely to interpret intergroup contact negatively (Gubler 2013; Paolini, Harwood, and Rubin 2010). Its impact on interracial and interethnic attitudes has also been challenged by recent reviews (Paluck, Green, and Green 2017). Despite a lack of evidence about the effects of contact-based peacebuilding programs in violent contexts, and the risks of programs going badly, peacebuilding organizations implement numerous contact-based interventions in violent contexts each year (Ditlmann, Samii, and Zeitzoff 2017). These peacebuilding programs may or may not defuse intergroup conflict.

To determine if contact-based peacebuilding interventions improve intergroup attitudes, 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 througout the Sahel in recent years, and nowhere more than in Nigeria. The most recent conflict escalation has caused 7,000 deaths in the past five years, 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 peacebuilding 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 trust, intergroup contact, 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.

[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.

This study expands our knowledge about intergroup conflict in several ways. First, this study teaches us about the capacity of contact-based peacebuilding programs to improve intergroup relations. To our knowledge this is the first field experimental test of a contact-based peacebuilding program implemented during an active conflict. Each of the groups in our study were part of an active and escalating conflict, with members of each side being killed within one year of the intervention's onset. We evaluated the program's effects on both attitudinal and behavioral outcomes. 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. In some contexts, formal institutions ensure collective action by punishing groups and individuals who "defect" on agreements. In many contexts, such as rural Nigeria, no formal institutions exist to encourage such behavior and so groups in those contexts develop informal structures to achieve collective action (Ostrom 2000). This peacebuilding intervention showed how those informal structures can develop through repeated intergroup interaction. Creating informal structures that diffuse the effects of contact are a way of scaling up peacebuilding interventions.

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.

In the next section we provide a theoretical framework for how and why opposing groups struggle to solve their disagreements through bargaining and negotiation, and elucidate how contact-based peacebuilding interventions help these groups resolve disagreements by improving intergroup trust. We then discuss Nigeria's farmer-pastoralist conflict, our experimental intervention, and two designs to evaluate the effect of the intervention. Last we present the results of the study and conclude by connecting these findings to psychological and economic theories of group conflict.

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