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

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0.1 Introduction

Intergroup conflict is responsible for many of the worst displays of human nature. In Nigeria, intergroup conflict between farmers and pastoralists has claimed countless lives and destroyed countless communities over the past two decades. As the conflict escalated, groups of anti-pastoralist vigilantes mobilized to pre-emptively prevent pastoralists from encroaching on land claimed by farmers (Duru 2018; McDonnel 2017). These groups, dubbed the "livestock guard", ransacked pastoralist settlements and violently drove pastoralists from their homes, often with the assistance of the local farming community. Likewise, pastoralist groups enacted vigilante justice, raiding and burning down farming villages seen to encroach on land claimed by pastoralists. Attacks such as these forced up to 180,000 people from their homes in 2018 (Daniel 2018) and farmer-pastoralist conflict costs Nigeria $13 billion of lost economic productivity annually (McDougal et al. 2015).

Though farmer-pastoralist conflict was widespread, mass violence did not break out in all communities with farmer-pastoralist conflict. In one village, farmers and pastoralists defended each other from hostile neighbors. When a group of livestock guard came for one pastoralist settlement, the neighboring farming village arrested them to protect the pastoralists. After the arrest, farmers and pastoralists convened to decide what should be done with the prisoners. They agreed that the group of livestock guard should not be punished, but should be disarmed and released home – a proposition proposed by *the pastoralists*. These farmers and pastoralists had also struggled with conflict, and people on both sides had died in disputes over farmland and grazing land. But their disputes had not escalated to the point that each side wanted the other removed by any means necessary. They had created structures that allowed them to settle disputes, and the same structures allowed them to reach a solution about the livestock guard.

Why were some farmer and pastoralist groups able to keep peace whereas others were swallowed by the escalating conflict? Why were some communities able to overcome their intergroup disputes whereas others were destroyed by them? Understanding the factors that help groups resolve their disputes is important for mitigating and preventing the myriad intergroup conflicts around the world. Intergroup conflict fuels and is fueled by intergroup prejudice. We argue that psychological reconciliation during an ongoing conflict can reduce intergroup prejudice and mitigate violence. Bottom-up peacebuilding programs can help conflicting groups achieve psychological reconciliation through intergroup contact and superordinate goals (Sherif 1958).

Most literature and policy about peacebuilding and preventing intergroup conflict revolves around international intervention (Severine Autesserre 2017; Regan 2002; Shannon 2009; Smith and Stam 2003; Walter 2002). The international community, through military intervention and mediation,

can increase the cost of fighting, enforce or raise the costs of defecting from peace agreements, and facilitate information flows (Di Salvatore and Ruggeri 2017; Doyle and Sambanis 2000). By providing information and punishing defection from agreements, international intervention helps conflicting actors overcome the bargaining failures that lead to violent conflict (Fearon 1994, 1995; Powell 2006; Smith and Stam 2003). This type of peacebuilding has been employed by the international institutions like UN in conflicts throughout the world, including Namibia, Sierra Leone, Guatemala, Cambodia, and India and Pakistan. Ideally, peacekeepers impose order to protect bystanders and prevent further violence while mediation assists the two groups in settling disputes peacefully. While not universally successful, research shows that peacekeeping and mediation are effective strategies to promote peace in many conflicts (Doyle and Sambanis 2000; Gartner 2011; Hartzell, Hoddie, and Rothchild 2001; Wallensteen and Svensson 2014; Walter 2002).

While international intervention has assisted in ending many conflicts, it is most effective at maintaining peace in a post-conflict setting and is relatively ineffective at ending ongoing conflicts (Bratt 1996; Doyle and Sambanis 2006; Gilligan, Sergenti, and others 2008). Notably, international intervention failed to stop intergroup conflicts in DRC (Séverine Autesserre 2010), Somalia (Severine Autesserre 2019), Bosnia (Fetherston, Ramsbotham, and Woodhouse 1994), Angola (Bratt 1996) and Rwanda (Barnett 1997; Dallaire 2009). And even when international intervention is successful, that success is often short-lived. Weinstein (2005) estimated that 75% of civil wars resume within 10 years of UN intervention, and Beardsley (2008) showed that mediation reduces conflict in the short-term but not the long-term. One reason for these failures is that international intervention is often more influenced by international norms about what strategies *should* work than finding the strategies that are most likely to work in a given context (Paris 2003). But international intervention has also been criticized for not solving the underlying problems that cause conflict – providing a band-aid when the conflict needs a doctor (Severine Autesserre 2019).

International intervention through military intervention and mediation might be conducive to preventing different types of violence than bottom-up peacebuilding programs. Whereas intervention is most successful in the immediate aftermath of conflict and mainly reduces violence in the short-term, bottom-up programs might be most effective at mitigating ongoing conflict before it escalates and at ameliorating the persistent "no peace – no war" contexts that plague many countries. Even for contexts when international intervention would be successful, bottom-up interventions might be more feasible or timely. Before international intervention can occur, the international community must agree on an appropriate intervention and make large commitments of forces and financing. As a result, international intervention often comes late, costs billions of dollars, and is unlikely to be applied unless preventing the conflict is an international priority. Therefore international intervention is unlikely to target the persistent intergroup conflicts that plagues many states and is unlikely to be used until conflict escalates into large-scale violence.

While most attempts to reduce violent conflict between groups are top-down, peacebuilding is going through a "local turn" as scholars and practitioners call for bottom-up strategies to building peace (Severine Autesserre 2016, 2017; Ditlmann, Samii, and Zeitzoff 2017; Safunu 2012). Bottom-up strategies focus on engaging local actors and assisting them in reducing group conflict. Conflicts at local levels are often driven and perpetuated by intergroup animosity long after the original grievance is forgotten [McDonnel (2017); cite more about intergroup animosity]. Intergroup animosity and strongly negative attitudes can be an insurmountable barrier to peace. Individuals often motivatedly reason to rationalize their beliefs, which leads to biased processing of information about outgroup members' behavior. Behavior by outgroup members may be perceived as more threatening and more malicious than the same behavior committed by a neutral party (cite fundamental attribution error,

motivated reasoning; Hewstone 1990). The perceived negative behavior may be seen as *defining* of the group, whereas any perceived positive behavior may be seen as the *exception* to the group (Allison and Messick 1985; Pettigrew 1979). This biased information processing reinforces negative group stereotypes and can subvert the groups' own attempts to foster peace. It can also sabotage intergroup bargaining by causing the groups to have inaccurate beliefs about each other, adding to information and commitment problems that cause conflict. Bottom-up strategies that help reduce group prejudice could help the groups achieve peace without the large-scale international intervention efforts most commonly used to build peace.

One of the most promising approaches to reducing intergroup prejudice and violence comes from intergroup contact theory. Intergroup contact theory hypothesizes that interactions in which group members cooperate to achieve shared goals will reduce prejudice and the likelihood of violence. Intergroup contact works by demystifying the outgroup, presenting the other group's perspective, and replacing imagined stereotypes with firsthand knowledge (Allport 1954; Pettigrew and Tropp 2008). Intergroup contact is likely 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 (Gaertner et al. 2000; Sherif 1958) The prejudice-reducing effects of intergroup contact have been demonstrated in a variety of countries and using a variety of methodological approaches (Paluck, Green, and Green 2017; Pettigrew and Tropp 2006). Notably, intergroup contacted programs reduced prejudice between white people and black people in the U.S. and South Africa (Burns, Corno, and La Ferrara 2015; Marmaros and Sacerdote 2006), Jews and Arabs (Ditlmann and Samii 2016; Yablon 2012), Muslims and Christians (Scacco and Warren 2016), and Hindus and Muslims (Barnhardt 2009). Peacebuilding programs utilizing intergroup contact and superordinate goals are increasingly used to reduce intergroup conflict by peacebuilding organizations (Ditlmann, Samii, and Zeitzoff 2017).

Although research shows support for intergroup contact theory generally, its efficacy to reduce prejudice amid *real-world* conflict is an open question. First, most research about intergroup contact uses correlational studies or lab experiments, both of which have methodological weaknesses. Correlational studies cannot demonstrate causal effects, and results from lab experiments may not apply to real world conflicts, where groups compete for resources and share a history of intergroup violence (Ditlmann, Samii, and Zeitzoff 2017). Second, no prior studies of intergroup contact have involved groups engaged in active intergroup violence[1], and some studies suggest that intergroup contact in violent settings could be ineffective or even backfire. Negative experiences with outgroups increase prejudice, and the most prejudiced individuals are most likely to interpret intergroup contact negatively (Gubler 2013; Paolini, Harwood, and Rubin 2010). Despite a lack of evidence about the effects of bottom-up peacebuilding programs in violent contexts, and the risks of programs going badly, peacebuilding organizations implement numerous bottom-up interventions in violent contexts each year. Bottom-up peacebuilding programs might defuse intergroup conflict, but these programs also might do more harm than good.

To study the effect of bottom-up psychological interventions on violent conflict, we conduct a field experiment with farmer and pastoralist communities Nigeria to determine if an intergroup contact-based program effectively reduces prejudice and violent conflict. We randomly assigned communities with farmer-pastoralist violence to receive the 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

[1]Previous studies have involved groups with a history of violence conflict – see Scacco and Warren (2016) and Ditlmann and Samii (2016).

chose and constructed infrastructure projects.[2] The program also provided mediation training to each community's leaders. To measure the effects of the intervention, we conducted pre- and post-intervention surveys, a post-intervention natural public goods behavioral game,[3] and twelve months of systematic observations in markets and social events during the intervention.

We find that the program assisted the groups in reducing their conflict. Compared to the control group, the treatment group increased intergroup contact and trust between the groups, and reduced physical violence and insecurity experienced by group members. We find no evidence that the program reduced outgroup threat or caused the groups to expand their conception of "ingroup" to include the other side, two prominent mechanisms for how intergroup contact reduces prejudice. The results also suggests that intergroup contact for a relatively small percentage of a group can indirectly affect attitudes of group members with no exogenous increase in contact with the outgroup. We observe the most positive changes from individuals directly involved in the intergroup committees, but we also observe positive spillover to group members who were not involved in the intergroup contact intervention.

This study expands our knowledge about intergroup conflict in several ways. First, to our knowledge this is the first field experimental test of a bottom-up peacebuilding program implemented by a peacebuilding organization during an active conflict. We evaluated the program's effects on both attitudinal and behavioral outcomes. The results suggest that bottom-up peacebuilding programs can effectively reduce conflict and is especially relevant to conflict resolution in the cases of intergroup and intercommunal conflicts.

Second, this study is one of the only field experimental interventions to test intergroup contact theory with groups actively engaged in violence. 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. Even in such a context, community members who engaged in direct interpersonal interaction with an outgroup member changed more positively than other community members. Importantly, the intergroup contact involved achieving superordinate goals that benefited both groups materially. This suggests that contact with superordinate goals is robust to actively violent contexts.

Third, we contribute to the literature about the role of social diffusion and social institutions in shaping attitudes and behaviors. Bottom-up peacebuilding interventions seek to provide a structure in which groups can solve their own conflicts, and those structures are social rather than coercive. Understanding how those structures form and are maintained is relevant to other institutional setups attempting to influence behavior. In this study, though the greatest changes in attitudes and behaviors were from individuals directly interacting with outgroup members, the attitudes of other community members also improved. This type of "social effect" is also a potential way to "scale up" the effects of intergroup contact.

In the next section we provide a theoretical framework for how and why bottom-up interventions that focus on prejudice reduction can reduce intergroup violence. 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 theories of group conflict and prejudice.

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

[3] 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. My 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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