Promoting Peace Amidst Escalating Conflict: An Intergroup Contact Field Experiment in Nigeria

Christopher Grady

April 18, 2019

Abstract

Intergroup conflict has caused millions of deaths in recent decades. In this paper we test the ability of psychological reconciliation through intergroup contact to contribute to peace between groups involved in violent conflict. Intergroup conflict often mitigated by international intervention, like foreign military intervention (or peacekeepers) and dispute mediation. However, international intervention is not always effective at reducing intergroup conflicts. We propose psychological reconciliation through intergroup contact as an alternative to large-scale international intervention. Groups in conflict develop negative attitudes about the other group that make peace impossible. Outside intervention often serve as substitutes for positive intergroup attitudes, but psychological reconciliation could improve intergroup attitudes directly. Improved intergroup attitudes should allow the conflicting groups to settle disputes even in the absence of outside intervention. We test the ability of psychological reconciliation programs to promote peace between violently conflicting groups with a field experiment in Nigeria, where farmer and pastoralist communities are embroiled in a deadly conflict over land use. We find that the programs increase intergroup trust and the physical security of group members. We do not find evidence for alternative mechanisms through which psychological reconciliation could reduce violence, such as reducing outgroup threat or expanding the conception of ingroup to include the former outgroup. These results suggest that psychological reconciliation can promote peace between groups in conflict.

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. 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", often ransacked pastoralist settlements and violently drove pastoralists from their homes. Likewise, pastoralist groups often enacted vigilante justice, raiding and burning down farming villages seen to encroach on land claimed by pastoralists. Raids 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)

Yet in one village, farmers and pastoralists defended each other. 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 did farmers assist the livestock guard in some areas but obstruct them in others? Why were some communities able to overcome their intergroup disputes whereas others were destroyed by them? Understanding how groups resolve their own disputes is important for mitigating and preventing the myriad intergroup conflicts around the world.

Most literature and policy about peacebuilding and preventing intergroup conflict revolves around international intervention into the conflict [Severine Autesserre (2017); Smith and Stam (2003); cite more]. Intervention from outside the conflict helps the conflicting actors overcome bargaining failures that lead to conflict (Fearon 1994, 1995; Powell 2006; Smith and Stam 2003). Outside actors like the UN frequently intervene to prevent violence and mediate disputes, as they did in Croatia and Bosnia, Sierra Leone, Guatemala, and India and Pakistan. Ideally, peacekeepers protect bystanders and prevent more violent conflict while mediation assists the two groups in settling disputes peacefully. In the aggregate, research shows that peacekeeping and mediation are effective strategies to promote peace in many conflicts [Doyle and Sambanis (2000); cite more].

While international intervention has been successful in many contexts and conditions, several intergroup conflicts seem outside of these conditions. International intervention is often unsuccessful – Weinstein (2005) estimated that 75% of civil wars resume within 10 years of UN intervention. Notably, international intervention failed to stop intergroup conflicts in DRC (Séverine Autesserre and Autesserre 2010), Somalia (Severine Autesserre January/February 2019), and Rwanda (Dallaire 2009). 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 – a band-aid when the conflict needs a doctor (Severine Autesserre January/February 2019).

Even for contexts when international intervention would be successful, it is not always feasible or timely. Before 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 and costs billions of dollars. Even if international intervention would successfully mediate many conflicts, intervention maybe too late and is unlikely to be applied unless preventing the conflict is an international priority.

While most attempts to reduce violent conflict between groups are top-down, scholars and practitioners have called for more consideration of bottom-up strategies (Severine Autesserre 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]. The 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]. 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 incorrect 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 (Pettigrew and Tropp 2008). 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 whites and blacks 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 other activities are increasing 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 will be ineffective or even backfire (Gubler 2013; Paolini, Harwood, and Rubin 2010). Negative experiences with outgroups increase prejudice, and the most prejudiced individuals are most likely to interpret intergroup contact negatively. 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. Though well-intentioned, these programs may do more harm than good.

To study the effect of grassroots 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 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

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

[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.

group, the treatment group increased intergroup contact, trust between the groups, and physical security of the 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 affect attitudes of group members with no exogenous increase in contact with the outgroup. At the individual-level, we observe the most positive changes from individuals directly involved in the intergroup committees, but we also observe positive changes in the intergroup trust and physical security of 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 grassroots 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 grassroots 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.

Third, we contribute to the literature about the role of social norms 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.

Future work should further investigate mechanisms through which grassroots strategies can be successful. Conditions under which different conflict resolution strategies are successful – when outside actors needed, when groups can be assisted in solving own conflict. Future work should also investigate "scaling up" grassroots interventions, especially those involving intergroup contact. Not every conflicting group can have contact with the other side. Contact between key actors that could diffuse the positive effects of contact & change social norms. And research shows that even *observing* interactions between a member of your group and a member of a disliked group can improve attitudes (Vezzali et al. 2014). Television and radio programs may thus provide intergroup contact between groups with limited exposure to each other (Eller et al. 2011).

In the next section we provide a theoretical framework for how and why grassroots interventions, especially those based on intergroup contact, 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 References

Autesserre, Severine. 2017. "International Peacebuilding and Local Success: Assumptions and Effectiveness." *International Studies Review* 19(1): 114–32.

———. January/February 2019. "The Crisis of Peacekeeping: Why the Un Can't End Wars." *Foreign Affairs*. https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2018-12-11/crisis-peacekeeping.

Autesserre, Séverine, and Séverine Autesserre. 2010. 115 *The Trouble with the Congo: Local Violence and the Failure of International Peacebuilding*. Cambridge University Press.

Barnhardt, Sharon. 2009. "Near and Dear? Evaluating the Impact of Neighbor Diversity on Inter-Religious Attitudes." *Unpublished working paper*.

Burns, Justine, Lucia Corno, and Eliana La Ferrara. 2015. *Interaction, Prejudice and Performance. Evidence from South Africa*. Working paper.

Dallaire, Romeo. 2009. *Shake Hands with the Devil: The Failure of Humanity in Rwanda*. Vintage Canada.

Daniel, Soni. 2018. "Anti-Open Grazing Law: Nass, Benue, Kwara, Taraba Tackle Defence Minister." *Vanguard*. https://www.vanguardngr.com/2018/06/anti-open-grazing-law-nass-benue-kwara-taraba-ta

Ditlmann, Ruth K, and Cyrus Samii. 2016. "Can Intergroup Contact Affect Ingroup Dynamics? Insights from a Field Study with Jewish and Arab-Palestinian Youth in Israel." *Peace and Conflict: Journal of Peace Psychology* 22(4): 380.

Ditlmann, Ruth K, Cyrus Samii, and Thomas Zeitzoff. 2017. "Addressing Violent Intergroup Conflict from the Bottom up?" *Social Issues and Policy Review* 11(1): 38–77.

Doyle, Michael W, and Nicholas Sambanis. 2000. "International Peacebuilding: A Theoretical and Quantitative Analysis." *American political science review* 94(4): 779–801.

Duru, Peter. 2018. "Court Stops Inspector General from Proscribing Benue Livestock Guard." *Vanguard*. https://www.vanguardngr.com/2018/11/court-stops-ig-from-proscribing-benue-livestock-gua

Eller, Anja et al. 2011. "Vicarious Intergroup Contact Effects: Applying Social-Cognitive Theory to Intergroup Contact Research." *Group Processes & Intergroup Relations* 14(2): 255–74.

Fearon, James D. 1994. "Ethnic War as a Commitment Problem." In *Annual Meetings of the American Political Science Association*, 2–5.

———. 1995. "Rationalist Explanations for War." *International organization* 49(3): 379–414.

Gubler, Joshua R. 2013. "When Humanizing the Enemy Fails: The Role of Dissonance and Justification in Intergroup Conflict." In *Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association*,

Marmaros, David, and Bruce Sacerdote. 2006. "How Do Friendships Form?" *The Quarterly Journal of Economics* 121(1): 79–119.

McDonnel, Tim. 2017. "Why It's Now a Crime to Let Cattle Graze Freely in 2 Nigerian States." *National Public Radio (NPR)*. https://www.npr.org/sections/goatsandsoda/2017/12/12/569913821/why-its-now-a-crime-to-let-cattle-graze-freely-in-2-nigerian-states.

McDougal, Topher L et al. 2015. "The Effect of Farmer-Pastoralist Violence on Income: New Survey

Evidence from Nigeria's Middle Belt States." *Economics of Peace and Security Journal* 10(1): 54–65.

Paluck, Elizabeth Levy, Seth Green, and Donald P Green. 2017. "The Contact Hypothesis Revisited."

Paolini, Stefania, Jake Harwood, and Mark Rubin. 2010. "Negative Intergroup Contact Makes Group Memberships Salient: Explaining Why Intergroup Conflict Endures." *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 36(12): 1723–38.

Paris, Roland. 2003. "Peacekeeping and the Constraints of Global Culture." *European Journal of International Relations* 9(3): 441–73.

Pettigrew, Thomas F, and Linda R Tropp. 2006. "A Meta-Analytic Test of Intergroup Contact Theory." *Journal of personality and social psychology* 90(5): 751.

———. 2008. "How Does Intergroup Contact Reduce Prejudice? Meta-Analytic Tests of Three Mediators." *European Journal of Social Psychology* 38(6): 922–34.

Powell, Robert. 2006. "War as a Commitment Problem." *International organization* 60(1): 169–203.

Safunu, Banchani John-Paul. 2012. "Do Grassroots Approaches and Mobilization for Development Contribute to Post-Conflict Peacebuilding? The Experience of Northern Ghana." *Nairobi: Africa Leadership Center*.

Scacco, Alexandra, and Shana S Warren. 2016. "Youth Vocational Training and Conflict Mitigation: An Experimental Test of Social Contact Theory in Nigeria."

Smith, Alastair, and Allan Stam. 2003. "Mediation and Peacekeeping in a Random Walk Model of Civil and Interstate War." *International Studies Review* 5(4): 115–35.

Vezzali, Loris et al. 2014. "Improving Intergroup Relations with Extended and Vicarious Forms of Indirect Contact." *European Review of Social Psychology* 25(1): 314–89.

Weinstein, Jeremy M. 2005. "Autonomous Recovery and International Intervention in Comparative Perspective." *Available at SSRN 1114117*.

Yablon, Yaacov B. 2012. "Are We Preaching to the Converted? The Role of Motivation in Understanding the Contribution of Intergroup Encounters." *Journal of Peace Education* 9(3): 249–63.