Expanding Intergroup Contact Research Beyond Prejudice Reduction:

Implications for Diversity, Inclusion, Belonging, and Support for Equality

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Intergroup contact has been one of the most widely studied strategies for reducing prejudice, particularly within the realm of racial and ethnic relations (Allport, 1954; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). Decades of experimental (Page-Gould et al., 2010), longitudinal (Schroeder & Risen, 2016), and meta-analytic (Lemmer & Wagner, 2015; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006; Van Assche et al., 2023) research converge in showing that greater intergroup contact can reduce prejudice and promote more positive attitudes and relations between different groups.

Whether explicitly stated or not, intergroup contact is often an inherent component of many initiatives designed to promote diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) within organizational and educational settings (see, e.g., D'Costa et al., 2022; Godsil et al., 2024; Harris, 2023; powell, 2023). Moreover, many programs that have actively integrated intergroup contact as part of DEI programming have demonstrated its effectiveness (Devine et al., 2012; Dovidio et al., 2017; Wolfgruber et al., 2022). Intergroup contact can create opportunities for meaningful intergroup dialogue that promotes a deeper understanding of diverse perspectives (Nagda & Gurin, 2007), along with greater awareness of inequality and disparate treatment (Hebl & Avery, 2013) and, in many cases, substantial behavioral change (Holvino et al., 2004; Mohideen et al., 2024). In this chapter, we seek to highlight the potential of intergroup contact to bolster DEI efforts, along with outlining some key considerations to support the meaningful implementation of contact approaches within DEI initiatives.

Intergroup Contact Research: Core Considerations Related to Equality and Equity

To begin, we note that intergroup contact research has traditionally emphasized that certain optimal conditions should be present in the contact situation to enhance the likelihood of achieving desired outcomes when members of different groups engage with one another (Allport, 1954; Pettigrew, 1998; Tropp, 2006). Alongside other proposed conditions (e.g., cooperation,

common goals), emphasis has been placed on establishing *equal status between groups within the contact situation* and *institutional support for the contact*. Although these conditions are often described separately for the purpose of conceptual clarity, they are typically understood to be interrelated and mutually reinforcing when implemented. That is, establishing equal status between groups in any given contact situation will likely involve, and be bolstered by, institutional authorities and local norms that encourage people from different groups to engage with each other as equals (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006; Tropp et al., 2022).

The interplay between establishing equal status between groups and having institutional authorities normalize and model equal status relations when people from different groups engage with each other are of critical importance for advancing goals related to DEI. Institutional cues that denote a commitment to equality and fairness in treatment hold the potential to diminish feelings of threat and bolster inclinations to trust both the institutions themselves and the people that interact within them (Murphy & Taylor, 2012; Purdie Greenaway & Turetsky, 2020; Tropp, 2008). Still, on the whole, existing scholarship on contact falls short in providing organizational leaders with insights on how best to structure intergroup contact between different status groups or assess its outcomes (see Stephan, 2006). Thus, in what remains of this chapter, we will (1) discuss how intergroup contact may be considered, structured, and evaluated to promote DEI goals and (2) offer some recommendations regarding how contact spaces can be designed to support DEI efforts in diverse institutional contexts.

Considering Intergroup Contact among Different Status Groups to Promote DEI Goals

Defining and operationalizing terms like equity and inclusion can be challenging, particularly when people from diverse backgrounds come together within the same institutional setting or context. Some scholars have even doubted that it would be possible to achieve equal

status between groups in a contact situation when structures exist at a societal level that produce

and reinforce inequalities between them, such as in the racial and ethnic contexts of South

Africa, Israel and the U.S. (see, Bobo, 1999; Dixon & Durrheim, 2003; Foster & Finchilescu,

1986; Maoz, 2000). Relatedly, given its historical focus on prejudice reduction, the intergroup

contact research literature has tended to overemphasize the perspectives and attitudes of

privileged groups to the relative neglect of the perspectives and attitudes of disadvantaged

groups (Shelton, 2000; Tropp & Pettigrew, 2005). Indeed, only since the dawning of the new

millennium—and with new insights offered by an increasingly diverse representation of scholars

in the field (see Roberts et al., 2020)—has intergroup contact research begun to incorporate more

fully the perspectives and experiences of disadvantaged groups.

These insights are especially important given that people from historically privileged and

disadvantaged groups may have divergent views regarding the extent to which DEI efforts are

actually needed, based on how lived experiences have informed their understandings of what

equality means and what is needed to achieve it (Lewis, 2021). On the whole, relative to

members of disadvantaged racial groups, members of privileged racial groups in the US (e.g.,

White people) tend to be less aware of societal inequalities and more supportive of the status quo

(Knowles et al., 2014; Skinner-Dorkenoo et al., 2023). This can lead to the perspective that

taking action to address unequal conditions may not always be necessary or a priority (Crosby,

2015). By contrast, members of disadvantaged racial groups in the US (e.g., Black people) are

likely to view DEI efforts with a greater sense of urgency, as they tend to perceive discrimination

as more widespread (Jones & Lloyd, 2021), and structural racism as a bigger problem (Rucker &

Richeson, 2021; Schaeffer & Edwards, 2022) relative to what is typically perceived by members

of privileged racial groups. Moreover, even if members of privileged and disadvantaged groups

express united support for DEI efforts, they may still diverge in their views about what local or institutional changes are needed. By seeing discrimination and structural racism as more pervasive, members of disadvantaged racial groups may seek more broad-scale change in institutional culture and practice than what many members of privileged racial groups would initially be willing to support (Dover et al., 2020; Zheng, 2022). Thus, reactions to DEI efforts that seek to equalize relations between groups through changing local culture and practices may vary considerably depending on the status positions, frames of reference, and motivated perceptions of different groups within the intergroup context (Brodish et al., 2008; Eibach & Ehrlinger, 2006; Onyeador et al., 2021).

Structuring Intergroup Contact and Evaluating Its Outcomes in Relation to DEI

It is therefore important to ground DEI initiatives that draw on intergroup contact research with an explicit recognition of the divergent experiences of members of disadvantaged and advantaged groups. Given the common patterns of responses to DEI initiatives among privileged and disadvantaged groups, more elaboration is needed regarding how to create spaces that address unequal conditions between groups while still acknowledging differences in perspective and fostering feelings of inclusion for all. The following sections explore how spaces for intergroup contact might be created, how the content of contact programming might be structured, and how the effectiveness of intergroup contact programs might be evaluated with such goals in mind (see also Tropp & Dehrone, 2022; Tropp & Morhayim, 2023).

Creating Spaces for Intergroup Contact with a DEI Lens

Within institutional settings, opportunities for intergroup contact can vary from relatively informal interactions to facilitated discussions around specific issues. However, regardless of any particular intergroup encounter, people generally desire to feel heard and understood (Bruneau &

Saxe, 2012; Kalla & Broockman, 2011; Livingstone et al., 2024). This includes having the legitimacy of their experiences acknowledged (McAdams & McLean, 2013), and navigating how group memberships shape life trajectories and narratives (Singer, 2004). It can therefore be useful to recognize that all people enter into diverse institutional spaces with different histories of lived experiences, different multi-faceted constellations of identities, and different understandings of their own identities in relation to power and status (see Deaux, 1993).

For this reason, adopting a "colorblind" approach—whereby efforts are made to encourage intergroup contact without a thoughtful acknowledgment of the ways in which racial, ethnic, or other cultural identities shape expectations for the intergroup context and likelihood of fair treatment—could inadvertently diminish many people's willingness to engage in contact, or the credibility of efforts designed to bring groups together (Yogeeswaran et al., 2021). A more fruitful approach might involve explicit statements of institutional norms indicating that intergroup contact is valued (Pettigrew, 1998), and that the perspectives and contributions of all its people are valued (Plaut et al., 2011); in so doing, institutional leaders can express support for diversity and inclusion in ways that nurture bridging and cross-group interaction (powell, 2023).

In a related vein, by virtue of their different identities and lived experiences, people from different groups may not always perceive existing conditions for contact in the same way (e.g., for racial and ethnic examples from the U.S., see Chavous, 2005; Molina & Wittig, 2006). Thus, rather than focusing on establishing optimal conditions for contact in a seemingly objective sense, it can be helpful to attend more closely to people's subjective experiences in intergroup contact (Tropp, 2006). Such an approach could be pursued using a variety of strategies. For instance, contact could be implemented in spaces that have a long-standing reputation for fostering psychological safety and belonging (Murphy & Taylor, 2012; Steele et al., 2002) or

bolstered by institutional policies that support the inclusion and integration of diverse groups (Green et al., 2020; Purdie Greenaway & Turetsky, 2020). Subjective responses to contact could also be sought from the interactants themselves, such that they would actively contribute to monitoring the extent to which optimal conditions for contact have been achieved (Green et al., 1988; Molina & Wittig, 2006) and to ensure that their psychological needs are met (Shnabel et al., 2009).

Ultimately, combining these approaches may also prove useful for moving our field away from conceptualizing equal status between groups as a *condition* or feature of the contact situation (Allport, 1954; Pettigrew, 1998)—and one which may be disputed or highly contested (Lewis, 2021; Riordan, 1978)—to instead move toward conceptualizing equal status between groups as a *process* in which we engage, and through which we can gain greater understanding and insight regarding what equality and equity entail from the perspectives of different status groups. Focusing on equal status during contact merely as a *condition* of the contact situation suggests that it is static in nature, and something that can be imposed upon interactants and easily agreed-upon by them all to a comparable degree. By contrast, focusing on equal status during contact as a *process* highlights its subjective, iterative, and dialogic nature, in which people from privileged and disadvantaged backgrounds are active participants in construing the contact situation (Tropp, 2006), sharing lived experiences (Droogendyk et al., 2016), communicating about power inequalities (Tropp et al., 2021), and assessing the extent to which they feel their perspectives are understood and acknowledged (Livingstone et al., 2024). Thus, by conceiving equal status as a *process*, interactants can work together to define what it might require, as well as revisit and refine its definition as necessary over the course of their interaction.

Informing the Content of Intergroup Contact with a DEI Lens

How we conceive of intergroup equality also has important implications for how we shape the content of intergroup contact and what we see as the desired outcomes of contact. Researchers have begun to distinguish between two types of intergroup contact: whereas *positive contact* seeks to facilitate positive interaction experiences (often through focusing on cross-group similarities) toward the goal of improving intergroup attitudes, *supportive contact* focuses on addressing inequalities between groups explicitly toward the goal of fostering support for social change toward greater equality (Droogendyk et al., 2016; Schreiber et al., 2024).

Positive contact can increase the willingness of privileged group members to engage in collective action to support the interests of disadvantaged groups through increased empathic concern for their welfare (e.g., among White people in relation to Black people in the US; Selvanathan et al., 2018; Tropp & Barlow, 2018). This is important because privileged groups often hold "gatekeeping" positions that can shape prospects for advancement among members of disadvantaged groups (Erskine & Bilimoria, 2019). Moreover, members of disadvantaged groups may feel greater psychological safety in contexts when they observe allies from privileged groups advocating for disadvantaged groups' rights (Fletcher & Marvell, 2023). Nonetheless, empirical data from 69 countries shows that positive contact can diminish support for social change among members of disadvantaged groups (Hässler et al., 2020), such that it may inadvertently legitimize existing status inequalities and create false expectations for fair treatment among those in relatively disadvantaged status positions (e.g., among Black South Africans, Dixon et al., 2010a; among Israeli Arabs, Saguy et al., 2009). As such, simply encouraging positive contact between groups, in and of itself, is not likely to be sufficient to foster more equal and inclusive relations between groups in the long run.

Alternatively, by addressing existing inequalities between groups more directly, supportive contact creates greater opportunities for members of different groups to address their relative privileges and disadvantages relative to positive contact alone (Droogendyk et al., 2016). Through supportive contact, members of privileged groups can gain a greater awareness of systemic inequalities from which they benefit (Nagda & Gurin, 2007; Nordstrom, 2015), and about which they might otherwise be unaware due to their relatively privileged status (Knowles et al., 2014). Along with motivating greater support for equality, this increased awareness of privilege may also contribute to greater willingness to advocate for institutional changes to promote equality (Case, 2007) and to take action when witnessing discrimination against disadvantaged groups (Uluğ & Tropp, 2021). Explicit acknowledgment of existing inequalities can also provide members of disadvantaged groups with opportunities to share experiences with derogation in ways that help them to feel validated rather than disbelieved (*cf.* Dix & Devine, 2024; Kaiser & Miller, 2003), propelling improved intergroup attitudes as well as greater feelings of inclusion (Wolfgruber et al., 2022) and greater willingness for further intergroup contact (Bruneau & Saxe, 2012; Cortland et al., 2017).

While there are many potential benefits of supportive contact, we recognize that its successful implementation requires intentionality and diligent effort (see Schreiber et al., 2024, for a detailed review). For members of privileged groups, supportive contact can trigger fears associated with loss of status or becoming disadvantaged relative to other groups (e.g., among White Americans, Eibach & Keegan, 2006; e.g., among Jewish Israelis, Shuman et al., 2024), and defensiveness about the perceived deservingness of their historically higher status (Knowles et al., 2014). These concerns could in turn compel members of privileged groups to engage in behaviors that run counter to DEI efforts and the promotion of social change, such as denying or

defending existing inequalities or avoiding discussions about them (Ford et al., 2022; Knowles et al., 2014; Shuman et al., 2024). Additional preparatory programming that provides privileged group members with initial opportunities to recognize and engage with structural inequalities (Ehrke et al., 2020) can enhance their preparedness and shared commitment to addressing social equality (Tropp et al., 2021). As one example, a successful preparatory program put forward by Devine et al. (2012) involves gradually building participants' capacity by first raising their awareness of existing stereotypes, and then encouraging them to actively challenge the stereotypes through cognitive exercises (e.g., imagining non-stereotypical examples), before facilitating direct interactions with outgroup members.

Assessing Outcomes of Intergroup Contact Programs to Promote DEI Goals

Along with considering ways that intergroup contact research and DEI principles can be integrated and implemented together, it is also important to examine how outcomes of intergroup contact are commonly assessed, and whether these are sufficient to inform and advance DEI goals. Of particular relevance, newer generations of contact research seek to understand what drives people's interest in intergroup contact (e.g., White British in the UK, Meleady, 2021; see also Kauff et al., 2021), their willingness to accept diverse perspectives (e.g., native Dutch in the Netherlands; Verkuyten et al., 2010) and their valuing of diversity itself (e.g., racial majority and minority groups in the US; Bahns et al., 2015; Tropp & Bianchi, 2006).

Researchers have also begun to assess support for social change in relation to their contact experiences (e.g., Hässler et al., 2020; Selvanathan et al., 2018). Assessing outcomes relevant to both social integration and social change is important for understanding how contact experiences may shape perceptions of inequality and unfair treatment (Tropp & Barlow, 2018). Furthermore, simultaneously measuring outcomes related to social integration and social change

may also shed light on how members of historically advantaged groups can work effectively in solidarity with members of historically privileged groups (Fletcher & Marvell, 2023; Hässler et al., 2020), in ways that support changes in social and institutional practices that foster greater diversity, equity, and inclusion (Godsil et al., in press).

Other key concepts to be assessed in alignment with DEI principles concern how intergroup contact may shape people's feelings of belonging and inclusion. Belonging typically refers to the degree to which individuals report feeling part of an institutional context (Argo & Sheikh, 2023; Duran et al., 2020; Walton & Cohen, 2007), whereas inclusion concerns the degree to which people believe that diverse groups of people will be included, valued, and respected in that context (Brannon & Lin, 2021). Moving beyond mere efforts to diversify institutional contexts through greater representation of varied groups (e.g., Purdie-Vaughns et al., 2008), a focus on belonging and inclusion centers attention on institutional strategies and practices that promote meaningful engagement among people from diverse backgrounds along with a more explicit valuing of their varied perspectives within the institution as a whole (Brannon & Lin, 2021; Tienda, 2013).

At the interface of DEI efforts and scholarship on intergroup contact, recent attention to felt belonging and inclusion has grown in relation to the experiences of students from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds at predominantly White universities, especially in the U.S. (Hussain & Jones, 2021; Shook & Clay, 2012; Strayhorn & Johnson, 2014). In line with prior work (e.g., Lowe et al., 2013; Murphy & Zirkel, 2015), Abellera (2021) observed that students from historically disadvantaged racial and ethnic backgrounds reported lower feelings of belonging, and lower perceptions of institutional commitment to inclusion, relative to their White peers on a predominantly White campus. Still, greater levels of interracial contact on campus

corresponded with stronger feelings of belonging and greater perceptions of institutional commitment to inclusion; moreover, the associations were significantly stronger among students from disadvantaged racial and ethnic backgrounds as compared to the effects observed among White students (Abellera, 2021). These findings suggest that interracial contact can promote underrepresented students' sense of belonging at predominantly White institutions (Strayhorn & Johnson, 2014) and may even serve to buffer against the impacts of discrimination on underrepresented students' feelings of belonging (Hussain & Jones, 2021). Thus, along with providing students from underrepresented racial and ethnic backgrounds with opportunities to bond through affinity groups (Thelamour et al., 2019), DEI efforts in institutional contexts should also foster opportunities for bridging and meaningful exchanges between students across group lines (Nagda & Gurin, 2007).

Despite their particular significance for people from historically disadvantaged and underrepresented groups, contact outcomes related to belonging and inclusion are relevant for *all* people living or working together within a shared community. To create institutional spaces in which DEI goals can be pursued effectively, it is essential that diverse groups of people can all feel like they belong and are included (see Plaut et al., 2011). Furthermore, early positive experiences within racially and ethnically diverse contexts can have important downstream effects: Students who attend more racially and ethnically diverse schools tend to report greater interest in living and working in racially and ethnically diverse environments in adulthood (Kurlaender & Yun, 2005; Merlino et al., 2019). Relatedly, students' contact with other racial and ethnic groups during their college years predicts long-term improvements in intergroup attitudes after graduation that disrupt racial and ethnic segregation in neighborhoods and other institutional contexts later in life (Gurin et al., 2002; Harper & Hurtado, 2007).

Recommendations for Intergroup Contact Programming to Promote DEI Goals

To conclude this chapter, we wish to offer some brief recommendations about how to support and implement DEI efforts in diverse institutional contexts that include people from varied racial and ethnic backgrounds and differing status positions. Although these recommendations have emerged largely from research conducted in the U.S., UK, and Europe, this work provides a useful base for exploration and adaptation in other contexts.

Creating spaces for intergroup contact to promote DEI goals. In preparing people from diverse backgrounds to engage with one another during DEI programming, it may prove useful to remind all involved that each person comes to the space with their own histories of lived experiences and that each person's views of and expectations for cross-group relations are largely a function of their lived experience. Indeed, every individual desires to have their experiences and perspectives heard and acknowledged by others, with similar motives to feel understood (Livingstone et al., 2024; McAdams & McLean, 2013). True commitment to creating inclusive spaces in institutions that aim to achieve DEI goals thus requires the dual practice of (a) sharing authentically from our own lived experiences and (b) listening earnestly so as to accept the veracity of other people's lived experiences, even if—and especially when—they do not reflect or resonate with familiar narratives. As such, it may not be possible to establish equal status contact in a purely objective sense; rather, equal status in the contact situation may only be reflected in people's subjective responses to the contact situation, when each person feels psychologically safe (Murphy & Taylor, 2011; Purdie Greenaway & Turetsky, 2020) and confident that their perspectives and experiences are regarded as of comparable value and validity as those of others (Tropp, 2006).

Informing the content of intergroup contact to promote DEI goals. Combining the

approaches of positive contact and supportive contact may also prove beneficial when people

from diverse backgrounds interact with one another during DEI programming. From the start, it

should be made clear to all participants that the contact will include both opportunities for people

from different groups to get to know each other and to examine both similarities and differences

in their perspectives and experiences through conversation. This duality in focus can address the

distinct needs of privileged and disadvantaged groups (Shnabel et al., 2009) and prepare

members of privileged groups for discussions they might otherwise wish to avoid (Knowles et

al., 2014). It may then be possible to implement aspects of positive and supportive contact

strategies in a sequential fashion, paralleling Pettigrew's (1998) proposal to personalize contact

prior to enhancing the salience of group categories during contact. That is, contact-based

elements of DEI programming could first provide opportunities for people from diverse groups

to have positive intergroup experiences with one another, such as through fun icebreakers, lighter

topics that highlight commonalities, or enjoyable activities that require cooperative

interdependence (Tropp & Dehrone, 2022; Tropp & Morhayim, 2023). Such positive contact

experiences may help to build cross-group rapport and trust before engaging people from diverse

groups in deeper and more challenging discussions related to existing inequalities between

groups, so as to address the interests and psychological needs of both disadvantaged and

privileged groups during contact (Shnabel et al., 2009; Watkins et al., 2007). Moreover, these

steps may allow participants in contact programs to actively engage in the process of establishing

and experiencing more equal status relations between groups, as compared to conceiving of

equal status contact merely as a feature of the contact situation (Tropp, 2006).

Assessing outcomes of intergroup contact to promote DEI goals. Just as it is critical to attend carefully to varied kinds of contact that may occur during DEI programming, it is also critical to assess varied concepts that capture the many ways in which participants in DEI initiatives may be transformed through their contact experiences. Beyond a traditional focus on prejudice reduction, we recommend that a wider range of potential contact outcomes be measured, including those related to shifts in worldview and acceptance of diverse perspectives (Verkuyten et al., 2010) and those that focus on support for and commitment to social change toward greater equality (Hässler et al., 2020). Social change indicators of particular relevance to institutional and societal transformation involve support for policies that would equalize status relations or access to resources across groups (Dixon et al., 2010b), and those that assess beliefs in the value of social integration and a greater willingness to live and work in integrated communities (Morhayim et al., 2024). Relatedly, measures of felt belonging and inclusion should be assessed to determine the degree to which people from diverse groups report feeling a part of the local, institutional, or societal context (see Argo & Sheikh, 2023).

Conclusion

Over the course of this chapter, we have examined intergroup contact research and theory through a DEI lens, taking into account how prevailing societal inequalities in group status, and corresponding differences in perspective among members of historically disadvantaged and privileged groups, might shape our efforts to create more equal status relations between groups within DEI programming. We believe that careful attention should be granted to how we create spaces for intergroup contact, how we structure the content of intergroup contact, and how we assess outcomes of intergroup contact, in order to promote DEI goals. Moreover, we contend that, when structured intentionally and evaluated effectively, intergroup contact can

meaningfully contribute to amplifying DEI efforts, both by creating more diverse and inclusive spaces, and by employing those spaces to advance greater social integration and greater social change toward equality.

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