

The “Content” of Intergroup Contact: Lessons from the Denton Women’s Interracial Fellowship

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Abstract

Does the content of intergroup contact matter? Despite extensive research on the benefits of contact for intergroup relations, we know little about what happens *during* contact-based programs and interventions. This article addresses this gap by inductively building theory about the desired content of contact. My analysis draws on oral history interviews and archival data from the Denton Women’s Interracial Fellowship: a real-world case of intergroup contact that emerged to ease the process of school desegregation in Denton, Texas. My analysis of these data moves beyond the scope conditions suggested by Allport (1954) to highlight the role of *conversations about outgroup experiences*. I illuminate how these conversations produce positive impacts on intergroup relations and draw out the implications for research on intergroup contact: namely, that forms of intergroup contact that incorporate these conversations are more likely to improve intergroup relations, and that intergroup contact interventions should explicitly encourage or incorporate these kinds of conversations.

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Introduction

A long literature documents the relationship between intergroup contact and prejudice reduction. According to this literature, contact improves intergroup relations when it involves equal status between the groups in the situation, common goals, intergroup cooperation, and the support of authorities, law, or custom (Allport 1954). Versions of such contact have been found to improve intergroup relations in a range of contexts (Barnhardt 2009; Burns, Corno, and La Ferrara 2022; Carrell, Hoekstra, and West 2015; Lowe 2021; Rao 2019; Scacco and Warren 2018; Mousa 2020; Weiss 2021; Jordan, Lajevardi, and Waller 2022; Walker, McCabe, and Matos 2022). Meta-analyses of this research finds that contact “typically reduces prejudice” (Paluck, Green, and Green 2019; Pettigrew and Tropp 2006).

However, we know little about what happens *during* the intergroup contact interactions and interventions that populate this literature. In their influential meta-analysis, Paluck, Green, and Green (2019) observe that “we know little about what happens within the contact interventions we are assessing” because studies rarely describe the intervention in enough detail to allow others to recreate the experience of contact. As a result, we learn little about the features and aspects of intergroup contact that reduce prejudice and contribute to improved intergroup relations.

This article aims to address this gap by inductively building theory about the content of successful intergroup contact. To so do, I draw on data from a real-world example of intergroup contact: the Denton Women’s Interracial Fellowship in Denton, Texas. The Interracial Fellowship began in 1964 when a group of white and black women met to ease the transition to school desegregation in Denton. The monthly intergroup meetings continued for 10 years and produced a number of positive outcomes: self-professed reductions in prejudice, enhanced outgroup knowledge, intergroup cooperation on local problems, and lasting intergroup friendships. This article investigates the factors that contributed to these positive outcomes with oral history interviews collected by the

University of North Texas Oral History Program in 1987-1988 and 2017, alongside a variety of archival materials, including primary source documents (photographs, surveys, and personal documents collected by the women) and newspaper articles.

My analysis of these data shifts the emphasis from the scope conditions suggested by Allport (1954) to the *content* of intergroup contact. Specifically, my analysis highlights the value of conversations about outgroup experiences. I use data from the oral history interviews to illustrate these conversations and to build theory about their contributions to the positive outcomes of intergroup contact. In so doing, the article highlights the potential for complementarities between the study of intergroup contact and recent research in political science on how hearing about the experiences of an outgroup, or “perspective getting,” can improve attitudes toward the outgroup (Broockman and Kalla 2016; Kalla and Broockman 2020; Kalla and Broockman 2023). By analyzing examples of these conversations during a real-world case of intergroup contact, I theorize the contributions of perspective-getting during contact for intergroup relations and draw out implications for the study of intergroup contact: namely, that forms of contact that incorporate conversations about outgroup experiences are more likely to improve intergroup relations, and that intergroup contact interventions should encourage or incorporate these kinds of conversations.

The article is organized as follows. First, I review the existing literature and highlight the lack of knowledge about the content of intergroup contact. This section also previews the argument that I develop in the empirical section. Then, I introduce the Denton Women’s Interracial Fellowship and describe and present my inductive analysis of the oral history data. I conclude by summarizing the implications for research on intergroup contact.

The “Content” of Intergroup Contact

Intergroup contact refers to interactions between members of different groups. According to the so-

called “contact hypothesis,” this kind of contact can reduce prejudice and improve intergroup relations. The best-known formulation of the contact hypothesis specifies four necessary conditions for successful intergroup contact: equal status between groups in the contact situation, intergroup cooperation, common goals, and support from authorities, law, or custom (Allport 1954). The contact hypothesis has been viewed as rationale for desegregation (Mussen 1950; Allport et al. 1953; Pettigrew 1979), and a promising policy tool for reducing intergroup bias and hostility (Paluck, Green, and Green 2019; Al Ramiah and Hewstone 2013; Wright, Mazziotta, and Tropp 2017).

Decades of empirical research demonstrate this role of intergroup contact in a range of populations and contexts (Barnhardt 2009; Lee, Farrell, and Link 2004; Burns, Corno, and La Ferrara 2022; Carrell, Hoekstra, and West 2015; Lowe 2021; Rao 2019; Scacco and Warren 2018; Mousa 2020; Weiss 2021; Jordan, Lajevardi, and Waller 2022; Walker, McCabe and Matos 2022; Green and Wong 2009; Finseraas and Kotsadam 2017). Moreover, psychologists have identified a number of mechanisms that link intergroup contact to prejudice reduction, including reduced anxiety about intergroup interactions, enhanced outgroup knowledge, and increased empathy and perspective-taking (Dovidio, Gaertner, and Kawakami 2003; Pettigrew and Tropp 2008). Meta-analyses of this research conclude that intergroup contact typically reduces prejudice (Paluck, Green, and Green 2019; Pettigrew and Tropp 2006).

However, while intergroup contact thus appears to be a promising tool for reducing prejudice, we know little about what happens during or within these intergroup interactions. As Paluck, Green, and Green (2019) observe, research reports rarely describe the experience of intergroup contact in enough detail to allow others to recreate the program with other populations. As a result, we lack information about the specific features and aspects of contact that contribute to improved intergroup relations. This missing evidence is important: without this kind of information, researchers and policy-

makers cannot optimally recreate intergroup contact interventions or apply specific features of these interventions to naturally occurring forms of intergroup contact.

This article aims to address this gap by building theory about the features of intergroup contact that contribute to improved intergroup relations. My inductive analysis of a real-world case of intergroup contact points beyond Allport's four scope conditions to an overlooked aspect of intergroup contact: conversations about outgroup experiences. In particular, my analysis suggests that conversations about outgroup experiences can (1) contribute to outgroup knowledge; (2) undermine negative outgroup evaluations and attitudes associated with prejudice; (3) uncover opportunities for cooperation and collective action; and (4) demonstrate the kind of trust and commitment that are conducive to intergroup friendship.

In developing this argument, this article connects research on intergroup contact to a growing literature in political science on the role of "perspective-getting" in reducing intergroup prejudice. According to this research, narratives that encourage individuals to consider an outgroup's perspective during conversations can reduce exclusionary attitudes towards that outgroup (Broockman and Kalla 2016; Kalla and Broockman 2020). Recent contributions to this literature suggest that the most effective narratives involve "perspective-getting," or hearing about the experiences of an outgroup member (Kalla and Broockman 2023), and that perspective-getting reduces prejudice when outgroup perspectives are shared by an outgroup member (i.e., during intergroup contact) or an ingroup third-party (i.e., without direct contact).² Although perspective-getting thus does not require direct

² Kalla and Broockman (2023) distinguish between "perspective-getting" (hearing about the experiences of an outgroup member), "vicarious perspective-giving" (recounting the experiences of an outgroup member), and "analogic perspective-taking" (recalling a similar situation from one's own

intergroup contact, this finding offers useful insights for intergroup contact, which, by definition, creates opportunities for “perspective-getting” conversations between ingroup and outgroup members. By inductively illustrating the contributions of perspective-getting conversations during intergroup contact (what I term, “conversations about outgroup experiences”), this article identifies these conversations as a strategy that could be incorporated into intergroup contact interventions or naturally occurring forms of intergroup contact. Moving forward, we can view “conversations about outgroup experiences” as a subset of “perspective-getting” that involves perspective-getting conversations between members of an ingroup and outgroup.

In addition to developing this recommendation for intergroup contact interventions, this article also offers insight into contact interventions in the existing literature. Specifically, if “perspective-getting” conversations about outgroup experiences are valuable for intergroup relations, then the absence of these conversations may undermine the impact of intergroup contact. This point places additional importance on the *context* of intergroup contact interventions: interventions in classrooms and discussion groups, for instance, may be more likely to create opportunities for perspective-getting conversations than interventions in sports teams and workplace training programs, which may view outgroup experiences as irrelevant to the aims of the team or job (i.e., as something that should be set aside in the name of “team spirit”).

This insight offers one interpretation of several recent findings in political science, such as Mousa (2020), who assigned Iraqi Christians to a Christian soccer team or a team mixed with Muslims, and Zhou and Lyall (2023), who assigned locals and migrants in Afghanistan to a vocational training program. Mousa found that intergroup contact positively impacted outcomes “on the field,” such as

experience), and find that perspective-getting most consistently reduces exclusionary attitudes toward the outgroup.

voting for a Muslim for a sportsmanship award and training with Muslims after the intervention. However, the intervention did not improve “off the field” outcomes: Christians with Muslim teammates were not more likely to attend mixed social events, patronize restaurants in Muslim areas, report increased comfort with Muslim neighbors, or direct less blame toward Muslims for Christian suffering. Zhou and Lyall (2023), similarly, found no evidence that contact during vocational training produced more positive views of migrants or interactions with migrants outside of the intervention. One interpretation of these findings is that contexts like sports teams and workplaces are unlikely to generate “perspective-getting” conversations about outgroup experiences and are thus limited in their ability to translate into tolerant outgroup behaviors outside of the intervention.³

Data and Methods

Case and Data

Denton is a city in the Dallas-Fort Worth Metroplex in Texas. The Denton Women’s Interracial Fellowship began in 1964, when several white and black women met to ease the process of school

³ Rossiter (2023), on the other hand, provides support for the value of intergroup contact in contexts that *are* conducive to perspective-getting conversations between ingroup and outgroup members. Rossiter assigns Republicans and Democrats to an online discussion and randomizes whether the pair share perspectives on political or non-political topics. Although both political and non-political conversations decrease affective polarization, only the exchange of perspectives on *political* topics increases knowledge about the outgroup and willingness to have future cross-partisan political conversations. Although conducted virtually and thus not a direct test of perspective-getting during in-person contact, this finding supports the argument that sharing outgroup perspectives through conversation during contact can promote openness and outgroup knowledge.

desegregation after the school board voted to integrate the public schools. Four or five women of each race attended this first meeting. These women recruited other members through their churches and subsequent meetings grew to 20-30 regular members. For the next decade, the women of the Interracial Fellowship met for monthly meetings, Christmas parties, picnics, and social gatherings.

The Denton Women's Interracial Fellowship is a useful case for studying the intergroup contact for several reasons. First, Denton was characterized by limited interracial contact during this time period. As one member (Jean Kooker, White, OH 711, 2) explained, "There really was no opportunity for people in Denton—black and white—to get together to visit with each other on any kind of a basis other than working for somebody or seeing somebody in some kind of official capacity."⁴ As a result, these meetings provided the first regular form of intergroup contact for the members of the Interracial Fellowship. Second, as the data will demonstrate, this intergroup contact produced several positive outcomes: self-professed reductions in racial prejudice, enhanced outgroup knowledge, intergroup cooperation on local problems, and lasting intergroup friendships.

The empirical section investigates the factors that contributed to these positive outcomes with data from oral history interviews with members of the Interracial Fellowship and a variety of archival materials, including primary source documents (photographs, surveys, and personal documents) and

⁴ I use the actual names of participants throughout the paper. The oral histories are public data and the participants were aware that their interview would be publicly available and matched to their name. I refer to each interview excerpt with the full name and race of the participant, the UNT Oral History Collection number (e.g., OH 711), and the relevant page number.

newspaper articles.⁵ The oral history interviews were conducted in 1987 and 1988 by the University of North Texas Oral History Program. These data consist of 809 pages of transcripts from interviews with 9 white and 9 black members of the Interracial Fellowship. Additional interviews with 20 members of the Interracial Fellowship were conducted in 2017. These interviews consist of 72 pages of shortened interview excerpts. Given the incomplete nature of the second set of interviews, my analysis mostly draws from the oral history interviews conducted in 1987 and 1988.⁶

Data Analysis

My analysis of the oral history interviews involved several rounds of qualitative coding (Saldaña 2015). I began by reading the transcripts and taking preliminary jottings about my initial impressions and theoretical insights (Saldaña 2015, 20-21). I then conducted a round of structural coding to identify the outcomes of contact during the Interracial Fellowship. Structural coding involves the application of a conceptual phrase to a segment of data to categorize the data corpus (Saldaña 2015, 84-97). In practice, this coding involved the categorization of segments of data into various outcomes of contact

⁵ A selection of the oral history interviews are in the digital archives of the Desegregating Denton project (<https://desegregatingdenton.omeka.net/>). The remainder are in the University of North Texas Oral History Collection. The archival materials are in the University of North Texas Libraries Special Collections and the archives of the Denton Record-Chronicle. For additional details about the data collection and the Denton Women's Interracial Fellowship, see Byrd (1991).

⁶ Appendix A provides additional information about the oral history participants. Appendix B presents examples of the oral history interviews and archival materials. Appendix C provides a discussion of ethical considerations.

(for instance, I coded passages about lasting intergroup friendships as a subcategory, “intergroup friendship,” of the broader category, “outcomes of contact”). After this round of coding, I conducted another round of structural coding to investigate the presence of Allport’s scope conditions: equal status, intergroup cooperation, common goals, and endorsement by authorities.

After these rounds of structural coding, I turned to my inductive analysis of the content of intergroup contact. For these rounds of coding, I used a combination of *in vivo* coding and process coding to identify the important features of intergroup contact during the Interracial Fellowship. *In vivo* coding draws from the participant’s own language for codes, while process coding exclusively codes using gerunds (Saldaña 2015, 91-100).⁷ In practice, these rounds of coding involved using participants’ own words and descriptions of their actions to identify the factors that generated the positive outcomes of intergroup contact. Throughout these various rounds of coding, I triangulated and cross-checked data and insights from the oral history interviews with data from the 2017 excerpts and the archival materials.

Data Limitations

Oral history interviews are well-suited to investigating the desirable features of intergroup contact because they illuminate aspects of contact that other methods might overlook: what stood out to participants during interactions with an unfamiliar outgroup, for instance, or how participants understood the importance of various contact-based activities.

However, oral histories also have important limitations. One obvious limitation of oral history data is the risk of inaccurate recollections. Fortunately, the interview transcripts show similar

⁷ Gerund coding uses gerunds (“-ing” verbs) for each code so that researchers prioritize the actions and agency of participants when trying to interpret their words.

descriptions of events and conversations across participants and consistent accounts for participants interviewed in both 1987-88 and 2017. This consistency across participants and interviews coheres with research in psychology which suggests that time is not a particularly important determinant of memory accuracy (Lind et al. 2017), such that oral histories collected years after an experience should not be dramatically worse than interviews conducted closer to the event. Research also finds that emotional events are more frequently and vividly remembered than their neutral counterparts (Kensinger and Ford 2020). That the Interracial Fellowship appeared to be an emotionally significant experience provides further reassurance regarding the accuracy of the interviews.

Another limitation of oral history data involves interviewees' potential desire to present themselves and their actions in a favorable light. In the context of this study, this desire might lead participants to exaggerate the importance and positive impacts of the Interracial Fellowship. While impossible to rule out this kind of misrepresentation, multiple oral histories and archival materials corroborate accounts of positive outcomes like the intergroup collective actions and the various gatherings and reunions that are indicative of intergroup friendships. Moreover, several women provided what could be viewed as unfavorable accounts of their own racial attitudes, which helps to reduce concerns about social desirability bias.⁸

A second limitation of this research is that the data are drawn from one case of intergroup contact. As a result, this study cannot assess how conversations about outgroup experiences during contact play out in other populations and settings. There may be features of this case that were particularly conducive to productive conversations about outgroup experiences, such as the duration

⁸ Dorothy Adkins (White, OH 705, 6), for instance, shared that she “found a lot of hidden prejudices ... found out that some ideas I had were very hurtful to the other group.” Pat Cheek (White, OH 731, 5) shared that, “My parents had never raised me to be prejudiced, but I had prejudices.”

or size of the group, the gender of the participants, or the particular demands of school desegregation. This article uses rich data from one case to build theory about the contributions of these conversations, but their role in other contexts and across other lines of division remains an open question.

Findings

The empirical section proceeds in three parts. First, I describe the outcomes of intergroup contact during the Denton Women's Interracial Fellowship. Second, I show how the Interracial Fellowship adhered to the scope conditions suggested by Allport (1954). These data support the importance of these scope conditions but provide an incomplete picture of what happened *during* the experience of intergroup contact. The third section looks beyond these scope conditions to investigate the role of conversations about outgroup experiences. I introduce these conversations with illustrative examples and document their contributions to the positive outcomes of the Interracial Fellowship.

The Interracial Fellowship: Four Positive Impacts on Intergroup Relations

In my first round of structural coding, I inductively identified the outcomes of intergroup contact during the Interracial Fellowship. Four positive outcomes emerged from this round of coding: enhanced knowledge about the lives and problems of the outgroup ("Outgroup Knowledge"), reductions in prejudice and stereotypes ("Prejudice Reduction"), intergroup cooperation and collective action on local problems ("Cooperation"), and lasting intergroup friendships ("Friendship"). **Table 1** provides sample quotes to illustrate these four outcomes.

Table 1. Positive Outcomes of Contact: Sample Quotes from Interviews

Positive Outcomes	Sample Quotes from Oral History Interviews
Outgroup Knowledge	<p>We found out a lot of things that we didn't know about the black community. For one thing, we found out that the women, when they went into the stores, couldn't try on garments before they bought them...We found out...that there were some stores that never hired blacks at all. (Dorothy Adkins, White, OH 705, 9-10)</p> <p>The problems, I think, we knew were there. But how they felt about them sometimes was rather eye-opening because we had no way of knowing. (Jean Kooker, White, OH 711, 23)</p>
Prejudice Reduction	<p>I found out that some ideas I had were very hurtful to the other group. I felt that it was really an enlightening experience. (Dorothy Adkins, White, OH 705, 8)</p> <p>It served well in order for us to learn that they didn't feel like they were any greater as far as stature of a person. (Billie Mohair, Black, OH 730, 19)</p>
Cooperation	<p>We went up and down the streets—one black and one white woman—getting signatures of all the owners of the property. Then we went back and petitioned the city to have a program for paving the streets. (Trudy Foster, White, OH 706, 15)</p> <p>We had voting drives. We canvassed our churches...We went as a group, and we registered voters. We volunteered to take people to the polls to vote. We went from door to door canvassing for voters. (Willie McAdams, Black, OH 730, 35)</p> <p>We would never have any project where we would have maybe all whites working on it...we would have maybe a black and white or two blacks and a white or whatever. (Mae Shephard, Black, OH 742, 15)</p>
Friendship	<p>We are all still good friends. We made long-lasting friendships through this group. (Dorothy Adkins, White, OH 705, 8)</p> <p>As relationships grew, we became friends, and we included them in our weddings and our family parties and things like that. And we were also included in theirs. (Willie McAdams, Black, OH 730, 26)</p> <p>We've been friends, friends, friends down through the years. (Bessie Harden, Black, OH 728, 44)</p>

Table 2 shows whether a participant mentioned one of these positive outcomes in their oral history interview. As this table indicates, every participant mentioned at least two positive outcomes and a majority of participants (14 of 18) mentioned three positive outcomes. All participants provided examples of intergroup cooperation, which included a tutoring program, a campaign for integrated housing, a campaign for street paving in black neighborhoods, voter registration drives, and meetings with the city council, among other examples. All but one participant mentioned that the group produced intergroup friendships. All white members and five black members referred to enhanced outgroup knowledge, and six white and three black members referred to reduced stereotypes or prejudice. That enhanced outgroup knowledge and prejudice reduction were more prevalent among white members is perhaps not surprising: several of the black women had worked in and around white families (or had been around white families while growing up) so had access to information about the lives of white women. For instance, when asked if she learned anything surprising about white people, a black participant (Willie McAdams, OH 730, 44) replied as follows: “No, I didn’t learn anything because...my grandmother worked for a prominent white family, and my brother and I would go out and play with the grandkids. So I’d always been around them.”

Table 2. References to Positive Outcomes in Oral History Interviews

	Outgroup Knowledge	Prejudice Reduction	Cooperation	Friendship	Any Positive Outcome
Dorothy Adkins (White)	+	+	+	+	+
Euline Brock (White)	+	+	+	+	+
Carol Riddlesperger (White)	+	+	+	+	+
Jean Kooker (White)	+		+	+	+
Ann Barnett (White)	+	+	+	+	+
Trudy Foster (White)	+		+	+	+
Pat Cheek (White)	+	+	+	+	+
Katherine McGuire (White)	+	+	+	+	+
Pat Gulley (White)	+		+	+	+
Bessie Harden (Black)			+	+	+
Willie McAdams (Black)	+		+	+	+
Billie Mohair (Black)		+	+		+
Betty Kimble (Black)			+	+	+
Catherine Bell (Black)			+	+	+
Norvell Reed (Black)	+		+	+	+
Linnie McAdams (Black)	+	+	+	+	+
Mae Shepherd (Black)	+		+	+	+
Gloria Denmon (Black)	+	+	+	+	+

Allport's Scope Conditions

To what extent did the Denton Women's Interracial Fellowship adhere to the scope conditions suggested by Allport (1954)? First, Allport identified the importance of equal status between groups during intergroup contact. Although the women of the fellowship were not equal in terms of wealth or power in society, the members did aim to achieve within-group equal status between the two races: the group maintained roughly equal numbers of white and black members, selected white and black co-chairs, and alternated the monthly meetings between white homes with a black co-host and black homes with a white co-host. One member (Jean Kooker, White, OH 711, 6) described the rationale behind this commitment as follows: "We didn't want it to be our meeting; we didn't want it to be the white people's meeting. We wanted it to be a meeting of blacks and whites on an equal basis."

Second, Allport identified the importance of common goals. The women of the Interracial Fellowship shared the common goal of easing the transition to school desegregation in Denton. As one member (Dorothy Adkins, White, OH 705, 2) put it, "That belief is what led up to the formation of the Interracial Fellowship—a desire to see that the integration of the schools went through as smoothly as possible." Another member recounted that "the real goal was to facilitate desegregation, to make it work. To be sure that the Black children didn't have any trouble. That if they needed anything we would see about providing it" (Euline Brock, White, 2017, 7 of 7).

Third, this common goal required various forms of Allport's third condition for effective contact: intergroup cooperation. The monthly meetings required collective decisions about locations and schedule, the selection of chairs and leaders, the organization of carpools and transport, and so on. Beyond the logistics of meetings, the women also cooperated on projects like a tutoring program, a Saturday morning play school for children, a campaign for street paving in black neighborhoods, and voter registration drives at churches.

Finally, although the Interracial Fellowship was not officially organized or endorsed by authorities, the group did receive credibility from the church. The founding members knew each other through church networks, the women recruited members in church, and the members met in churches when the group exceeded the capacity of their homes. These connections to the church lent respectability to the group. For instance, when recalling her effort to invite a black woman to the monthly meetings, one member shared that “our church had already established our credibility with her. We weren’t just coming in from outside and...calling her as strangers or something” (Euline Brock, White, OH 707, 23-24).

Together, these data suggest that the Interracial Fellowship met or partially met each of Allport’s conditions and thus support the importance of these conditions during intergroup contact. However, these data tell us little about what happened *during* intergroup contact. The next section takes up this question to investigate how the content of contact improved intergroup relations.

Conversations about Outgroup Experiences

This section investigates the role of conversations about outgroup experiences during intergroup contact. This feature of intergroup contact emerged during my inductive investigation of the oral history interviews. As I will argue next, this feature of contact made a crucial contribution to the positive outcomes of the Denton Women’s Interracial Fellowship.

First, however, what does it mean to speak about outgroup experiences? The interviews offer several illustrative examples of this kind of conversation. Consider the following excerpt:

Ann Barnett (White, OH 710, 17-18): Betty Kimble and another person read...a dialogue between a black woman and a white woman...It had to do with a black woman expressing her feelings at the way she was treated in a store where the clerk would continually ignore her and wait on white

ladies even though maybe she had come up to the counter before and ahead of the white ladies. It was that kind of thing—the prejudice subtle and not so subtle—that they met every day of their life...It really made quite an impression on all of us...and I think we had some discussion about it afterwards.

This excerpt involves a conversation about outgroup experiences and challenges in Denton. The women of the Interracial Fellowship read from a dialogue about the differential treatment of black women in stores (how “the clerk would continually ignore her and wait on white ladies”). This dialogue and the subsequent discussion centered on the discrimination faced by black women in Denton (i.e., “the prejudice subtle and not so subtle—that they met every day of their lives”). An excerpt from an interview with another member offers a similar example of this kind of conversation:

Carol Riddlesperger (White, OH 712, 24-25): When we got to know the women in the black community, they shared experiences about how they were treated when they went to one of the nice dress shops and wanted to try on clothes. I can’t remember the specifics of it, but we were appalled to know that they were treated less cordially than the rest of us...So they shared some of the ways in which they felt hurt and left out and less than accepted.

Here, the interviewee (Riddlesperger) describes conversations about the differential treatment of black women in Denton (how the women “were treated less cordially than the rest of us”). These conversations were opportunity for black women to describe the impact of this experience of differential treatment (“they shared some of the ways in which they felt hurt and left out and less than accepted”). As in the first example, this conversation centered on the experience of racial discrimination in Denton. Other examples of these kinds of conversations from the interviews include

conversations about how black women were cut in line by white women in retail stores, the lack of employment opportunities for blacks, how the women would feel if their child married into the other race, and the challenges of school desegregation (including discrimination and racist remarks from teachers, the challenges of integration for the children, and so on).

Table 3 presents descriptive data on the contributions of these conversations to the positive outcomes from **Table 1**. The table shows that nearly all of the participants (17 of 18) drew a connection from conversations about outgroup experiences to at least one positive outcome. A majority (13 of 18) participants connected speaking about outgroup experiences to intergroup cooperation. A majority (13 of 18) participants connected these kinds of conversations to enhanced outgroup knowledge. A fewer number of participants connected these conversations to prejudice reduction (6 of 18) and intergroup friendships (5 of 18).

Table 3. References to Positive Impacts of Conversations About Outgroup Experiences

	Conversations About Outgroup Experiences → Outgroup Knowledge	Conversations About Outgroup Experiences → Prejudice Reduction	Conversations About Outgroup Experiences → Cooperation	Conversations About Outgroup Experiences → Friendship	Conversations About Outgroup Experiences → Any Positive Outcome
Dorothy Adkins (White)	+	+	+		+
Euline Brock (White)	+		+		+
Carol Riddlesperger (White)	+		+	+	+
Jean Kooker (White)	+		+		+
Ann Barnett (White)	+	+	+	+	+
Trudy Foster (White)			+		+
Pat Cheek (White)	+	+			+
Katherine McGuire (White)	+	+	+		+
Pat Gulley (White)	+				+
Bessie Harden (Black)			+	+	+
Willie McAdams (Black)	+		+		+
Billie Mohair (Black)		+	+	+	+
Betty Kimble (Black)					
Catherine Bell (Black)			+		+
Norvell Reed (Black)	+		+		+
Linnie McAdams (Black)	+		+	+	+
Mae Shepherd (Black)	+				+
Gloria Denmon (Black)	+	+			+

How can conversations about outgroup experiences contribute to improved intergroup relations? In what follows, I use data from the oral history interviews to illustrate the pathways between these conversations and each of the four positive outcomes. The first such pathway connects conversations about outgroup experiences to enhanced knowledge about the outgroup. The following excerpt offers an illustration:

Ann Barnett (White, OH 2017, 15 of 17): Being in that group, we learned what the conditions were that these ladies were living in. And one time, one of the ladies said, “Well, I’ll invite you all to meet at my house next time, if it doesn’t rain.” And we said, “Doesn’t rain? What difference would that make?” She said, “Oh, when it rains, my streets are impassable”...They were just dirt streets that turned to mud every time it rained. And we didn’t know that they were having to put up with conditions like that.

This excerpt shows how conversations about an outgroup experience (in this case, the “dirt streets that turned to mud” in the black neighborhoods) helped to increase outgroup knowledge among the white women of the Interracial Fellowship (“we didn’t know that they were having to put up with conditions like that”). The following interaction offers another illustration of this pathway:

Interviewer: Could you identify some of the mutual concerns of the black community during this period in 1964 when this group was formed?

Dorothy Adkins (White, OH 705, 7-8): Well, we found out a lot of things that we didn’t know about the black community. For one thing, we found out that the women, when they went into the stores, couldn’t try on garments before they bought them. They were not allowed to try on

garments in the stores...We found out about the lack of employment opportunities for the blacks in communities, that there were some stores that never hired blacks at all.

Here, the interviewee (Adkins) describes how conversations about outgroup experiences helped her to understand the daily lives of black women (“we found out a lot of things that we didn’t know about the black community”). In particular, these conversations revealed the unequal treatment of blacks in stores (“we found out that the women...couldn’t try on garments before they bought them”) and the barriers to employment for blacks in Denton (“We found out... that there were some stores that never hired blacks at all”). Together, these examples show how conversations about outgroup experiences enhanced the outgroup knowledge of the white members of the group.

The second pathway connects conversations about outgroup experiences to reduced prejudice. Examples of this pathway include descriptions of how these conversations undermined a negative or stereotypical evaluation of the outgroup. Consider the following excerpt:

Dorothy Adkins (White, OH 705, 15-16): I think that all of us found out very quickly that the stereotype of the lazy black was completely false. I remember at some of the Christmas parties discussing the work situation with the black couples, and we defined how many jobs they were holding down and raising their own families. When we visited in their homes, we noticed how well-kept their homes were. That stereotype of the black people being lazy and not knowing how to work was certainly false, as far as our group was concerned.

In this excerpt, conversations about the experience of racial barriers to employment (the work situation of blacks and “how many jobs they were holding down”) helped to dispel a negative

stereotype (“the lazy black”) among the white women of the Interracial Fellowship. In this way, conversations about outgroup experiences helped to undermine a negative evaluation of the outgroup.

Descriptions of how these conversations undermined an attitude associated with prejudice provide a second example of this pathway. The following interaction illustrates this point:

Interviewer: Describe the kinds of things black women mentioned to the group about how they were feeling.

Ann Barnett (White, OH 710, 19): I can’t recall specifics, but it was just the fact that they were looked down upon; they were not able to be treated equally whether it was at a water fountain or a restaurant or a restroom or being waited on at a store. There were things that I imagine a lot of us never thought about, and we began to see how grossly unfair segregation was.

Here, conversations about the unequal treatment of black women (how “they were not able to be treated equally”) undermined support for segregation among the white women (“we began to see how grossly unfair segregation was”). This example illustrates how conversations about outgroup experiences undermined an attitude typically associated with prejudice (support for segregation).

The third pathway connects conversations about outgroup experiences to intergroup cooperation. Consider the following example from one of the oral history interviews:

Dorothy Adkins (White, OH 705, 9-10): We got marginally involved when we found out about what our women friends were experiencing in the retail stores. We had some stamps printed up that said that we believed in and approved of equal opportunity hiring. I don’t remember the

exact wording, but we put these on the envelope or on our checks when we paid our bills to try to encourage the businesses to be more open in their hiring policies.⁹

Here, the interviewee (Adkins) connects conversations about the experience of racial discrimination (“what our women friends were experiencing in the retail stores”) to the group’s collective demonstration of support for equal opportunity hiring in retail stores.

The following excerpt provides another example of this pathway from conversations about outgroup experiences to cooperation:

Ann Barnett (White, OH 2017, 15 of 17): Being in that group, we learned what the conditions were that these ladies were living in...And so, that led to the street paving...It was all an outgrowth of these people getting to know one another and sharing the problems and trying to work on things together.

This description shows how conversations about the conditions in black neighborhoods led to intergroup cooperation on the street paving project. This two-year project involved significant intergroup cooperation: the women would “meet on Sunday evenings usually...to organize ourselves and divide up areas and that sort of thing” (Billie Mohair, Black, OH 713, 20-21), before going “up and down the streets—one black and one white woman—getting signatures of all the owners of the property” (Trudy Foster, White, OH 706, 15). This project involved a significant amount of work: the women assembled data on 174 residents otherwise unavailable in public records and went door-to-door to convince property owners and residents to sign the petitions. In describing the success

⁹ An image of the equal hiring stamp is in Appendix B, Figure 3.

of the street paving project, one member recounted that, “We just stayed on them all the time with the help of those white women. That’s what got it done. Those white women helped us to get it done” (Bessie Harden, Black, OH 728, 12).

Together, these examples illustrate how speaking about outgroup experiences uncovered opportunities for cooperation and collective action on local problems. The following excerpt provides an overview of this pathway:

Interviewer: How did the group shift from being kind of social to more of an activist group?

Carol Riddlesperger (White, OH 712, 27): ... I guess that as we became aware that the blacks were having some of the problems, like, housing and the streets in southeast Denton and having trouble being accepted in the nice dress shops and trying on clothes and so on, we thought, “What are we going to do about it? These people have become our friends, and how can we help tackle these social problems?”

The final pathway connects conversations about outgroup experiences to intergroup friendship. The impact of these conversations on intergroup friendship appears to be more indirect than the other outcomes. However, several of the women provide examples of how conversations about outgroup experiences helped to establish and demonstrate intergroup trust. Consider the following excerpt:

Carol Riddlesperger (White, OH 712, 28-29): One of the things that I considered...it was a problem, but it also indicated to me the trust that some of the black people had in some of their white friends to do something on behalf of their kids that they thought were treated badly...I and

two or three other white women were invited to a home in the black community...They spelled out the injustices they thought had been done to their black child in School and what would you do about it and what would you recommend. Well, I thought it was a knotty problem, and we didn't know how to solve it. But the fact that they thought we could be helpful was the payoff. To me that was what was important. To this day we see these people, and it's like seeing a friend, although we don't meet on a regular basis.

Here, the interviewee (Riddlesperger) describes how a conversation about an outgroup experience ("the injustices they thought had been done to their black child in School") helped to demonstrate the level of intergroup trust between the women (it "indicated to me the trust that some of the black people had in some of their white friends"). Even though Riddlesperger was unable to solve the problem at hand, this trust was itself a valuable outcome ("The fact that they thought we could be helpful was the payoff. To me that was what was important").

Another example of this pathway includes descriptions of how these conversations demonstrated a commitment to genuine intergroup relationships. As one participant explained:

Billie Mohair (Black, OH 730, 18): As I understand it, the group was more or less formed to try to help the blacks and the whites to be able to have a little better insight into the family life more or less. This was kind of how it started—to kind of air things about how they really felt and to see what the group as a whole could do to try to heal some of these things that we knew weren't right...So I think that it was really a great thing because it served well in order for us to learn that they didn't feel like they were any greater as far as stature of a person. They made us know that right away. I think it took a special kind of people to even want to do that.

In this excerpt, Mohair describes how conversations about outgroup experiences (i.e., conversations that allowed the women to “air things about how they really felt” and heal “things that we knew weren’t right”) showed her that the white women did not consider themselves to be above the problems of the black women. This commitment to engaging with the problems of the black community endeared these women to Mohair (“I think it took a special kind of people to even want to do that”) and appeared to lay the foundation for intergroup friendship.

In summary, this section draws from the accounts and experiences of the women of the Interracial Fellowship to illustrate how conversations about outgroup experiences contributed to the positive outcomes of intergroup contact. In particular, this analysis illuminates how conversations about outgroup experiences enhanced outgroup knowledge, undermined prejudicial evaluations and attitudes, generated cooperation and collective action, and contributed to intergroup trust and friendship in the segregated context of Denton, Texas. By demonstrating this role of conversations about outgroup experiences, this inductive analysis thus complements recent research on how “perspective-getting” narratives can improve intergroup relations (Broockman and Kalla 2016; Kalla and Broockman 2020; Kalla and Broockman 2023). Specifically, this analysis identifies “conversations about outgroup experiences” as a perspective-getting strategy that could be incorporated into intergroup contact interventions to enhance the impact of contact on intergroup relations. Although limited to one community (Denton, Texas) and one form of division (the racial division between white and black), this analysis thus takes a step toward building theory about the role of perspective-getting conversations about outgroup experiences during intergroup contact.

Moreover, although perspective-getting can improve exclusionary attitudes even when outgroup experiences are shared by an ingroup (Kalla and Broockman 2023), evidence from the oral histories suggest that the long-term nature of intergroup contact interventions might be particularly conducive to perspective-getting conversations. Two oral histories, for instance, described how

conversations about outgroup experiences only occurred because of the familiarity provided by long-term contact. When asked about the first meeting, Pat Gulley (White, OH 737, 4) recalled that, “I can’t remember very many serious thoughts that we had at first. I really think that perhaps maybe we were afraid to talk about serious things at that time.” Euline Brock (White, OH 707, 31-32) recounted that, “It was very tense because none of us had ever, ever been in an integrated meeting of that sort. There was much bustling about, serving refreshments and so forth, and the whole conversation was just as if race didn’t exist and there were no problems.” Brock then described how the group used a prepared dialogue about race to initiate a more meaningful discussion in the second meeting, but that “in the first meeting, that wouldn’t have been possible; there was too much tension.” Both accounts thus point to long-term contact as conducive to perspective-getting conversations. Alongside the inductive demonstration of the positive impacts of these conversations, this point should provide additional support for the incorporation of perspective-getting conversations into intergroup contact interventions (which typically involve longer-term forms of contact).

Conclusion and Future Directions

Decades of research show that certain forms of intergroup contact can reduce prejudice and improve intergroup relations. Yet we know relatively little about what happens during intergroup contact because this research rarely describes the experience of intergroup contact in sufficient detail. This article builds theory about the content of contact by analyzing the experiences of participants in a real-world case of intergroup contact: the Denton Women’s Interracial Fellowship.

My analysis of the rich oral history data from this case highlights the value of conversations about outgroup experiences. In particular, by investigating how the women of the Interracial Fellowship understood their own experience of intergroup contact, my analysis moves beyond the scope conditions provided by Allport (1954) to show how conversations about outgroup experiences

can (1) enhance outgroup knowledge by providing insight into the lives and challenges of the outgroup; (2) reduce prejudice by undermining negative outgroup evaluations and prejudicial attitudes; (3) generate cooperation by uncovering opportunities for collective action; and (4) build friendships by demonstrating intergroup trust and a commitment to intergroup relationships.

This argument has two main implications for research on intergroup contact. First, this analysis offers insight into the findings of intergroup contact interventions in the existing literature by highlighting the importance of the *context* of intergroup contact interventions. Specifically, if certain contexts are more conducive to “perspective-getting” conversations than others, then the context of the intervention may play an underexplored role in the impact of intergroup contact. For instance, if classrooms and discussion groups are conducive to conversations about outgroup experiences, we might expect these contexts to impact intergroup relations more than sports teams and workplaces, which may encourage the setting aside of group differences in the name of team spirit. This point offers potential insights into recent contact interventions in sports teams (Mousa 2020) and workplace training programs (Zhou and Lyall 2023), which found no evidence that contact improved attitudes and behaviors toward the outgroup outside of the intervention.

This explanation for the limits of previous contact interventions points to a second and more promising implication for the study of intergroup contact: that intergroup contact interventions should encourage or incorporate “perspective-getting” conversations about outgroup experiences. This recommendation coheres with a related literature in political science which shows that hearing about the experiences of an outgroup, or “perspective-getting,” can reduce exclusionary attitudes toward the outgroup (Broockman and Kalla 2016; Kalla and Broockman 2020; Kalla and Broockman 2023). By inductively demonstrating the value of perspective-getting conversations during contact, this article brings this literature into conversation with research on intergroup contact. In so doing, the article uncovers a potentially productive complementarity between these literatures: that

intergroup contact interventions (and naturally occurring forms of contact) may benefit from the incorporation of “perspective-getting” conversations about outgroup experiences between ingroup and outgroup members. Future contact interventions could explore the value of these conversations during contact in different populations and contexts. Such work would help to establish the scope conditions of perspective-getting conversations during intergroup contact and guide efforts to improve intergroup relations through contact.

Supplementary Material for “The “Content” of Intergroup Contact: Lessons from the Denton Women’s Interracial Fellowship”

Appendix A

Table A1. Information about Oral History Participants

Name	Race	Profession	Date of Interview(s)
Dorothy Adkins	White	Schoolteacher	November 17, 1987; March 3, 2017
Euline Brock	White	Professor, Community activist	October 27, 1987; December 1, 1988; February 23, 2017
Carol Riddlesperger	White	Schoolteacher, Community activist	February 5, 1988; February 28, 2017
Jean Kooker	White	Schoolteacher, Community activist	February 2, 1988
Ann Barnett	White	Homemaker, Teacher, Community activist	November 13, 1987; March 10, 2017
Trudy Foster	White	Realtor, Community Activist	November 17, 1987
Pat Cheek	White	Schoolteacher, Community activist	April 12, 1988; April 3, 2017
Katherine McGuire	White	Community activist	April 6, 1988
Pat Gulley	White	Community activist	May 11, 1988; March 1, 2017
Bessie Harden	Black	Homemaker, Community activist	April 7, 1988
Willie McAdams	Black	Community activist	December 10, 1987; March 2, 2017
Billie Mohair	Black	Librarian	February 25, 1988; April 7, 2017
Betty Kimble	Black	Homemaker, Community activist	December 8, 1987; March 3, 2017
Catherine Bell	Black	Public employee, community activist	December 12; 1987, April 7, 2017
Norvell Reed	Black	Community activist	March 11, 1988
Linnie McAdams	Black	Community activist	December 10; 1987, March 2, 2017
Mae Shepherd	Black	Homemaker, Community activist	July 14, 1988; April 10, 2017
Gloria Denmon	Black	Community activist	May 12, 1988

Appendix B

Figure 1. Typical excerpt from an oral history interview (Euline Brock, White, OH 707)

NORTH TEXAS STATE UNIVERSITY
ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION
NUMBER
707

Interview with
EULINE BROCK
October 27, 1987

Place of Interview: Denton, Texas
Richard W. Byrd
Jane Harris
Interviewers: Mary Lohr
Terms of Use: Open
Approved: Euline Brock
(Signature)
Date: Oct. 27, 1987

Figure 2. Typical excerpt from an oral history interview (Euline Brock, White, OH 707)

Oral History Collection

Euline Brock

Interviewers: Jane Harris, Mary Lohr, and Richard Byrd Date of Interview: October 27, 1987

Place of Interview: Denton, Texas

Ms. Harris: This is Jane Harris, Richard Byrd, and Mary Lohr interviewing Dr. Euline Brock for the North Texas State University Oral History Collection. The interview is taking place on October 27, 1987, in Denton, Texas. We are interviewing Dr. Brock in order to obtain her recollections concerning the Denton Christian Women's Interracial Fellowship and its role in desegregating Denton. Okay, could you tell me your birthdate?

Dr. Brock: The year, too (chuckle)? June 2, 1932.

Ms. Harris: Where were you born?

Dr. Brock: Out in a country community in Smith County, Texas, which is where Tyler is located.

Ms. Harris: Could you describe for me your educational background?

Dr. Brock: I went to public schools in Van, Texas, which I later realized was very fortunate because it was an oil town. Even though most of the people were real poor, the school was rich; and we had good libraries and good teachers. I was lucky.

 Then I went to Tyler Junior College. I lived at home

Figure 3. Equal hiring stamp and open housing pledge (Trudy Foster, OH 706)

"As Your Customer I Welcome
Being Served By Any Qualified
Person Regardless of Race,
Creed or Color."

The Good Neighbor Pledge

I believe; that every person has the moral and legal right to rent, buy, or build a home anywhere without restriction based on race, religion, or national origin. Equality of opportunity is basic to the American society and our religious beliefs.

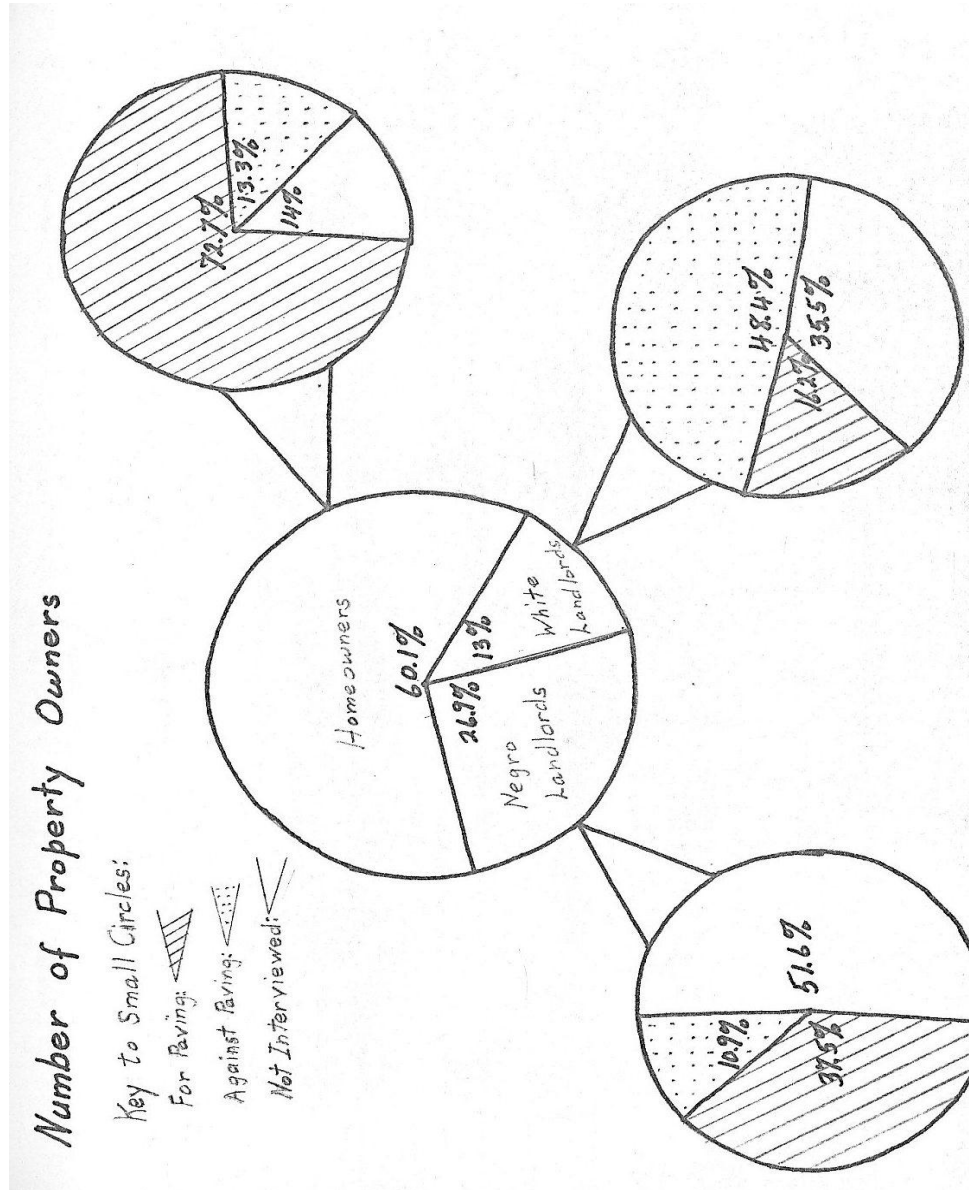
Therefore, I will welcome persons into my neighborhood without regard to race, religion, or national origin; and I will work with them to build, to improve, and to maintain a community which is good for all.

NAME

ADDRESS

Survey conducted by
CHRISTIAN WOMEN'S INTER-RACIAL FELLOWSHIP

Figure 4. Excerpt from the street survey conducted during the street paving project (reprinted by the Denton Public Library)



Appendix C

Ethical Considerations

I was granted an IRB “exemption” for this research. Throughout the paper, I use the actual names of oral history participants rather than pseudonyms. I use actual names because the oral history interviews are public data and because participants were aware at the time of their interview that their accounts would be made publicly available and matched to their name. Moreover, identification introduces no risk or harm to participants.

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