

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?² 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 requirements of the scope conditions suggested by Allport (1954) to highlight the role of *conversations about group-specific issues*. I illuminate how these conversations produce positive impacts on intergroup relations and draw out the implications for research on contact: namely, that forms of contact that incorporate these conversations are more likely to improve intergroup relations, and that contact-based 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 reports that contact “typically reduces prejudice” (Paluck, Green, and Green 2019; Pettigrew and Tropp 2006).

However, we know little about what happens *during* the 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. As a result, we learn little about the features and aspects of 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 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 interracial 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 interracial friendships.

In this article, I investigate 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 group-specific issues. 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. I also draw out the implications of this analysis for research on intergroup contact: namely, that forms of contact that incorporate these conversations are more likely to improve intergroup relations, and that contact-based interventions should explicitly encourage or incorporate these kinds of conversations.

The article is organized as follows. First, I review the literature on contact and highlight the gaps in our knowledge of the content of intergroup contact. Then, I introduce the Denton Women's Interracial Fellowship and describe and present my inductive analysis of the oral history data. I conclude with a discussion of the implications for research on intergroup contact and experimental contact-based interventions.

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). This 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 (Al Ramiah and Hewstone 2013; Paluck, Green, and Green 2019; Wright, Mazziotto, and Tropp 2017).

Decades of empirical research demonstrate this role of 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 several mechanisms that link 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 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 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 contact-based interventions or apply specific features of these interventions to naturally occurring forms of contact.

This article aims to address this gap by building theory about the features of contact that contribute to improved intergroup relations. My inductive analysis of a real-world example of contact shifts the focus from Allport's four scope conditions to an overlooked aspect of intergroup contact: conversations about group-specific issues and constraints. In particular, my analysis suggests that these kinds of conversations 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. The next section develops this argument with data from a real-world case of intergroup contact: the Denton Women's Interracial Fellowship.

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 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."² As a result, these meetings provided the first regular form of intergroup contact for the

² 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.

members of the Interracial Fellowship. Second, as the data will demonstrate, this interracial contact produced several positive outcomes: self-professed reductions in racial prejudice, enhanced outgroup knowledge, intergroup cooperation on local problems, and lasting interracial 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 newspaper articles.³ 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 1988.⁴

³ 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).

⁴ 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.

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 (for instance, I coded passages about lasting interracial 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 moved 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).⁵ 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.

⁵ 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.

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 and interpreted the importance of various contact-based activities.

However, oral histories have important limitations. An obvious limitation of oral history data is the risk of inaccurate recollections. Fortunately, the interview transcripts show similar descriptions of events across participants and consistent accounts for participants interviewed in 1987-88 and 2017.⁶ 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, the transcripts and archival materials corroborate accounts of positive outcomes like the interracial collective actions and the various gatherings and reunions that are indicative of interracial friendships.

A second limitation of this research is that the data are drawn from one case of intergroup contact. As a result, this research cannot assess how conversations about group-specific issues play

⁶ 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 more 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.

out in other populations and settings. There may be features of this case that were particularly conducive to productive conversations about group-specific issues, such as the fact that participants opted or “self-selected” into the fellowship, the duration or size of the group, the gender of the participants, the particular demands of school desegregation, or the fact that members shared several things in common (e.g., gender, town, religion). Self-selection and commonalities are perhaps the most likely scope conditions for my argument, although I would argue that theorizing the “content” of contact for those who opt into contact in the presence of some shared identity or attribute (e.g., workplace, school, town, religion) is still valuable. Nevertheless, the specificities of this particular case limit my ability to draw larger inferences from these data. This article utilizes rich data from one case to build theory about the contributions of conversations about group-specific issues, but their role in other contexts and across other lines of division remains an open question.

Findings

The empirical 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 contact. The third section looks beyond the requirements of these scope conditions to investigate the role of conversations about group-specific issues. 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 in 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 interracial 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>
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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 interracial 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 interracial 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 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.⁷

⁷ 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 stressed the importance of equal status between groups during the intergroup interaction. Although the women of the Interracial Fellowship were not equal in terms of wealth or power in society, the members did work 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: 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 scope conditions and thus support the importance of these conditions during contact. However, these data tell us little about what happened *during* contact. The next section takes up this question to investigate how the content of contact contributed to improved intergroup relations.

Conversations about Group-Specific Issues

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

First, what does it mean to speak about group-specific issues? 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 group-specific issue 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 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 group-specific issue of racial discrimination in Denton. Other examples of these kinds of conversations from the interviews include conversations

about how the women would feel if their child married into the other race, how black women were cut in line by white women in retail stores, the lack of employment opportunities for blacks, 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 participants (17 of 18) drew a connection from conversations about group-specific issues to at least one positive outcome. A majority (13 of 18) of participants connected speaking about group-specific issues to intergroup cooperation. A majority (13 of 18) of 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 interracial friendships (5 of 18).

Table 3. References to Positive Impacts of Conversations About Group-Specific Issues

	Conversations About Group-Specific Issues → Outgroup Knowledge	Conversations About Group-Specific Issues → Prejudice Reduction	Conversations About Group-Specific Issues → Cooperation	Conversations About Group-Specific Issues → Friendship	Conversations About Group-Specific Issues → 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 group-specific issues contribute to improved intergroup relations? In what follows, I use data from the oral histories to illustrate the pathways between these conversations and each of the four positive outcomes. The first such pathway connects conversations about group-specific issues 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 group-specific issues (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 group-specific issues 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”). 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 group-specific issues enhanced the outgroup knowledge of the white members of the group.

The second pathway connects conversations about group-specific issues to reductions in prejudice. Examples of this pathway include descriptions of how conversations about group-specific issues and challenges 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 issue 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 group-specific issues 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 group-specific issues undermined an attitude typically associated with prejudice (support for segregation).

The third pathway connects conversations about group-specific issues 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.⁸

Here, the interviewee (Adkins) connects conversations about 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 group-specific issues 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 interracial 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 of the street paving project, one member recounted that, “We just stayed on them all the time with

⁸ An image of the equal hiring stamp is in Appendix B, Figure 3.

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).

These examples, then, illustrate how speaking about group-specific issues 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 group-specific issues to intergroup friendship. The impact of these conversations on interracial friendship appears to be more indirect than the other outcomes. However, several of the women provide examples of how conversations about group-specific issues 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 an interaction about a group-specific issue ("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 interracial 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 group-specific issues (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 interracial friendship.

In summary, this section draws from the recollections and experiences of the women of the Interracial Fellowship to illustrate how conversations about group-specific issues contributed to the positive outcomes of intergroup contact. In particular, this analysis illuminates how conversations about group-specific issues served to enhance outgroup knowledge, undermine prejudicial evaluations and attitudes, generate cooperation and collective action, and develop intergroup trust and friendship in the deeply segregated context of Denton, Texas. Although limited to one community (Denton, Texas) and one form of division (the racial division between white and black), this analysis takes a step toward building theory about the importance of conversations about group-specific issues during intergroup contact.

Discussion and Conclusion

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 contact because this research rarely describes the experience of 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 contact: the Denton Women’s Interracial Fellowship.

My analysis of rich oral history data from this case highlights the value of conversations about group-specific issues. In particular, by investigating how the women of the Interracial Fellowship

understood their experience of intergroup contact, my analysis moves beyond the requirements of the scope conditions suggested by Allport (1954) to show how conversations about group-specific issues 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 several implications for research on intergroup contact. First, this analysis suggests that forms of contact that incorporate conversations about group-specific issues are more likely to improve intergroup relations. Certain settings may be more conducive to these kinds of conversations than others. For instance, mixed classrooms and book clubs may be more likely to create opportunities for conversations about the group-specific issues of members. The norm in mixed sports teams and workplaces, on the other hand, may be that group-specific issues are irrelevant and should be set aside to focus on the aims of the team or job (i.e., in the name of “team spirit”). Overall, there are reasons to underpredict these kinds of conversations in everyday settings because research finds that people tend to avoid divisive issues in mixed groups. In the United States, for instance, the avoidance of racial issues has long been documented in group settings (Eliasoph 1999; Bonilla-Silva 2010; Feagin 2010; McKinney 2005). Researchers find similar norms of avoidance in divided contexts like Quebec, Northern Ireland, and settler-colonial Ontario (Taylor, Dube, and Bellerose 1986; Trew 1986; Pettigrew 1998; Denis 2015). This literature thus suggests that conversations about group-specific issues may be unlikely to arise without intentional encouragement or intervention.⁹

⁹ Interestingly, two of the oral history interviews described this kind of avoidance of divisive issues in the first meeting of the Interracial Fellowship. 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

This tendency toward the avoidance of divisive issues points to a second and more promising implication for research on intergroup contact: namely, that contact-based interventions should aim to explicitly encourage or incorporate these kinds of conversations into the experience of contact. To do so, researchers might look to experimental literature which finds that encouraging individuals to consider an outgroup's perspective in interpersonal conversations can durably reduce exclusionary attitudes (Broockman and Kalla 2016; Kalla and Broockman 2020; Broockman and Kalla 2023). The perspective-taking strategies employed in these studies might help to facilitate non-judgmental and meaningful conversations about group-specific issues. This kind of experimental research would be well-suited to exploring the value of conversations about group-specific issues in different populations and settings. Such work would help us better evaluate the scope conditions of these conversations and potentially guide and refine efforts to improve intergroup relations through contact.

think that perhaps maybe we were afraid to talk about serious things at that time.” Similarly, 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 proceeded to describe 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.”

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