Beyond the Optimal Contact Strategy

A Reality Check for the Contact Hypothesis

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The contact hypothesis proposes that interaction between members of different groups reduces intergroup prejudice if—and only if—certain optimal conditions are present. For over 50 years, research using this framework has explored the boundary conditions for ideal contact and has guided interventions to promote desegregation. Although supporting the contact hypothesis in principle, the authors critique some research practices that have come to dominate the field: (a) the prioritizing of the study of interactions occurring under rarefied conditions, (b) the reformulation of lay understandings of contact in terms of a generic typology of ideal dimensions, and (c) the use of shifts in personal prejudice as the primary measure of outcome. The authors argue that these practices have limited the contact hypothesis both as an explanation of the intergroup dynamics of desegregation and as a framework for promoting social psychological change. In so arguing, the authors look toward a complementary program of research on contact and desegregation.

Keywords: contact hypothesis, racism, desegregation

In January of 2003, an international group of scholars met to discuss the applicability of the contact hypothesis to ethnic and racial relations in the United Kingdom. The historical backdrop to this meeting was growing evidence of racial segregation and conflict in British cities, a problem starkly illustrated by the violent disturbances of 2001 in which race riots disrupted urban areas across the North West of England.[1] The meeting was held at New College, Oxford University, and formed part of an Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) seminar series on social exclusion (for further details visit http://www.kent.ac.uk/psychology/social-inclusion/). It was attended by a mixed audience of students, academic speakers, politicians, and members of the press. It was also attended by Bruce Berry, the head teacher of a high school in Bradford, one of the cities worst hit by violence in 2001. Having spent the morning listening to social psychologists review work on the contact hypothesis, Berry delivered an evaluation that later made headlines in *The Guardian* (Ward, 2003).

The nub of his evaluation was that the contact hypothesis requires a reality check—that its proposals for the integration of different groups, while admirable in principle, gloss over the harsher realities of social life in cities such as Bradford. Although agreeing that social change may be achieved by regular mixing and communication, Berry suggested that contact theory offers little guidance about how this ideal is to be achieved in places where racial segregation and inequality are deeply entrenched. He used as an example relations in his own school, which have shifted over the past few decades from a situation of ethnic diversity to a situation of ethnic isolation. This process has been paralleled by broader changes in the urban design of Bradford, which has increasingly assumed a doughnut formation, with Asians living in the center and Whites scattered around the perimeter. He concluded, "The seminar did not come up with an idea about what you can do when that [ideal of integration] is not possible. All the research in the world is not addressing the situation that some cities find themselves in now" (Berry, cited in Ward, 2003, p. 1).

Berry's intuitive assessment of the field inspired the present article, which reevaluates psychological research on the contact hypothesis. Although broadly sympathetic to this tradition of work, we believe that Berry's misgivings about its applied relevance are not entirely misplaced. In several important respects, the contact literature has become detached from (and sometimes irrelevant to) everyday life in divided societies. Accordingly, it offers recommendations that are often of limited utility for understanding or promoting social change. The present article explores the nature and origins of this problem and makes some suggestions about how it might be overcome.

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[1] In July and August of 2001, riots occurred in several cities in the North West of England, including Burnley, Oldham, Bradford, and Leeds. The riots involved clashes between Asian youths and the police and resulted in millions of pounds' worth of damage done to private and public property. Kalra (2002) and Hingorani (2001) offered informative analyses of the nature and causes of this "summer of violence."

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In developing this argument, we do not mean to dismiss the historical contribution of psychological research on contact. In point of fact, we share Brewer and Brown's (1998) view that the contact hypothesis is one of the most successful ideas in the history of social psychology, and we feel that contact researchers are right to claim that desegregation has the potential to reduce prejudice. Nor do we wish to single out for criticism a particular theoretical approach to contact: to adjudicate, for example, between the decategorization, pluralist, and recategorization models that currently dominate debates in the field (see Brown, 1995; Dovidio, Gaertner, & Kawakami, 2003; Pettigrew, 1998). Rather, our target is a deeper set of assumptions that have informed work across a variety of theoretical traditions in contact research. These assumptions translate into a (more or less) coherent strategy for investigating intergroup relations and for framing prescriptions about how they might be improved.

The Optimal Contact Strategy as a Framework for Investigating the Social Psychology of Contact and Desegregation

The contact hypothesis arose in a context in which profound skepticism existed about the value of desegregation and in which many people believed that legal systems of racial segregation were necessary for the maintenance of social stability and harmony. Moreover, even those who accepted desegregation as a worthwhile ideal tended to favor a gradualist approach to social change. They thus balked at the more dramatic transformation demanded by leading figures in the contact tradition such as Allport

(1954), Cook (1985), Clark (1953), and Pettigrew (1969), who called for "extensive integration in all realms of life" (p. 66). It became imperative that a robust, evidence-based defense of the psychological benefits of this policy be mustered.

Even in the formative years of contact research, few scholars espoused a simple "warm body" (Sampson, 1986) theory of the impact of desegregation, one proposing that the co-presence of members of different groups within a desegregated space would in itself be sufficient to eradicate long-standing prejudices. The paradox of contact, as Yinger and Simpson (1973) observed, is that "prejudice is sometimes explained as a result of the *lack* of contact with members of a minority group and sometimes explained as the result of the *presence* of such contact" (p. 117). Expressing this paradox, early research on the psychological effects of racial contact produced mixed results, a fact that was not lost on Gordon Allport (1954), who is generally credited with formulating the contact hypothesis. Indeed, according to Pettigrew (1999), Allport's influential version of the hypothesis was expressly designed to challenge the well-meaning but spurious belief that contact per se can reduce prejudice. Allport wanted to highlight the importance of contextual prerequisites in promoting meaningful change. Thus, in *The Nature of Prejudice*, he warned, "Theoretically, every superficial contact we make with an out-group member could by the 'law of frequency' strengthen the adverse associations that we have" (Allport, 1954, p. 264).

So it was that research on the contact hypothesis developed into an elaborate program of situational qualifications in which psychologists sought above all to distinguish between favorable and unfavorable contact (Forbes, 1997). This objective profoundly shaped the conceptual, methodological, and applied character of the field, to a large extent defining its criteria for progress. Conceptually, the point of contact research became the explanation of how, when, and why certain situational variables maximize prejudice reduction, a project that continues to inform theoretical dialogue. Methodologically, the field evolved around the problem of testing the association between intergroup prejudice and putatively ideal forms of contact. As well as adapting standard survey and laboratory techniques, psychologists intervened in field settings, devising ingenious microcosms of harmony such as the Jigsaw Classroom (e.g., Aronson & Patnoe, 1997).

The latter illustrates how the optimal contact strategy has informed attempts to apply contact research. The translation of theory into practice has entailed a concerted effort to shape the local conditions under which desegregation occurs, with the aim of ensuring that the transformation of institutions such as schools unfolds under the "right" circumstances (e.g., see Schofield, 1986; Schofield & Eurich-Fulcer, 2001). Although this project has been at best only partially successful, one must admire its interventionist spirit, a spirit embodied in the activism of contact researchers such as Cook (1985, p. 460), who urged social psychol-

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ogists to abandon their customary "reactive orientation" and become advocates of social change.

The *optimal contact strategy*, then, aims to identify and elucidate the conditions under which contact works most effectively to reduce prejudice and, by implication, to increase the possibility of social harmony. For several decades, this approach has served as social psychologists' primary framework for understanding the dynamics of contact and desegregation. Enormous resources have been expended in elaborating taxonomies of conditions for "good contact" and explaining their relationship to prejudice reduction. Some of the prescriptions recommended in the contact literature include the following:

- Contact should be regular and frequent
- Contact should involve a balanced ratio of in-group to out-group members
- Contact should have genuine "acquaintance potential"
- Contact should occur across a variety of social settings and situations
- Contact should be free from competition
- Contact should be evaluated as "important" to the participants involved
- Contact should occur between individuals who share equality of status
- Contact should involve interaction with a counter-stereotypic member of another group
- Contact should be organized around cooperation toward the achievement of a superordinate goal
- Contact should be normatively and institutionally sanctioned
- Contact should be free from anxiety or other negative emotions

- Contact should be personalized and involve genuine friendship formation
- Contact should be with a person who is deemed a typical or representative member of another group

Perhaps because it yields the kinds of clear, testable hypotheses that are beloved of social psychologists, the optimal contact strategy has provided a highly productive research paradigm. The project of assessing the psychological effects of different combinations of contact conditions has generated a prolific, if at times rather repetitive, empirical literature; and in recent years, this literature has been extended well beyond the early focus on ethnicity and race to encompass many other kinds of social relations (e.g., see Adsett & Morin, 2004; Herek & Capitanio, 1996; Manetti, Schneider, & Siperstein, 2001; Maras & Brown, 1996; Werth & Lord, 1992). Far from tapering off, research output in the field appears to have escalated. The contact hypothesis is now firmly established as "one of psychology's most effective strategies for improving intergroup relations" (Dovidio et al., 2003, p. 5).

The productivity of the field has not, however, blinded commentators to its potential limitations, particularly limitations arising from the burgeoning list of optimal conditions. In his 1987 review, Stephan warned that the boundary conditions for contact had become so baroque that the field "resembled a bag lady who is so encumbered by excess baggage she can hardly move" (p. 17). Pettigrew (1986) likened such conditions to a laundry list, and in his more recent publications, he has distinguished between *necessary* and *facilitating* conditions for positive contact (Pettigrew, 1998). His argument is not merely that the field requires greater conceptual parsimony and coherence but also that the proliferation of optimal conditions is in danger of rendering the contact hypothesis inapplicable to real-world situations, a point that brings us to the limitations of the optimal contact strategy.

Limitations of the Optimal Contact Strategy

Utopianism

The optimal contact strategy invites researchers to discover an ideal world, a world in which the superlative conditions for contact apply and the opportunities for reducing prejudice are maximized. For many decades, social psychologists have been debating what this world might look like, what social conditions and forms of contact might prevail there, and more recently, how contact might be arranged to promote the generalization of attitude and stereotype change.

Something that is easily hidden by this research enterprise is that everyday contact between groups bears little resemblance to this ideal world. The available evidence on the nature and extent of interracial communication, for example, suggests that it remains occasional, fleeting, and superficial (see also Dixon & Durrheim, 2003; Taylor & Moghaddam, 1994). It is not only in British society that the

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problem of "parallel lives" can be diagnosed. Racial segregation and avoidance remain the norm in many societies, including American society, where the vast majority of contact research has been conducted (e.g., Darden & Kamel, 2000; Davis, 2004; Farley, Fielding, & Krysan, 1997; Goldberg, 1998; Massey & Denton, 1989, 1993). Of course, it is possible to find cases of stable racial integration (Ellen, 1998), communities or settings where genuine and long-lasting progress has been made. By and large, however, Black and White Americans continue to live in different areas, attend different schools, and circulate in different social networks.

Nor does the limited amount of racial contact that does occur appear to involve the kinds of personalized exchanges that are lauded by contact theorists—exchanges that have so-called "acquaintance potential" and lead to the formation of long-lasting friendships. Descriptive surveys of friendship patterns are revealing here. Sigelman, Bledsoe, Welch, and Combs's (1996) survey revealed, for instance, that over 70% of White Americans have no Black friends whatsoever and that those who do have such friends generally have "only a few." In a national probability sample, Marsden (1987) similarly found that only 8% of adults with a social network of two or more people reported "discussing important matters" with people of a different race. These sobering examples of racial "homophily" (McPherson, Smith-Lovin, & Cook, 2001) in social networks are by no means unique to the United States. Gibson's (2001) recent survey of the experiences of 3,700 South Africans living in a supposedly postapartheid era, for instance, documented a similar pattern of racial isolation. Although Gibson located a positive correlation between interracial contact and acceptance of racial reconciliation,

he also found that such contact remains highly limited. Only a tiny proportion of White (6.6%) and Black (1.5%) South Africans have more than a "small number" of friends of another "race" group, whereas the majority of South Africans have either "never" or "not very often" shared a mixed-race meal.

The racial organization of friendship choices is perhaps not surprising. In many historically divided societies, the conditions for ethnic and racial intimacy have proved difficult to create. Scholars working in places such as Israel, Northern Ireland, South Africa, and the United States have repeatedly noted how wider power structures— embedded within the historical, political, and economic organization of society—make conditions such as equality of status and cooperative interdependence either difficult to implement or applicable only within a narrow range of settings (e.g., Connolly, 2000; Foster & Finchilescu, 1986; Jackman & Crane, 1986). Even when they are successfully implemented, such conditions are notoriously unstable, tending to wane or disintegrate over time (see also Brewer, 1996).

In short, there is a gulf between the idealized forms of contact studied by social psychologists and the mundane interactions that characterize most ordinary encounters between groups. When it is conjured into existence, "optimal contact" usually takes the form of short-lived laboratory analogues or highly localized interventions in the field. These interventions may be successful in creating small islands of integration in a sea of intolerance, but they are unrepresentative of wider processes of contact and desegregation. As Amir (1969) conceded in his early review of the literature,

if most studies have appeared to prove that contact between ethnic groups reduces prejudice, it does not necessarily follow that these results are typical of real social situations. Intergroup contact under the circumstances studied is unfortunately quite rare in actual life, and even when it occurs, it produces only casual interactions rather than intimate acquaintances. (p. 337)

The problem that arises here is not simply the well-worn one of ecological validity (cf. Nesdale & Todd, 2000); there is also a danger that the field is succumbing to a form of utopianism. In focusing on rarefied forms of interaction, social psychologists have inadvertently widened the gap between theory and practice in contact research. On the one hand, the proliferation of optimal conditions has rendered some versions of contact theory meaningless, making it "increasingly unlikely that any situations can meet the specified conditions" (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2000, p. 94). On the other hand, contact research has produced a picture of intergroup processes that increasingly obscures and prettifies the starker realities of everyday interactions between members of different groups (cf. Bramel, 2004), some of which have been outlined above. By prioritizing the study of "optimal contact," researchers have effectively allowed such realities to slip beneath the threshold of scientific inquiry. Indeed, reading the contact literature, one sometimes senses that everyday relations are

regarded as messy and unpredictable, a poor testing ground for the propositions of contact theory.

A qualification is in order here. We are not saying that it is wrong in principle to investigate social conditions that approximate the ideal. It may even be true that this process encourages social change by providing the glimpse of an alternative social order. Yet, if it is to have broader utility, contact research must also begin to address some pervasive but underexplored features of social relations in desegregated societies. What are the social psychological consequences of contact episodes across the full range of contexts in which group members encounter one another? How do participants make sense of such encounters and with what short-term and long-term implications? How can we account for the resilience of segregation and for the persistence of either superficial or negative contact experiences? What is the nature of the gulf between ideal and ordinary forms of interaction between groups, and above all, how might this gulf be overcome?

Although they haunt the margins of the literature, these kinds of questions are rarely the focus of theoretical commentary or research on the contact hypothesis. As a result, the literature has been vitiated not only as a model of the effects of desegregation but also as a framework for promoting social change. Certainly, there is little point in enumerating lengthy lists of boundary conditions for ideal contact without explaining how such conditions might be made relevant to the lived experiences of ordinary people in ordinary situations or without explaining how they might be implemented in particular contexts of inequality. To do so is to detach the contact hypothesis from wider historical and political realities and thus to mask the preconditions for social change. In this sense, Mr. Berry, our headmaster from Bradford, is quite correct: The contact hypothesis requires a reality check.

Neglect of Participants' Own Constructions of the Meaning of Contact

The quest for optimal contact leads not only to a utopian conception of interaction between groups but also to a conception that is so generic as to be almost devoid of meaning. The cost of an approach that presupposes that the "basic features that determine the success or failure of . . . intergroup contact experiences are the same across times and places, provided that the processes involved are conceptualized at the appropriate level of abstraction" (Miller & Brewer, 1984, p. 2) is a neglect of the contextual rootedness and specificity of social relations.

As an unintended consequence, this approach has nurtured a strange incuriosity about how participants themselves make sense of their encounters with others within particular sociohistorical circumstances. This may seem an odd criticism to level at a social *psychological* tradition of work, and it needs to be immediately qualified. We are not suggesting that researchers have ignored participants' subjective interpretations of contact. To the contrary, they have routinely explored such interpretations using postexperimental rating scales or, more commonly, formal question-

naires such as the following (adapted from Islam & Hewstone, 1993):[2]

1. What amount of contact do you experience with Muslim people as neighbors?
   None at all   1   2   3   4   5   6   7   A great deal
2. What amount of contact do you experience with Muslim people as close friends?
   None at all   1   2   3   4   5   6   7   A great deal
3. Is the contact you have with Muslim people perceived as equal?
   Definitely not   1   2   3   4   5   6   7   Definitely yes
4. Is the contact you have with Muslim people competitive or cooperative?
   Very competitive   1   2   3   4   5   6   7   Very cooperative
5. Is the contact you experience with Muslim people of a superficial or intimate nature?
   Very superficial   1   2   3   4   5   6   7   Very intimate

Islam and Hewstone (1993) developed these items as part of a questionnaire to assess Hindus' experiences of contact with Muslims in India.[3] As is apparent, some of the items measure the perceived quantity of contact that respondents experience in various contexts, whereas others measure the perceived quality of such contact in terms of dimensions such as cooperativeness and intimacy. As with most survey instruments in the field, individuals' answers on such scales are used to construct average contact scores, and the association of these scores with ethnic attitudes and stereotypes is then determined.

An advantage of this methodological approach is that it allows researchers to classify and compare the experiences of large numbers of respondents and provides useful information about the broad features of social relations in a given society. A disadvantage, however, is that participants' own concepts of contact are quietly subsumed by concepts grounded in the academic literature on the contact hypothesis. By necessity, the meanings that participants themselves attribute to their encounters with others are translated into a set of general categories that correspond to the ideal forms of interaction proposed by Allport (1954) and successive generations of researchers.

To our minds, this approach has several limitations. Perhaps most important, it runs the risk of concealing the "stubborn particularity" (Cherry, 1995) of participants' perspectives on contact. We can be confident, for example, that the above questionnaire items reflect how social psy-

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[2] From "Dimensions of Contact as Predictors of Intergroup Anxiety, Perceived Out-Group Variability, and Out-Group Attitude: An Integrative Model," by M. R. Islam and M. Hewstone, 1993, *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, *19*, pp. 702, 703. Adapted with permission of the authors.

[3] In selecting the scales used by Islam and Hewstone (1993) for illustrative purposes, we do not mean to imply that their measures are especially problematic. To the contrary, their measures of the quantity and quality of contact are, in their own terms, valid and reliable and have proved useful in other research (e.g. Greenland & Brown, 1999).

chologists have classified and thought about contact. To what extent, however, do they capture group members' own ways of making sense of their social relations in particular social situations? One could argue that this kind of measure flattens and decontextualizes the social evaluation of interaction between groups such as Hindus and Muslims, producing data that are "remote from the complexities of lived experience" (Dixon & Reicher, 1997, p. 364). The problem that arises here is not simply that psychological research on the contact hypothesis becomes self-referential; its practical efficacy too is undermined. If we overlook the context-specific ways in which participants themselves construct the meaning of desegregated relations, we limit our ability to understand how and why contact has been effective or ineffective in promoting social change.

This leads to a second and related problem, to which we return later in the article. By substituting their own analytic categories for those of their respondents, social psychologists have obscured the fact that lay interpretations of contact may in themselves enable the reproduction of racism. Indeed, we would argue that commonsense understandings of race relations typically express wider ideological dilemmas and interests and that, as such, desegregation frequently leads to the reassertion of what Sampson (1993) called "serviceable" constructions of encounters with others.

Dixon and Reicher (1997) made a related argument on the basis of their case study of residential desegregation in a town near Cape Town, South Africa, where an informal settlement of Black residents was established amid a historically White community. Dixon and Reicher found that White homeowners' accounts of contact tended to portray their new neighbors as a foreign and intrusive presence, as "squatters" who had broached the legitimate boundaries that divide insiders (those who belong) from outsiders (those who are out of place). This shared understanding of desegregation profoundly shaped their collective reactions to social change in the town. White interest groups pressured the local government to "contain" the "influx" of people to the new settlement and to insulate the surrounding White communities from negative impacts. As a result, the settlement's design gradually came to embody the apartheid ideology of separate spheres even though it was officially heralded as a successful example of racial transformation in South Africa (cf. Dixon, Reicher, & Foster, 1997). Buffer zones, razor wire fences, screens of trees, and other material barriers were erected in order to limit the possibility of interaction between communities. At the same time, the neighborhoods abutting the settlement became fortified enclaves, with residents withdrawing behind an extensive array of security measures.

What was important about residents' constructions of contact in this setting, then, was not merely that they failed to match the optimal conditions and accordingly led to heightened levels of individual prejudice. They also reproduced a collective framework of interpretation through which the territorial entitlements of the advantaged group

could be reasserted, the existing systems of privilege cast as reasonable and legitimate, and the process of desegregation resisted. By reducing contact to a list of formal and ideal dimensions, researchers have tended to hide precisely these kinds of ideological meanings and effects. That is, they have failed to recognize how racism may be immanent within, and enacted through, the working models of contact that members of a community apply as they make sense of their changing relations with others. This point brings us to our third and final criticism.

Theoretical Individualism

Contact research attempts not only to understand but also to promote social change. It proposes to do so through the rehabilitation of the prejudiced individual. If segregation has left us harboring irrational stereotypes and attitudes, then contact promises to help us to change our psychology and to recognize what Allport (1954) termed our *common humanity*. More sophisticated versions of this story can be found in the literature, but the basic idea that contact improves collective tolerance and stability by reducing personal antipathy remains central. Indeed, contact is defined as *optimal* precisely when its impact on prejudice reduction is maximized.

Three criticisms have been leveled at this model of social change, each focusing on a different (though related) aspect of its theoretical individualism. The first has suggested that the effects of contact on interpersonal perceptions may not generalize to shape intergroup perceptions, a problem that has been extensively analyzed in the contact literature (see Hewstone, 1996; Miller, 2002). Varying theories have emerged about how best to promote attitude and stereotype generalization, with some researchers arguing, for example, that it is essential that participants see one another as typical representatives of their social groups if they are to revise their attitudes toward the out-group as a whole (Hewstone & Brown, 1986). Often this does not appear to occur. Contact improves individuals' attitudes toward particular out-group members—who are classified as exceptions to the rule—but leaves intergroup perceptions unchanged (cf. Rothbart & John, 1985).

The second criticism has highlighted a more fundamental limitation of the contact hypothesis. What if the causes of collective conflict reflect processes that are relatively autonomous from—and thus impervious to—interactions between individuals? What if interpersonal contacts are an effect rather than a cause of collective relations, being "symptomatic of preexisting group affiliations and intergroup relations rather than a decisive determining factor" (Brown & Turner, 1981, p. 60)? According to several commentators, it is precisely because contact interventions leave intact the collective and institutionalized bases of discrimination that they offer at best a limited framework for promoting social change (see Foster & Finchilescu, 1986; Jackman & Crane, 1986; Reicher, 1986). At worst, the theoretical individualism of the hypothesis may render it vulnerable to ideological exploitation. The political and economic reforms that are essential to the reduction of

racism may be deferred in favor of policies designed to give divided communities the opportunity to "get to know one another."

The third criticism has focused on how contact research conceives the consequences of desegregation, a theme to which we return later. Taking the rehabilitation of the prejudiced individual as its primary objective, the optimal contact strategy defines social psychological change primarily in terms of cognitive and emotional shifts within the individuals in contact. This idea is evident at the level of research practice. The vast majority of contact studies take as their outcome measure individuals' scores on prejudice scales, notably, attitude and stereotype scales.

Forbes (1997, 2004) has elegantly traced some of the limitations of this approach. He pointed out that desegregation generally exerts a somewhat paradoxical effect on intergroup relations, a fact overlooked in the majority of contact research. At an interpersonal level, direct contact with others may well foster tolerance and may even "cure" prejudice in some cases. However, its effects on relations at a collective level may work in the opposite direction. The new forms of interaction that desegregation makes possible may heighten perceptions of threat among the wider membership of the communities involved. This may result not only in an increase in aggregate levels of racism but also in the emergence of new systems of segregation, designed precisely to regulate the possibility of contact.

The details of Forbes's (1997, 2004) fascinating argument need not concern us here. What is important is its general orientation, which exposes the limits of an approach to social change that focuses exclusively on the rehabilitation of the prejudiced individual. This approach is inherently limited because processes of contact and desegregation carry consequences that are irreducible to their impact on individual attitude and stereotype change. They have collective, institutional, and ideological ramifications that extend beyond the private attitude and stereotype shifts measured by contact researchers. A fortiori, in the absence of a more expansive model of consequentiality, we cannot understand why it is so difficult to implement and maintain the ideal conditions for contact. Once again, the contact hypothesis slips into a utopian position, in which the gulf between theory and practice widens.

New Directions in Research on Contact and Desegregation

In the previous section, we outlined some potential problems with research on the contact hypothesis. The origins of these problems, we argued, derive from a particular conceptual and methodological approach to understanding the dynamics of contact and desegregation, which we have labeled the *optimal contact strategy*. What are the implications of this critique? How might it inform future work in the field?

One option would be to dismiss contact theory and to look toward an alternative approach. Along these lines, for instance, Reicher (1986) has argued that the contact hypothesis misrepresents the deeper causes of racial conflict and inequality and is thus unable to contribute substantively to their solution (see also Foster & Finchilescu, 1986; Jackman & Crane, 1986). In his view, an approach is required that interrogates the historical, material, and ideological practices through which the meaning of race relations is defined (indeed, through which contact comes to be viewed in terms of race in the first place). He also advocated an approach that attempts to understand and promote forms of group behavior that directly challenge the status quo. The shift here is from a model of change focused on the reduction of personal prejudice to a model of change focused on the production of collective resistance.

Although we have considerable sympathy for this kind of radical critique, we hold a somewhat more sanguine evaluation of contact theory. Notwithstanding our earlier criticisms, we believe that the investigation of how (relatively ideal) forms of contact influence individual prejudice remains an important focus for social psychological work. At the same time, we believe the social psychology of contact and desegregation must now develop beyond the constraints of the contact hypothesis. Building on some of the critical reflections outlined above, we advocate a fourfold extension of work in the field. In so doing, we discuss some recent studies of intergroup contact that illustrate the kind of reorientation we have in mind even if they do not present a systematic alternative to the optimal contact approach. The following discussion does not aim to develop a fully fledged theoretical position; rather, it anticipates some lines of inquiry that might be developed in a more programmatic fashion by future researchers.

Beyond Optimal Contact: The Social Psychological Significance of Mundane Encounters Between Groups

We have argued that contact research tends to gravitate toward the investigation of relations unfolding under rarified conditions. As a corrective to this tendency to prioritize ideal forms of contact, we advocate that more research be conducted on the mundane, seemingly unimportant, encounters that constitute the overwhelming majority of everyday contact experiences. This type of research would entail "thick description" of unfolding interactions between groups in ordinary situations. Dixon and Durrheim (2003) and Lee (2003) have provided instructive examples.

Dixon and Durrheim (2003) observed day-to-day relations on a beach in postapartheid South Africa and documented a mixed pattern of integration and segregation. On the one hand, the demographic composition of the beach seemed to reflect the racial diversity of South African society, with about 64% of occupants being classified as Black, 24% as White, 10% as Indian, and 2% as colored. If one recognizes that during the apartheid era beaches were racially exclusive, then this multiracial demography can be viewed as a sign of progressive change. On the other hand, Dixon and Durrheim reported that direct interaction between groups rarely occurred on the beach. Indeed, Dixon and Durrheim found that the very possibility of such inter-

action was prohibited by a dynamic system of informal segregation that operated across a range of scales and was maintained via routine practices of boundary construction. Such practices ranged from the maintenance of racially exclusive umbrella spaces at a microinteractional scale to the reproduction of broader territorial patterns of dispersal and division across the beachfront as a whole. Such informal segregation also occurred via temporal processes of influx and withdrawal, with White holidaymakers tending to leave the beach when Black holidaymakers arrived in numbers.

Jennifer Lee's (2003) study also explored the dynamics of racial contact and avoidance in an everyday setting. Lee asked 75 Black shoppers to discuss their experiences of shopping in White and Black neighborhoods in the United States. Working as a bag collector and a cashier, she also observed customer–retailer interactions over a 14-month period. From a rich set of data, we wish to extract two simple but revealing themes. First, and perhaps not surprisingly, Lee found that the treatment of Black customers was more negative in White than in Black shopping areas. In particular, she found that Black customers were subject to routine practices of surveillance and suspicion in White stores, practices that made the racial dimension of the customer–client interaction highly salient for them. They described, for example, how their movements through the store would be "tailed" and their purchasing behavior closely, though often furtively, monitored. Second, Lee found Black customers engaged in a variety of behavioral strategies in order to navigate such discriminatory encounters. For example, they tended to "wear their class," making strategic use of visible markers of status such as expensive accessories, clothes, speech, and mannerisms in order to qualify themselves as belonging and to deemphasize processes of racial classification. Alternatively, they adopted tactics of withdrawal and avoidance, insulating themselves from the experience of being treated as outsiders or criminals. As in Dixon and Durrheim's (2003) study, Lee (2003) found that the lived experience of contact often led to the reestablishment of racial boundaries.

Why is this kind of work relevant to researchers interested in the contact hypothesis? From the perspective of classic contact theory, one might simply dismiss the racial exchanges studied by Dixon and Durrheim (2003) and Lee (2003) as superficial and impersonal, that is, as irrelevant to the ideal forms of interaction prescribed by the contact hypothesis. To do so, however, would be to overlook the social psychological significance of such exchanges and to miss out on the opportunities they may afford for intervention.

To put the point simply: In the absence of detailed information about these kinds of banal contacts, social psychologists cannot begin to understand the wider implications of desegregation in a given society or formulate realistic programs of social intervention. They cannot appreciate, for example, the full range of situations in which contact occurs or does not occur (e.g., retail outlets, beaches); the varying imagined, ascribed, or imposed identities of the participants involved (e.g., customer–vendor; tourist); the communicative processes that characterize contact (e.g., surveillance, boundary construction); and the social practices and institutions in which contact is embedded (e.g., shopping, holidaying). In short, they cannot appreciate the nature and variety of ordinary encounters between groups and, by implication, the full range of situations in which interventions can, or should, be attempted.

Nor can they understand the impediments that lie in the path of meaningful social change. What Lee's (2003) study reveals, for example, is how institutionalized practices of surveillance—ostensibly designed to maintain store security—create a retail environment in which racial hierarchy is constantly being flagged and in which contact is defined (and experienced) in terms of a micropolitics of suspicion and criminality. Her work thus identifies a concrete, and largely unacknowledged, set of social practices and assumptions that are ripe for transformation. In a similar vein, Dixon and Durrheim's (2003) work clarifies one of the most central, though undertheorized, obstacles to policies of integration, namely, the tendency for informal systems of preferential segregation to reemerge. Although contact researchers have occasionally acknowledged this problem (see especially Schofield, 1986; Schofield & Sagar, 1979), they have in our view greatly underestimated its pervasiveness and tenacity. By focusing on relatively ideal forms of social interaction, they have not fully accounted for how, when, and why resegregation occurs. Nor have they specified what, if anything, can be done about it.

Beyond Formal Typologies of Contact: Recovering Participants' Own Constructions of Their Interactions With Others

In everyday life, contact may assume a wide range of meanings and be constituted in terms of a bewildering array of social practices. In academic research, by contrast, contact has been defined, measured, and operationalized in terms of a limited set of generic and ideal dimensions. We have argued that this methodological approach has inherent limitations. Notably, it masks the interpretive frameworks and practices used by the individuals and communities in contact to make sense of their everyday relations (which may or may not use constructions of contact that are captured by the analytic concepts of social psychologists). What is required, then, is a methodological framework that proceeds not from a top-down imposition of pregiven categories but from a detailed, bottom-up analysis of participants' own frameworks of meaning as they are applied within particular social contexts. A small body of qualitative work on contact and desegregation illustrates the potential utility of this methodological shift (e.g., see Buttny, 1999; Buttny & Williams, 2000; Connolly, 2000; Dixon & Reicher, 1997; Hubbard, 1999; Morris, 1999).

Consider, as an instructive example, Connolly's (2000) work in a Northern Irish context. Connolly conducted an ethnographic study of a cross-community initiative that brought together groups of 10- and 11-year-old Catholic and Protestant schoolchildren for a dance at a

disco. Building on the logic of the contact hypothesis, the initiative's aim was to encourage pleasant, cooperative interactions that might reduce prejudice and build positive relations between communities historically divided by sectarian conflict. However, Connolly's results suggested that this objective was not achieved; if anything, contact seemed "to reinforce existing sectarian beliefs" and to intensify tensions between groups (p. 186). Yet why was this so? Why did contact fail in this instance?

Connolly (2000) insisted that in order to answer this question one needs to recover participants' *own perspectives* on relations within the disco context. An analysis of follow-up interviews revealed, for example, that participants' experiences of interaction were complexly mediated by their understanding of the rules of sexual subcultures. For many of the girls and boys involved, the disco was a highly charged environment in which gender and sexual identities were placed on the line. In this context, Connolly argued, a reversion to sectarian prejudice offered a means of managing threat, accounting for ambivalent or difficult experiences, and maintaining public self-image among a peer group. Thus, Protestant boys talked about Catholic girls in sexually derogatory terms, justifying their avoidance of contact through the use of sectarian and gender stereotypes.

Our goal here is not to discuss Connolly's (2000) ethnography in detail. Rather, we wish to use his work to capture a central problem with research that measures contact in terms of preconceived rating scales. Namely, it may eviscerate individuals' lived experiences of their relations with others, depriving such experiences of their social psychological richness, complexity, and specificity. In turn, we impoverish our capacity to explain why contact fails or succeeds. To ask Connolly's respondents, for instance, to rate the degree to which their contact was "cooperative," "superficial," or "intimate" would be entirely beside the point. Such questions would reveal little about how they formulated their relations in the disco or about why contact was deemed problematic in this case. At best, it might lead to the (decidedly circular) inference that one or more of the ideal conditions for contact must not, after all, have been operative. Along similar lines, Connolly (2000) has criticized contact research on the grounds that

explanations as to why particular respondents have experienced attitude change are not derived from a careful examination of their own experiences and perspectives but are simply "read off" from the presence of particular conditions within the contact (i.e., that it was cooperative, that the participants were of equal status, etc.). Given the context-specific character of racial and ethnic relations, and their highly contingent and contradictory forms, the production of such ungrounded assumptions is highly questionable. (p. 176)

An emic analysis of participants' perspectives on contact is particularly important when one is dealing with the experiences of members of historically disadvantaged groups, who have borne the brunt of policies of segregation and discrimination. Hopkins and Kahani-Hopkins's (in press) research on British Muslims' perceptions of inter-

ventions to promote integration with the non-Muslim majority in Britain provides a revealing case in point.

Their work has suggested first that Muslims' constructions of the meaning of contact must be viewed within a context of historical change. Over the past two decades, Hopkins and Kahani-Hopkins (in press) argued, British Muslims' experiences of discrimination in spheres such as employment, education, and health provision have increasingly become organized along religious rather than racial lines. That is, these Muslims have come to view their marginalization in British society not as a function of anti-Asian or anti-Black sentiments but as a function of their identity as Muslims. There is a growing sense that the status of Muslims in Western societies such as Britain is precarious and that basic religious freedoms are under threat. Accordingly, political activism has become focused on the rising problem of so-called "Islamaphobia."

Second, building on an analysis of political discourse about Islamaphobia in Britain, Hopkins and Kahani-Hopkins (in press) argued that British Muslims' constructions of contact both contradict and overlap with social psychological theorizing about social change. On the one hand, in line with the prescriptions of the contact hypothesis, some Muslims view integration as axiomatic to the struggle against Islamaphobia. They thus strongly advocate programs to encourage dialogue, dispelling the myth that Islamic communities are somehow closed to interaction with members of other faiths. Indeed, they hold that it is precisely via such bridge-building initiatives that Muslims' identity as Muslims is realized.

On the other hand, and in opposition to this framework for understanding the meaning of contact, other Muslims define Islamaphobia as reflecting a fundamental antagonism between Islam and the West, an antagonism that expresses a timeless moral struggle between *haqq* (truth) and *batil* (falsehood). According to this theory of social relations, contact is likely to subvert Muslim identity, promote decadence and moral corruption, and, critically, undermine the potential for collective resistance to discrimination. Along these lines, for example, representatives of the Muslim Parliament of Great Britain have recently asserted that the autonomous organization and development of Muslim communities must, at this juncture in British history, take precedence over programs of interfaith dialogue. Mere contact, they suggest, is likely to perpetuate the conditions under which Islamaphobia continues to flourish; indeed, it may be part of a political project to promote secular values and to fracture Muslim identity.

A central theme of Hopkins and Kahani-Hopkins's (in press) research, then, is that communities may hold disparate and sometimes contradictory "theories" of the meaning and implications of contact. These culturally embedded theories, which are not readily translated into the generic coding categories of the contact hypothesis, have potentially profound implications for the success of interventions designed to promote interaction between groups, helping "to explain when and why contact is successful or unsuccessful" (Hopkins & Kahani-Hopkins, in press, p. 26). If,

for example, contact is seen as threatening the extent to which members are able to engage in, or preserve, valued forms of religious expression, or if it is constructed in terms of a moral struggle between decadence and purity, then it is unlikely to have a beneficial impact on social relations. To the contrary, it is likely to reproduce forms of isolation that contact researchers conceive as problematic but group members themselves conceive as necessary to the preservation of their identity.

What is crucial, then, is that researchers pay closer attention to the voices and concerns of ordinary people. They must adopt methods of data collection and analysis that are adequate to the diversity and contextual specificity of lay constructions of the meaning of contact. In this way, they may begin to bridge the gulf between contact as it is operationalized in the psychological literature and contact as it is understood, evaluated, and practiced in ordinary life. We suspect that one outcome of this process will be a growing realization that shifts in individual prejudice are only one way of investigating the relationship between contact and social change . . . and arguably not the most important way.

Beyond the "Prejudice Problematic": Contact, Political Ideology, and the Reproduction of Inequality

Research on the contact hypothesis takes shifts in personal prejudice as its primary, and often sole, index of social psychological change. This reflects a conviction that the rehabilitation of the intolerant individual is of paramount importance to the transformation of broader patterns of intergroup relations. As mentioned earlier in this article, this conviction has been criticized on the grounds that it perpetuates various forms of theoretical individualism. Developing one aspect of this line of argument, we wish to suggest that contact research needs to move beyond the restrictions of the "prejudice problematic" (cf. Wetherell & Potter, 1992) to adopt a more expansive conception of change. A concrete line of research is used to illustrate briefly the promise of this shift in emphasis, which concerns the relationship between contact and perceptions of the ideological legitimacy of systemic inequality.

In their 1986 article entitled "Some of My Best Friends Are Black . . . ," Jackman and Crane developed a searching critique of the concept of prejudice that underpins the contact hypothesis. Their critique was based on an analysis of data collected during a national probability survey ($N = 1,914$) in 1975 in the United States that included measures of personal interracial contact as well as an unusually comprehensive variety of measures of racial attitudes. This analysis suggested that contact was selective in its impact on White Americans' racial attitudes. Although Jackman and Crane found evidence of a positive impact on standard measures of racial affect, they found that contact had little effect on Whites' support for political policies designed to redress racial inequalities (e.g., inequalities in housing and employment). In other words, intimate contact promoted emotional acceptance of Blacks,

just as the contact hypothesis predicts. However, it left unaltered a resilient core of conservative attitudes that led members of a dominant group to defend their privileges and to accept the kinds of inequalities that prevent the optimal conditions for contact from being implemented.

Discussing these results, Jackman and Crane (1986) questioned the concept of prejudice that underlies the majority of contact research and called for a more penetrating analysis of how desegregation shapes the broader constellation of political attitudes in a society. Contact research, they argued, tends to view prejudice and discrimination as "emotionally based outgrowths of the ignorance that accompanies the physical separation of Blacks and Whites" (p. 479). The intuitive appeal of the contact hypothesis is that it shows how this tragic misunderstanding can be rectified, namely, by giving people the opportunity to recognize the falsity of their emotional and cognitive preferences. In contrast to this view, Jackman and Crane argued that researchers need to adopt a political conception of intergroup attitudes: a conception that acknowledges how racial attitudes may both reflect and sustain dominant groups' privilege and sense of position. The paradox of contact, they suggested, is that interracial intimacy may nurture bonds of affection yet leave intact political commitments that sustain institutional discrimination. An analogy with gender relations may be apposite here. The fact that men have regular and intimate contact with women, and often cherish their company, need not diminish their support for patriarchal arrangements. To the contrary, in many cases love and sexism seem not only to coexist quite happily but also, and more disturbing, to be closely intertwined.

In presenting this line of argument, we are not necessarily accepting wholesale the validity of Jackman and Crane's (1986) findings. In point of fact, research on the association between interracial contact and Whites' political orientations remains sparse and does not as yet permit strong conclusions to be drawn. Certainly, we would not dismiss the possibility that contact may, in some contexts, increase (White) awareness of the unjust consequences of racial discrimination and perhaps even motivate political activism (for an example, see Surace & Seeman, 1967). At the same time, we support Jackman and Crane's call for a more politically sophisticated understanding of the effects of contact and desegregation on White racism (see also Durrheim & Dixon, 2004). In our view, this shift in emphasis requires social psychologists to reevaluate some of the deeper assumptions of the Allportian tradition of contact research (Allport, 1954), which has fostered the idea that prejudice is an irrational property of individual minds rather than a collective rationalization of political (dis)advantage. As such, the issue for contact research "is not whether Whites generalize to Blacks as a whole from their personal experience of friendship with an individual Black. Instead, the issue is how a relationship of intimacy with individual subordinates modifies the manner in which dominant group members defend their privilege" (Jackman & Crane, 1986, p. 481).

In a similar fashion, research on the effects of contact and desegregation on minority group reactions needs to go beyond standard measures of racial preferences and stereotypes to explore their broader impact on political consciousness (Rodriguez & Gurin, 1990) and collective resistance to discrimination. On the one hand, contact may heighten awareness of broader patterns of institutional and social injustice. Thus, Poore et al. (2002) found that the more members of a geographically isolated Inuit community experienced contact outside their own community, the greater their perception of systemic discrimination against their group. Regular interaction with members of an advantaged group seemed to enable forms of social comparison that encouraged members of a disadvantaged group to recognize their plight. On the other hand, it is possible that the emotional benefits of contact may sometimes be offset by its tendency to promote acceptance of broader patterns of discrimination; it may thus exercise an unanticipated systems justification effect (cf. Jost & Banaji, 1995). Ellison and Powers (1994), for example, found that African Americans who had one or more close White friends were three times more likely to believe that White Americans want to facilitate Black socioeconomic advancement than they were to believe that White Americans are indifferent to the conditions of Black Americans. African Americans without close White friends tended to hold a more cynical, and arguably more accurate, view.

At the very least, the research discussed in this section raises some uncomfortable questions about the relationship between different forms of interracial contact and the likelihood that groups will recognize and resist systemic discrimination. How, if at all, do processes of contact and desegregation affect participants' willingness to acquiesce in exploitative social relations or even to acknowledge them as such? How do such processes influence participants' willingness to support the very policies of political and economic restitution that would bring us closer to the kind of ideal society imagined within social psychological writing on the contact hypothesis?

Contact and Social Change Revisited: The Importance of Comparative Analysis

It is worth reiterating at this point that we are not rejecting the contact hypothesis in principle or suggesting that its recommendations for promoting change are without value. To the contrary, like the majority of contact researchers, we believe that desegregation often has the potential to transform society for the better. Left to develop in isolation, one's assumptions about others tend to become inflexible and self-referential. Contact between groups may act as a motor of change by encouraging a dynamic and reflexive process of (re)evaluation. Berger and Pullberg (1965) expressed this idea rather eloquently when they wrote that cultural contact "de-reifies" orthodox frameworks for knowing and relating, forcing one to encounter others in terms of a maximum of symptoms. In so doing, it invokes reactions that vary between the extremes of "promiscuous syncretism" and "xenophobic retreat" (p. 209).

To understand more fully why a given set of social relations approaches one or another of these extremes, however, we believe that contact research must be reoriented along the lines discussed above. That is, contact researchers must pay closer attention to the mundane particulars of everyday interactions between groups, to lay understandings of the significance of such interactions, and to outcomes located beyond the level of personal prejudice. Extending this argument, we now briefly recommend a comparative methodology that has the potential to clarify when, why, and how contact succeeds or fails.

The value of comparative analysis has, of course, long been recognized by contact researchers; landmark studies in the area were designed to systematically contrast relations across different kinds of social and material contexts (e.g., Deutsch & Collins, 1958; Jahoda & West, 1951). As the field has developed, however, researchers have increasingly limited comparative analysis to a routine and often perfunctory appraisal of the extent to which a given set of social relations matches the ideal conditions proposed by the contact hypothesis. This approach has guided innumerable post hoc explanations for the mixed effects of contact in settings such as education, the residence, and the workplace.

We are concerned that this style of comparative analysis may ultimately hide as much as it reveals about the relationship between contact and social change. By using the optimal contact strategy as a frame of reference, social psychologists are absolved of the more complex and puzzling task of understanding the historical particulars of successful or unsuccessful contact. (Why go to this kind of trouble if a conveniently generic explanation can be taken "off the shelf"?) Accordingly, if they wish to bridge the gap between theory and practice, we would recommend that contact researchers use other kinds of comparative frameworks.

One potentially fruitful approach might juxtapose relations in settings where ostensibly similar events of desegregation have had divergent outcomes. The aim here would be to generate inductive explanations for different forms of social change. Ellen (1998), for instance, argued that this kind of comparative work is essential if researchers wish to understand the intractable nature of segregation in the United States. Her research examined the historical stability of mixed neighborhoods in 34 U. S. metropolitan areas and found that the oft-reported pattern of "White flight" was less extensive than previous research had suggested. The existence and apparent durability of a minority of integrated neighborhoods, she argued, provide the opportunity for important—if relatively neglected—comparative research. After all, "understanding when and where households seem content to live in racially mixed environments should not only help us to understand the dynamics of neighborhood change, but also shed light on the question of why the growth in stable, racially integrated neighborhoods has not been greater—or, put another way, why America has remained such a remarkably segregated country" (Ellen, 1998, p. 40).

Addressing one aspect of this issue, Ellen (2000) provided evidence to support a race-based neighborhood projection hypothesis. What differentiates stable, racially integrated neighborhoods from unstable neighborhoods where resegregation occurs, she suggests, is not so much their current racial composition as their imagined future conditions. In neighborhoods where residents expect a pattern of environmental decline to occur (e.g., in schooling, property values, and crime), residential integration is likely to be short lived. It is interesting that such negative attributions do not necessarily express the "in principle" refusal of White residents to live among Black neighbors. Instead, they reflect a more complex set of "racialized" assumptions about the kinds of environmental changes that occur when growing numbers of Black people enter a neighborhood. In other words, Ellen's research shows how attributions about the future trajectory of a place, and about the interrelation between race and place, may figure centrally in the processes of White flight. By implication, she argues that interventions designed to promote stably integrated environments might be profitably directed at changing such attributions.

Another form of comparative analysis might explore the intergroup relativity of contact experiences. Like most social psychological work on prejudice (cf. Shelton, 2000), contact research has focused primarily on the problem of transforming White racism and, as a result, has often neglected the possibility that the lived experience of contact and desegregation may differ according to one's race group membership and historical location within a social system. In a recent meta-analysis of the contact literature, however, Pettigrew and Tropp (2005) recommended that closer attention be paid to the varying ways in which majority and minority groups understand the same supposedly "objective" conditions of contact. Pettigrew and Tropp noted that this form of comparative work may help to explain why the beneficial effects of contact on prejudice tend to be less consistently evidenced for minority group members than for majority group members.

In American society, for example, desegregation has typically assumed a specific political form, involving the admission of Black people into spheres of social life from which they were formerly excluded. Inevitably, this fact has profoundly shaped the relative contact experiences of White and Black participants, an idea poignantly illustrated by recent qualitative research on mixed-race friendships between African American and White girls. Scott (2004) argued that these friendships are typically played out in organizational settings where official support for desegregation is offset by a normative environment that tacitly valorizes White culture. Thus, for African American girls, "contact" involves a struggle for social acceptance in which their physical appearance, sexuality, economic status, and even speech style may be subtly coded as deviant. This struggle in turn leads to ongoing dilemmas of assimilation and resistance, the consequences of which may be profound both for the development of interracial friendships and for the general well-being of Black girls. As Scott (2004, p. 384) suggested, "What are the psychological costs of navigating oneself in a peer culture that derogates your race-gender identity? Since one of the rewards from friendship is identity support, what kind of support can White girls provide their Black female friends as they challenge the stratified system that prioritizes White femaleness?"

Although Scott (2004) did not offer ready answers to such questions, her work illustrates the importance of using a comparative lens other than that suggested by the optimal contact strategy. We need to appreciate that the communities we study may hold radically different assumptions about contact, assumptions that are mobilized as members grapple with the concrete political and historical conditions of their everyday lives. The complexities of this process, and its relationship to the wider (re)configuration of relations between groups, cannot be grasped by a comparative methodology based solely on the analysis of contextually abstracted optimal conditions. At the very least, researchers need a methodological framework that is able to acknowledge how and why different groups come to hold disparate understandings of what counts as equality, cooperation, institutional support, intimacy, and even integration. Steve Biko (1978, p. 24), the antiapartheid activist, once broached this theme with characteristic eloquence. In the context of a critique of the assumptions of White liberalism, he remarked, "Does this mean that I am against integration? If by integration you understand a breakthrough into White society by Blacks, an assimilation and acceptance of Blacks into an already established set of norms and codes of behavior set up by and maintained by Whites, then YES I am against it."

Conclusions

We began this article by citing Berry's (cited in Ward, 2003) argument that the contact hypothesis, being detached from the harsher realities of urban life in Britain, requires a reality check. Responding to this argument, Miles Hewstone, one of the organizers of the ESRC seminar series on social exclusion in the United Kingdom, suggested that Berry's assessment of contact research is not entirely fair. "As social psychologists," he noted, "we always make the point that we do not have the power to change policies. We and those we would like to help can only work within the constraints set by society and what governments are willing to spend their money on" (Hewstone, cited in Ward, 2003, p. 2). Hewstone thus highlighted the difficulties that psychologists face in applying their knowledge in the public domain, where policymakers either overlook our recommendations or place them low on their list of funding priorities.

We agree with Hewstone (cited in Ward, 2003) that psychologists seeking to promote racial integration face many extradisciplinary challenges and constraints. We share his frustrations concerning the ways in which our research is (mis)appropriated by political authorities. The present article should not be misread as a wholesale rejection of past research on the contact hypothesis, which in

our view has offered a sustained, rational, and progressive challenge to the misconception that segregation is psychologically beneficial to society. Although we have criticized certain aspects of this research program, our aim has not been to devalue its importance. Rather, we have argued for a *reorientation* of the field, a shift of emphasis that attempts to bridge the gulf between contact as it is represented in the social psychological literature and contact as it is practiced, experienced, and regulated in everyday life. We believe that the obstacles lying in the path of social change reflect not only the actions (or inactions) of those who control social institutions but also the shortcomings of an approach based primarily on studying the ideal conditions for prejudice reduction.

What, in essence, are those shortcomings? Following the logic of what we have called the optimal contact strategy, contact researchers have historically tended (a) to gravitate toward the analysis of contact occurring under rarefied conditions, (b) to reformulate lay understandings of contact in terms of a relatively fixed and generic typology of ideal dimensions, and (c) to use shifts in personal prejudice as the primary measure of social psychological change. It is hardly surprising, then, that they have typically neglected the starker realities of intergroup relations in everyday settings,[4] the lived experiences and interpretations of ordinary people, and the sociopolitical consequences of contact that lie beyond the rehabilitation of the prejudiced individual. As it presently stands, the psychological literature on the contact hypothesis works well as a resource for imagining the abstract preconditions for an ideal society. It is far less convincing, however, as a depiction of the actual nature of ethnic and racial contact in particular contexts or as a realistic account of the obstacles to transformation that exist there. The failure to account for the tenacity and pervasiveness of informal systems of segregation (Dixon & Durrheim, 2003) and the recalcitrance of conservative political attitudes toward racial inequality (Jackman & Crane, 1986) exemplify the latter problem.

One of the most worrying implications of the optimal contact strategy, then, is that it tends to elide the discrepancy between actual and ideal forms of contact and thus to relieve social psychologists of their responsibility for explaining and overcoming that discrepancy. Accordingly, in the psychological literature, discussions of why contact "fails" usually take one of two forms. Either researchers resort to post hoc claims that the optimal conditions were not properly implemented in a given set of circumstances, or they argue that the beneficial effects of contact were reduced by countervailing psychological processes (e.g., the desire to retain positive distinctiveness). The problem with this approach is not simply that it renders contact theory unfalsifiable. It also absolves psychologists of the burden of explaining the specific nature, form, and consequences of "failed" contact within a given set of historical, material, and political circumstances. Failure to fulfil the optimal conditions becomes an explanation in itself.

If it continues down this path, we fear that contact research may come to resemble the religious doctrines that Marx famously rebuked: doctrines that involve looking for the sources of salvation in some imagined world to come while masking the causes of misery in this one. Pace the logic of the optimal contact strategy, we feel that contact researchers, if they are to contribute meaningfully to social change, need to know much more about the less-than-optimal exchanges that constitute the vast majority of intergroup encounters. Moving beyond the utopianism of classic contact theory, which looks toward some idealized space of optimal interaction, we advocate research that proceeds from where we are now, in the messy, ambivalent, and often still deeply divided arenas of everyday life. Moving beyond academic abstractions of contact, we advocate work that focuses on the mundane details of how ordinary people themselves make sense of, and manage, their encounters with others in the wake of processes of desegregation. Moving beyond outcome indices located solely at the level of individual prejudice change, we advocate a heightened awareness of the collective and political implications of desegregation (which are also, of course, social psychological). A continuing reliance on the optimal contact strategy means that contact research will remain in need of a reality check and that the study of contact under ideal conditions will continue to conceal the very processes that prevent the realization of those conditions.

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[4] In saying this, we are not saying that *all* research on contact has focused on ideal conditions. Research on the role of intergroup anxiety and threat in shaping the effects of contact on prejudice illustrates an important exception to this trend (e.g., Islam & Hewstone, 1993; Stephan & Stephan, 1985). However, the general trend in research has been to focus on more or less "optimal" conditions.

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