

## ADDRESS

# A Renaissance of Social Relevance: Maximizing Insights and the Impact of Psychological Research

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## ABSTRACT

Within each generation of academics, perennial, soul-searching questions emerge regarding whether and how psychological research can have meaningful impact, and calls for the broader applicability and significance of our work have only grown in recent years. Yet, oftentimes, the social relevance of our research is construed as being at odds with the scientific enterprise, as if we must choose between conducting rigorous tests of psychological theory and caring about the issues and populations we study, and about how psychological processes operate in the real-world. This address serves as a reminder that pursuing socially relevant research and maintaining scientific rigor need not be framed as being in opposition to each other. Instead, I propose quite the opposite: there are many ways in which a focus on social relevance can make our science better.

## 1 | Introduction

To begin, I wish to highlight that calls for the social relevance and broader impact of psychological research have grown in recent years (see, e.g., Abrams 2022; Wood and Fenlon 2022). And, I would like to suggest that—rather than being a new focus—we are actually witnessing a renewed focus, or a renaissance of interest, in making psychological research relevant and of practical use to social issues. To provide some historical context, using scientific research to address pressing social issues has a long and rich legacy in the discipline of psychology. Often regarded as the founder of social psychology, Lewin (1947) stressed that it is not sufficient to do research simply for the sake of academic publication, and that academic research should ideally lead to some sort of social action. Yet even before this well-known statement by Lewin, and as early as the 1930s with fascism on the rise in Europe, many academic psychologists expressed “great interest” in forming a new professional society “to apply psychology to political problems” (Krechevsky 1936) and dedicated themselves to conducting scientific research to address social issues and promote positive social change. As described

20 years later by Krech and Cartwright (1956), the early origins of this new society were guided by two principal objectives:

*One is to encourage research upon those psychological problems most vitally related to modern social, economic, and political policies. The second is to help the public and its representatives to understand, and to use in the formation of social policies, contributions from the scientific investigation of human behavior.* (p. 471)

A note outlining these objectives and addressed to all members of the American Psychological Association (APA) added that “how these important but difficult and sometimes delicate tasks can best be accomplished, the [new] Society must discover” (p. 471). Nonetheless, in forming this new society, its founders sought to bring together those who “believe[d] that realistic research in social psychology should be encouraged and that the scientific study of human behavior might render greater service than it has in the past to wise statesmanship” (p. 471)—and this eventually became known as our very own Society for the Psychological Study of

Social Issues (SPSSI; see also Finison 1979; Krech and Cartwright 1956; Levinger 1986).

Now, nearly 90 years later, we can see many cases where academic psychologists have contributed scientific research to inform social policies and public debates about social issues. Some standout examples involve the work of psychologists Kenneth and Mamie Clark, who reported on problems faced by racial minority youth for a White House Conference on Children, for which they synthesized research on the effects of racial segregation, including their famous “doll studies” (see Clark and Clark 1947). These psychologists, along with many others, prepared and signed onto the influential 1952 Social Science Statement included as part of the appellants’ briefs in the landmark *Brown v. Board of Education* cases, which led to the desegregation of public schools in the United States (Benjamin and Crouse 2002; Clark et al. 2004).

Moreover, across many decades, numerous leaders of our discipline have stressed the importance of making psychological research relevant to social issues. For instance, past APA president George Miller (1969) stated that he couldn’t imagine anything “that would be more relevant to human welfare, and nothing that could pose a greater challenge to the next generation of psychologists, than to discover how best to give psychology away” (p. 1074). A generation later, in his own Kurt Lewin address, Pettigrew (1988) stressed that “our society and world are faced with an array of threatening problems that deserve intense scientific scrutiny...” and that “social psychology has distinctive and important contributions to make to the analysis of and remedies for some of these problems” (p. 206). More recently, in an interview as APA President, Jessica Henderson Daniel (2018) stated that “almost every aspect of human existence is impacted by psychological science...and almost every social policy can be informed by it.”

And, yet, despite its many decades of compelling research findings, it seems that the field of psychology has not quite lived up to its potential for having broad-scale, real-world impact. As Pettigrew (1988) acknowledged, “our discipline has yet to apply the full force of its research and theory to social policy” (p. 206). Relatedly, Omoto (2012) noted that psychologists “are not as involved in social policy work as they once were or as they can be” (p. 805). Collectively, then, we might wonder why this is the case: *why has psychology, as a discipline, not had the level of social or policy impact that we would ideally like it to have?*

## 2 | Psychological Science and Social Relevance: Long-Standing Tensions

As I reflect on such questions, I can think of at least a few reasons why. Henderson Daniel (2018) provides a glimpse as to what one of these reasons might be. After speaking about the great relevance of psychological science to social policy, she goes on to say that she “firmly believe(s) that psychologists and psychology students need to be in more rooms, at more tables, and at the heads of those tables when decisions affecting the public are formulated and implemented.” Based on my own personal observations and experiences when working with civil society organizations and engaging in public-facing work, I

think Henderson Daniel is absolutely right: there are relatively few psychologists in those spaces, and we need to have more psychologists at the table. Admittedly, we academics have not always done the best job of making our work accessible to the public or finding ways to make research maximally accessible and of use to the policymakers, organizations, and practitioners we seek to reach (Miller 1969; Schalet et al. 2020; Tropp 2018).

But I think there are other reasons, too, for our limited collective impact. One of those has to do with what has traditionally been valued and emphasized during our professional training. As Dalton and Bazerman (2018) describe it, academics “are, and are trained to be, in love with their newest idea” whereas practitioners and policymakers “want to know what works” such that “they are unlikely to care about how new the effect is, instead [being] far more interested in how it can be used” (p. 85). Moreover, as we know all too well, to have status and credibility as psychological scientists, we must publish our research findings (see Moosa 2018); and, to publish our research findings in high-status, highly credible outlets, we must demonstrate something new, such as making new conceptual connections and revealing trends that are theoretically novel (see Burghardt and Bodansky 2021). Yet, this perpetual focus on theoretical novelty may, in turn, feed into the common critique that we often fail to deliver insights of interest and utility to the broader public (see Giner-Sorolla 2019).

Part of the challenge here is that critiques about the social and policy relevance of psychological research are not the only critiques leveled against psychology as a discipline. For decades, our field has also been contending with critiques about our status and legitimacy as a science (see Ferguson 2015; Sperry 1993). As put succinctly by Coon (1992), psychology “has occupied a precarious place in the hierarchy of the sciences” such that we appear to have long suffered from “physics envy” (p. 143). Relatedly, Lilienfield (2012) illustrates a scenario that may reflect what many of us have experienced, in which the scientific legitimacy of psychology is questioned; he writes:

*Whenever we psychologists dare to venture outside of the hallowed halls of academia... we are likely at some point to encounter a puzzling and, for us, troubling phenomenon... most of us will inevitably hear the assertion from laypersons that psychology—which those of us within the profession generally regard as the scientific study of human behavior—is in actuality not a science* (p. 111)

As such, it is perhaps not surprising that many psychologists have ended up experiencing a kind of “tug of war” between seeking to prove how *scientific* we are, at the same time as we seek to make our work *useful* to society. Indeed, there have long been tensions between those who have sought to regard psychology as a “science” as compared to those who see psychology more as a “practice-oriented field” (Boneau 1992, 1588). Long-standing debates about psychology’s identity and validity as a discipline have also persisted both among scientific researchers in the academy (*cf.* Berezow 2012; Wilson 2012) and in public discourse (*cf.* Jogalekar 2013; Tannenbaum 2013).

In my view, these tensions and debates center heavily on ambivalence about the practical value of our work (often referred to as “applied” research) relative to the scientific value of our work (often referred to as “basic” research; see Tropp 2025, for an extended discussion). Some psychologists have questioned the framing of basic and applied research in dichotomous terms (e.g., Breckler 2006; Medin 2012), thereby challenging the common presumption that the more a psychologist cares about the issues and populations under study, the less likely they are to conduct sound psychological science. Given prevailing debates within our field and in public discourse, it is perhaps not surprising that some academic psychologists who hope their research will have broader impact can end up getting caught somewhere in the middle of these two extremes. The more I reflect on these issues, however, the more I wonder if—as an alternative to the ambivalence-laden “tug of war” so many of us experience—we were instead inclined to *unapologetically claim and unequivocally reframe the nature of our work as being based in an explicit valuing of both rigorous science and its practical utility*.

### 3 | Socially Relevant Research: Defining and Outlining a New Path Forward

I use the term *socially relevant research* to refer to rigorous research that seeks to extend existing theory while simultaneously being driven by concern about social issues and offering practical value for addressing them. Rooted in the original founding of social psychology as a subdiscipline (see Lewin 1947), socially relevant research can be interpreted as representing a “harmonious fusing of both applied and theoretical interests” (Ring 1967, 114) that combines “high scientific standards with a concern for social issues and the problems of the ‘real world’” (Kelman 1968, xi), or that which is “driven by the joint goals of understanding and use” (Stokes 1997, 15). By employing this term, I seek to provide greater space for academic psychologists to envision complementarity in pursuing their science-oriented and practice-oriented goals, rather than having them conceive of these goals as inherently in opposition or feel they must pursue only one of these goals at the expense of the other.

As I attempt to define socially relevant research, I also think it is important to emphasize that—though we may explicitly value both scientific rigor and real-world relevance, and though we may do our best to incorporate valued elements from each into our research—in practice, we might not always (or ever) achieve what we feel would be a perfect balance between the two. Just as we recognize gaps between conceptual and operational definitions of constructs in our research programs, we may also come to recognize gaps between what we would see as an ideal blending of rigorous scientific methods and practical utility, and what our research studies and outcomes look like in reality. Our ability to incorporate rigorous research methods with an eye toward the practical value of research findings will understandably across lines of research and across individual scholars depending on the specific research questions we seek to address, the populations and contexts we study, the research methodologies we have available to us, and our own unique insights, proclivities, and aptitudes as researchers. As academic psychologists, we are also likely to vary in our views about whether or how values might

shape our research (cf. Crosby et al. 2004; Howard 1985; Kendler 2004; Kurtines et al. 1990), and we may engage in healthy debates about the role (or roles) researchers should (or should not) play in relation to the issues we study (see Pielke 2007; Schalet et al. 2020). Yet, as members of a shared scholarly community, such variability in perspective and approach offers all the more reason for academic psychologists to be explicit about where we stand and how we seek to balance the virtues of scientific rigor and practical utility in relation to our research.

I also prefer to use the term “socially relevant research” instead of distinguishing between “basic” and “applied” research, as I believe the traditional “basic-applied” dichotomy precludes the possibility that new theory may be developed, as well as tested, when attention is granted to the social conditions and contexts within which theoretical principles and psychological processes operate. Rather, employing a term like “socially relevant research” allows for more of a full-cycle psychology approach (see Cialdini 1980; Mortensen and Cialdini 2010), through which efforts to examine phenomena *in context* can often lead to novel scientific discoveries that may inform further extensions of existing theory.

### 4 | Socially Relevant Research: Views from the Lens of Contextual Social Psychology

Though I have long favored theoretical perspectives that seek to integrate individual and contextual factors toward understanding human experience and behavior (see, e.g., Deaux 1993; Lewin 1936), these leanings were surely reinforced during my graduate years at the University of California, Santa Cruz. I was exceptionally fortunate to have been co-advised by Stephen Wright and Thomas Pettigrew through a contextual social psychological approach, which considers how psychological processes are shaped by social conditions, societal processes, and historical contexts, such that they may be studied at multiple levels of analysis (see Pettigrew 1991, 2018, 2021). Scholars in this tradition suggest that this approach can help to bridge gaps between scientific research and its practical application, because greater contextualization can establish links between abstract theoretical principles and the concrete social realities people face (see, e.g., Brewer 1997; Pettigrew 2006; Stephan 2006; Wright et al. 2017).

Although such explicit integration of science and real-world relevance is currently held in high regard within social psychology (see, e.g., Eberhardt et al. 2021), this was not always the case, or at least not what I personally experienced during the earlier stages of my career. I vividly remember the feelings I had as a graduate student in the late 1990s, convinced that I would never receive an offer for a faculty position because of the scholarly orientation I held, at a time when psychological research based on social neuroscience and implicit measures were on the rise (see Fazio and Olson 2003; Lieberman 2007). Seeing the academic marketplace for what in those early years, I sought to do “enough” of the kinds of work that were deemed most valuable at the time—even including studies with reaction time measures and cortisol assays (see Page-Gould et al. 2008; Tropp and Wright 2001)—so that I would have sufficient legitimacy within social psychological circles to be taken seriously when pursuing other lines of research

from a more contextual social psychological approach. Yet over the last couple of decades, it appears that greater value has once again been granted to socially relevant research, echoing the views of seminal figures in our discipline who have long stressed the importance of making psychology relevant to social issues (e.g., Lewin 1947; Miller 1969; Pettigrew 1988).

In light of this personal and historical background, and recent discourses that surround our field, I wish to offer some additional reflections on why conducting scientific research with an eye toward social relevance is both important and necessary, along with some illustrations of what I would regard as socially relevant research from my own contributions to the research literature. On the one hand, when psychologists emphasize the social relevance of their research, others may be inclined to view such work with suspicion, either presuming that it may not be sufficiently rigorous, or worse still, that it may sacrifice scientific rigor to push forward an activist agenda (see, e.g., Steele and Spector 2024; Wanic 2024). On the other hand, when psychologists conduct scientific research to offer ever-greater levels of predictive precision, we run the risk of losing sight of why the research matters, and why we may have chosen to pursue this research in the first place; idiomatically speaking, we may lose sight of the forest for the trees, whereby our focus on precision in specification of psychological processes may not ultimately translate into greater insights regarding the human condition as a greater whole (see, e.g., Asch 1952; Rozin 2001).

Given the varied sensibilities and approaches that research psychologists bring to their work, I can imagine that some readers of this article may lean toward one of these extreme views more than the other. Correspondingly, some readers may find themselves feeling wary about the reflections I have to share about socially relevant research, whereas others might experience great resonance with them. For those readers who might have concerns about focusing “too much” on social relevance as part of the research enterprise, I hope you can envision ways in which valuable extensions of theory and new scientific discoveries can grow from enhanced attention to context and practical application. And, for those readers who are more inclined to focus on real-world relevance and application, I hope you can see what stands to be gained from conducting research with scientific rigor, such as building a credible evidence base and clearer theories of change with which to address social issues and engage in public-facing work.

## 5 | Commitment to Ensuring the Replicability of Research Findings

In my view, by enhancing our focus on social relevance, we can cultivate greater commitment to testing the replicability of our research findings. Not only is replication central to the scientific enterprise (see Berg 2019; Warren 2018), but it is crucially important for maintaining the health and integrity of psychology as a discipline, and for creating a sturdy foundation onto which future generations of psychological research can be built (see Giner-Sorolla 2019; Greenwald 1976). Concerns about the replicability of research findings also have direct implications for realizing the potential of our research findings to have real-

world impact. If we seek to share scientific knowledge with policymakers and practitioners to address social problems and contribute to positive social change, then, at the very least, we need to make sure that we are confident in our results. As stated succinctly by Forscher et al. (2020), “sound applications require sound science.”

Concerns about replicability of research findings served as a key motivation for the meta-analytic research Thomas Pettigrew and I conducted on intergroup contact effects (see Pettigrew and Tropp 2006, 2008; Tropp and Pettigrew 2005a, 2005b), since meta-analyses can be particularly useful for assessing the degree to which research findings do or do not replicate across many studies (Rosenthal 1991; Shrout and Rodgers 2018). Like so many well-established theories in social psychology (see Asch 1952), theoretical perspectives on intergroup contact have their roots in tackling pressing social issues (Allport 1954; Pettigrew 1988; Williams 1947). Indeed, decades of intergroup contact research have sought to address the perils of segregation and promote strategies that could effectively reduce intergroup prejudice and facilitate social integration among people from different racial and ethnic backgrounds (see Pettigrew and Tropp 2011). Nonetheless, prior reviews of this vast literature had often come to conflicting conclusions regarding the likely effects of intergroup contact. (*cf.* Cook 1984; Ford 1986; Pettigrew 1998; Rothbart and John 1985).

We therefore pursued a meta-analytic investigation of intergroup contact effects, to determine whether findings across varied contact settings would replicate. Over a period of approximately 6 years (1998–2004), we gathered as many empirical contact studies as we could find. Our view has long been that, if we truly wish to understand the nature, contours, and outcomes of intergroup contact, then we should do our best to learn—as conclusively as possible, and light of the entire existing evidence base—what insights the contact research literature could offer overall. Ultimately, our final meta-analytic dataset included 515 contact studies from the 1940s through 2000, which included data from more than a quarter of a million individual participants in 38 countries (Pettigrew and Tropp 2006). In more than 90% of the cases, we found that greater levels of intergroup contact corresponded with lower levels of intergroup prejudice. We observed comparable contact-prejudice associations among studies that were conducted in controlled laboratory settings and studies that were conducted in field settings outside of the laboratory (see also Lemmer and Wagner 2015). Moreover, we observed that associations between contact and prejudice tended to be significantly stronger not only for studies that employed more rigorous research methods, but also for those in which the contact was more intimate, and where the contact situation was more intentionally structured to promote prejudice reduction (e.g., by fostering cooperative interdependence and equal status among members of the different groups; Allport 1954; Pettigrew 1998). These patterns of findings may be seen as encouraging to both scientific researchers and practitioners, as they suggest that well-designed and thoughtfully implemented contact interventions, tested using rigorous research methods, have considerable potential to replicate desired prejudice-reducing effects (see also International Organization for Migration 2021; Tropp and Morhayim 2023).

## 6 | Understanding Both Generalizability and Variability in Effects

By enhancing our focus on social relevance, we can also shift the presumed goals of our research from simply seeking to replicate findings, to understanding how the phenomena we study function, and whether they should or should not be expected to generalize across cases and contexts. Indeed, the more we attend to how social psychological phenomena operate in the real-world, the more we should care not only about testing for consistency and replicability, but also about identifying and testing possible moderators and boundary conditions for effects—and this is particularly important if we wish to use research insights as a basis for practice and application (see Shrout and Rodgers 2018). In line with other work seeking to understand how social contexts shape the nature and magnitude of observed effects (Asch 1952; Pettigrew 2018), we sought to conduct more extensive analyses with our meta-analytic dataset, to consider both generalizability of and variability in intergroup contact effects (see Rosenthal 1991).

Here, we began by testing contact effects across many different types of intergroup contexts and contact settings, informed by the proliferation of research studies and applied programs that have sought to use intergroup contact to transform relations between varied groups of people (e.g., racial and ethnic groups, people with and without physical or intellectual disabilities, people with and without mental illness), as well as across varied settings in which contact occurs (e.g., schools, neighborhoods, workplaces; see Pettigrew and Tropp 2006). Overall, we observed that while there was some variability in the magnitudes of contact-prejudice associations, the basic patterns of effects were quite similar across varied types of group relations and varied contact settings. Nonetheless, further analyses of the meta-analytic data, as well as subsequent lines of research, revealed some key moderators of intergroup contact effects.

### 6.1 | Group Status as a Moderator of Contact Effects

In part, we found that the links between contact and reduced prejudice tended to be weaker among members of minoritized groups than among members of dominant groups (Tropp and Pettigrew 2005)—a finding later replicated by other researchers (see, e.g., Binder et al. 2009). Through conducting a secondary analysis of national survey data from Black and White Americans, I then replicated and extended this work (Tropp 2007); in line with results from Tropp and Pettigrew (2005), I observed weaker contact effects among Black Americans as compared to White Americans; also, greater perceptions of discrimination against one's racial group appeared to inhibit the potential of contact to foster improved intergroup attitudes among Black Americans, while such inhibition of contact effects in relation to discrimination was not apparent among White Americans.

Once we begin to attend to differences in group status, it makes sense that contact would show distinct effects among groups who occupy different status positions in society (Dixon et al. 2012; Richeson and Sommers 2016)—and more specifically, weaker effects among members of minoritized groups who are regularly

confronted with prejudice and discrimination against their racial group (Swim et al. 2003). But, uncovering such divergent trends requires that we examine the perspectives of group members on each side of the interaction, an approach that has only become more common in the last 20 years (Richeson and Shelton 2007; Tropp 2006). It is probably not a coincidence that studies of both groups' perspectives on intergroup contact have grown in recent decades, just as the community of intergroup scholars has become more racially and ethnically diverse, and as contact research has expanded to address new themes beyond prejudice reduction, which had traditionally focused only on the perspectives of dominant groups (Dixon et al. 2010; Tropp et al. in press). New generations of research now indicate that—given our field's original efforts to reduce prejudice and pursue social harmony through intergroup contact—insufficient research attention had been granted to the perspectives of minoritized groups, and to possible downstream consequences of contact for achieving intergroup equality (see, e.g., Dixon et al. 2012; Hässler et al. 2020; Wright and Lubensky 2009). Not only are these new developments valuable and important in their own right, but they have served as a springboard for many new and promising lines of research, such as those investigating the types of intergroup contact that may keep intergroup contact from inhibiting motivations for social change toward greater equality (e.g., Becker et al. 2014; Droogendyk et al. 2016). Moreover, from a practical perspective, these new lines of research suggest that facilitators and evaluators of contact programs should be mindful of how status positions in the larger society can shape group members' experiences during contact programs, as well as potential outcomes of those programs (see also Foster and Finchilescu 1986, for a related argument).

### 6.2 | Social Division and Conflict as Moderators of Contact Effects

Additionally, the relatively limited geographic diversity of research studies has also been a shortcoming of the intergroup contact research literature—as it has been for other branches of the psychology research literature (Henrich et al. 2010). Indeed, most of the studies included in our original meta-analysis of intergroup contact effects were conducted in the United States, and a large proportion of those US-based studies focused specifically on Black-White relations (see Pettigrew and Tropp 2011). Furthermore, historically, most contact studies—including both empirical studies led by researchers and evaluations of contact programs implemented by practitioners—had not been conducted in context where groups were experiencing extreme forms of social division and conflict (see Lemmer and Wagner 2015; Paolini et al. 2021; Pettigrew and Tropp 2006), which has led some scholars to question whether there is value in applying contact strategies within conflict settings (e.g., Dixon et al. 2005; Paluck et al. 2019). Nonetheless, peacebuilding programs around the world commonly rely on intergroup contact as a strategy to ease tensions, reduce prejudice, and otherwise transform relations between groups in societies divided by conflict (International Organization for Migration 2021; Shirch et al., 2023).

If we wish to feel confident making claims about the applicability of intergroup contact to real-world settings—or, add caveats regarding its applicability—then we must examine the effects of contact in a broader array of societal contexts than what has

historically been done. It is highly likely that the countervailing forces of social division and violent conflict could render contact less effective in yielding and sustaining desired intergroup outcomes (Tropp 2015; Wagner and Hewstone 2012). As such, contact studies from a limited sampling of societal contexts, including few cases from divided societies and conflict settings, could mask potential bounds for contact's effects (Tropp 2026; Tropp et al. 2022). Thus, to fill this gap, over many years I have been involved in a number of collaborative projects to examine the kinds of effects that intergroup contact might have in societies with varied forms of social division. In so doing, my colleagues and I have sought to test potential "boundary conditions" for contact effects—that is, to see whether contact effects might still be observed under such challenging social and societal conditions. A few examples of contact studies we conducted in different societal contexts are provided in the paragraphs below.

### 6.2.1 | Hungary

As one example, we conducted research in Hungary, to test whether significant contact effects might be observed in a context where prejudice is normative (Orosz et al. 2016). In the Hungarian context, anti-Roma sentiment is quite blatant and widespread; members of the Roma community are common targets of hate crimes (Amnesty International 2017), and polls have shown that 61% of Hungarians openly express negative sentiments about Roma people (Pew Research Center 2019), and 40% of Hungarians support discriminatory anti-Roma policies (FXB Center for Health and Human Rights 2014). Here, we collaborated with the Living Library Program, sponsored by the Council of Europe, in which student participants have opportunities to meet with human volunteers who represent different marginalized groups; these volunteers offer "living narratives" that allow program participants to listen to first-person accounts of marginalized groups' experiences, and to ask questions they may have regarding their experiences. For the purposes of this study, some program participants met with members of the Roma community in Hungary, and some program participants met with members of other marginalized groups; additionally, all participants completed surveys to assess their attitudes toward Roma (i.e., social distance; see Bogardus 1926) before and after participating in the program, along with asking them to report the attitudes toward Roma they perceived among their peers (i.e., social norms; see Sechrist and Stangor 2005). Overall, our findings showed that participants who met with a Roma person during the program showed significantly greater willingness to engage with Roma people in general (i.e., less social distance) as compared to those who did not meet with a Roma person during the program. Also, given the prevalence of anti-Roma sentiment in Hungarian society (see Orosz et al. 2018), we tested whether these patterns of effects depended on the perceived attitudes of their peers. Program participants who reported having more prejudiced peers tended to report greater social distance from Roma, compared to those with less prejudiced peers; however, we observed the same patterns of contact effects across program participants, regardless of perceived peer attitudes. Thus, in this study, intergroup contact and social norms appeared to have largely independent effects—with intergroup contact fostering more positive attitudes toward Roma, and social norms fostering less positive

intergroup attitudes. More recent longitudinal survey research complements this work, showing that contact with Roma may serve to buffer Hungarian adolescents from developing deeper anti-Roma prejudice through peer norms (Váradi et al. 2025).

### 6.2.2 | Rwanda

We have also sought to test whether contact might play a role in rebuilding trust between groups in the aftermath of mass violence, through a collaboration with several peacebuilding organizations in Rwanda (Dehron et al. 2022). Survivors, perpetrators, and bystanders of the 1994 genocide were recruited from rural communities in eight districts in Rwanda, and they participated in one of two contact-based programs over several months. The two contact programs differed in their focus and content; those who participated in the "facilitated dialogues" program met in ethnically mixed groups to talk about their feelings and identities in relation to the genocide, whereas those who took part in the "trauma healing" program met one-on-one with a peer and were trained to provide emotional support to one another as they discussed their experiences. Before and after participating in each program, participants completed surveys via interviews with a co-ethnic tester, who provided visual scales so that they could verbally indicate agreement or disagreement with each statement (see Dehron et al. 2022). Participants reported significantly greater willingness to trust other people in Rwanda following participation in each program, as compared to their prior levels of trust, with similar magnitudes of effects emerging across both programs. More specifically, genocide survivors became more willing to trust perpetrators and bystanders, and were more willing to live in ethnically integrated communities, following participation in these programs. These findings lend support for the notion that contact *may* be a useful strategy for building trust and improving intergroup attitudes, even in societal contexts that have been laden with violent conflict; at the same time, the findings speak to the importance of intentionality in designing and implementing contact programs to facilitate such encouraging outcomes (see Tropp and Morhayim 2023).

### 6.2.3 | South Africa

Even with these encouraging trends, it should be noted that the studies reported above focus predominantly on shifting intergroup attitudes. But some would argue that the scope of contact research needs to be broadened beyond attitudinal outcomes, to consider the implications of intergroup contact for policy support (see Jackman and Crane 1986). In particular, over the last two decades Dixon, Durrheim, and their colleagues (e.g., Dixon et al. 2005, 2007, 2012) have stressed that while members of historically advantaged groups might express positive attitudes toward the historically disadvantaged, they may still not be inclined to support policies intended to improve the disadvantaged group's position in society. I was fortunate that these researchers invited me to collaborate with them on a national probability survey in South Africa, a country whose history is stained by apartheid, white supremacy, and severe racial inequality (Clark and Worger 2016), to examine whether Whites' interracial contact experiences might shape their support for a range of social

policies that would benefit Black South Africans (see Dixon et al. 2010). Generally, White South Africans tended to oppose policies such as returning lands previously stolen from Black families, affirmative action programs to enhance Black South Africans' employment prospects, and economic empowerment programs that would promote Black advancement. However, White South Africans who reported more positive, high-quality contact experiences with Black South Africans showed greater support for these equalizing policies, as well as reporting lower prejudice toward Black South Africans and lower feelings of interracial threat. Moreover, when investigating possible mediators for links between contact and policy support, we observed that lower threat—and not lower prejudice—served as a key pathway through which greater interracial contact corresponded to greater support for equalizing policies. Findings from this study serve to complement results from national surveys in other contexts (see, e.g., Pettigrew et al. 2010), while offering novel insights to extend existing theory.

#### 6.2.4 | Kosovo

Another research example that broadens the scope of the contact literature grew from a collaboration with peacebuilding organizations working in Kosovo, through which we sought to test whether a contact-based intervention might cultivate support for peace and reconciliation between ethnic groups on different sides of civil conflict (Morhayim et al. 2024). Local organizations partnered to implement outdoor education camps that would allow ethnic Albanian and Serb youth to engage with one another. During the 3-day camps, they participated in several outdoor activities, including some that explicitly required youth from different ethnic backgrounds to work together cooperatively and interdependently (see Cook 1984; Sherif et al. 1961). For this study, we were able to gather survey responses from participating youth before and after each camp session, and we were also able to gather pre-and post-camp surveys from comparable ethnic Albanian and Serb youth (from the same communities, and of similar ages) who did not participate in the outdoor camps. Of particular interest in the present study was the question of whether participation in the ethnically mixed outdoor education camp would shift youth's beliefs about ethnic reconciliation, their beliefs in the value of ethnic integration in Kosovo, and their own willingness to integrate across ethnic lines. On average, ethnic Serb youth were less pessimistic about possibility of achieving reconciliation, and they reported less willingness to integrate. Yet, youth from both ethnic groups were significantly more likely to believe that ethnic reconciliation was possible following participation in the outdoor education camp, as compared to their own pre-camp scores and youth who did not attend the camp. Moreover, youth from both ethnic groups who attended the camp reported significantly greater belief in the value of ethnic integration, as well as greater willingness to integrate, by the end of camp, while no such change was observed among youth who did not attend the camp. Together with results from the studies reported above, findings from this study suggest that contact has potential to transform crucial dimensions of intergroup relations beyond attitudes, including support for relevant policies and orientations toward reconciliation, even among groups in divided societies that have experienced violent conflict.

## 7 | Concluding Thoughts

Though there is surely more work to be done to examine the boundary conditions for intergroup contact in conflict settings (see Tropp 2026), the brief research examples provided above illustrate how, at the same time as we attend closely to the social relevance of our work, we can both extend existing theory and learn a great deal about the social phenomena we study. Even though enhancing the social relevance of our research is often construed as being “at odds” with the scientific enterprise, I do not think we need to accept the premise that pursuing socially relevant research and maintaining a scientific focus are inherently in opposition to each other. As stated by Berkman and Wilson (2021), “there is no logical inconsistency between theory development and problem solving—both can be done at once” (p. 5).

As an alternative, we can offer our discipline a new orientation that highlights simultaneously the dual values of scientific integrity and rigor on the one hand, and practical value and real-world relevance on the other. Thus, rather than feeling compelled to frame our research in “either-or” terms—such as choosing between doing “basic” versus “applied” research, between conducting rigorous tests of theory versus understanding how psychological processes operate in the real world, or between doing “good science” versus “making a difference”—my hope is that we can adopt and socialize more of a “both-and” approach (see also Jones and Dovidio 2018; Tropp and Dehron 2023), through which we generate socially relevant research questions that extend existing theory and use rigorous scientific methods to test them.

#### Conflicts of Interest

The author declare no conflicts of interest.

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