

Positive and negative intergroup contact predict Black and White Americans' judgments about police violence against Black Americans

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Abstract

We examined whether past positive and negative interracial contact predict people's views of interracial police violence. White ($N = 207$) and Black ($N = 116$) Americans reported on their past intergroup experiences before viewing information about one of two true events involving the death of a Black man at the hands of a White police officer. For White Americans, negative contact predicted a reluctance to blame the officer and a willingness to believe that people's responses to the events involved "playing the race card." For Black Americans, positive contact predicted marginally less officer blame and lower beliefs that the victim was racially profiled. This suggests the potential for a vicious cycle, whereby past contact experiences color perceptions of intergroup conflict in the present.

1 | INTRODUCTION

In August 2014 in Ferguson, Missouri, an altercation occurred between White American police officer Darren Wilson and Black American teenager Michael Brown. The consequences of this altercation were devastating. Although accounts of what occurred during this altercation differ, the struggle ultimately resulted in Mr. Brown's death after he was shot six times by Officer Wilson (BBC, 2014). Mr. Brown was found to be unarmed at the time of the incident. In November 2014, a grand jury reached the decision not to indict (charge) Officer Wilson. Only a month before this incident took place, in July 2014 in Staten Island, New York City, an altercation occurred between White police officer Daniel Pantaleo and a Black American man, Eric Garner. While attempting to arrest Mr. Garner, Officer Pantaleo is argued to have placed him in a chokehold, a move that is prohibited by the City of New York Police Department. Mr. Garner fell unconscious shortly after and later passed away. According to the New York City Medical Examiner's Office, Mr. Garner died as a result of the chokehold in combination with compression of his chest and pre-existing poor health. In December 2014, less than 2 weeks after the Michael Brown grand jury decision was announced, a grand jury decided not to indict Officer Pantaleo for the death of Mr. Garner. These two incidents and subsequent grand jury decisions sparked a series of protests across the country (and internationally), as part of the wider *Black Lives Matter*

movement. This movement had originally begun in 2013 in response to the acquittal of George Zimmerman in the fatal shooting of Black American teenager Trayvon Martin, but escalated after the deaths of Michael Brown and Eric Garner (Day, 2015).

Incidents such as these are far from uncommon, and people often hear about them through news reports and other media sources (additional examples include the deaths of Black Americans Tamir Rice, Walter Scott, Freddie Gray, Philando Castile, and Alton Sterling). Although the vast majority of people might agree that these incidents are tragic, they often differ in their specific judgments of these situations. While some see the incidents as examples of racial profiling that are illustrative of wider societal injustice (e.g., Swaine, Laughland, & Lartey, 2015), others argue that the events represent terrible accidents that do not necessarily reflect racial bias (e.g., McKay, 2014). These different judgments about what happened during the incidents and who is to blame has the potential to fuel conflict between groups, as evidenced by people engaging in protests either condemning or supporting the police officers involved (Day, 2015; Talanova, 2014).

Broadly, race has been examined as a potential factor in police decision-making (Center for Policing Equity, 2016). For example, in a simulated "shooter" video game, both police officers and members of the general population are faster to correctly decide to "shoot" an armed Black man than an armed White man, and faster to correctly "not shoot" an unarmed White man than an unarmed Black man

(Correll, Park, Judd, & Wittenbrink, 2002; Correll et al., 2007). People also appear to be faster at associating Black faces with “guilty” words and White faces with “not guilty” words in a version of the Implicit Association Test (IAT; Levinson, Cai, & Young, 2010). Moreover, a meta-analysis of mock juror studies found a small but significant racial outgroup bias effect on judgments of guilt and sentencing decisions (Mitchell, Haw, Pfeifer, & Meissner, 2005). With regards to real-world instances of police violence in the United States, recent evidence suggests that the probability of being Black, unarmed, and shot by police, is, on average, approximately 3.49 times the probability of being White, unarmed, and shot by police (Ross, 2015). This work sheds light on how interracial police shootings such as those described above might occur, but little research has examined how these shootings are then perceived by the public.

There are a number of factors that have the potential to alter how these indirect contact situations are perceived. One factor is the group membership of the perceiver: Representative polls relating to the deaths of Michael Brown and Eric Garner (the two cases on which we focus) show strong evidence that there is a polarization between Black and White Americans in terms of how they view the same events. In a national survey of 1,507 adults conducted by the Pew Research Center and USA Today (2014), 80% of Black Americans said the grand jury made the wrong decision in the Michael Brown case and 90% said the wrong decision was made in the Eric Garner case. Comparatively, 23% of White Americans say the decision was wrong in the Michael Brown case and 47% say it was wrong in the Eric Garner case. Black Americans were also more likely to report that race was a major factor in both grand jury decisions (64% and 62%) compared to White Americans (16% and 18%). Thus, in line with the core motivation to maintain a positive view of the ingroup (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; see Homsey, 2008), White Americans are more likely to hold views that defend the actions of the police officer, whereas Black Americans are more likely to support the side of the victim and see the events as representative of wider racial injustice. These findings are consistent with earlier research showing that Black Americans perceive greater police misconduct than White Americans, even after controlling for a range of demographic and environmental variables (Weitzer & Tuch, 2004).

In addition to group membership, the current article focuses on a novel factor that might shape people's perceptions of such events: their direct contact experiences with the outgroup. Exposure to intergroup conflict via the news and other forms of media constitutes a form of indirect contact, in that it involves learning about how fellow ingroup members engage in contact with the outgroup (Wright, Aron, McLaughlin-Volpe, & Ropp, 1997). Unfortunately, it is also through the news that one is especially likely to see highly charged and extreme examples of intergroup behavior. In this article, we suggest that the lens through which people perceive these news events may in fact be colored by their past direct experiences with the outgroup. Although there has been no specific examination of this question, tangential evidence provides support for our core proposition. White American children from ethnically homogenous schools (where contact between groups is limited) show a racial bias in their appraisal of ambiguous

interracial interactions, interpreting behavior from a Black target as more negative than the same behavior from a White target (McGlothlin & Killen, 2006), whereas White American children in ethnically diverse schools show little racial bias in their appraisals (Margie, Killen, Sinno, & McGlothlin, 2005; McGlothlin, Killen, & Edmonds, 2005). The interactions used in the studies cited above were hypothetical and were not particularly emotionally charged; still, these findings provide initial evidence that contact with the outgroup may shape people's appraisals of intergroup interactions.

Experimental studies have also shown that intergroup contact can alter people's expectations surrounding future contact. For example, for disadvantaged group members, positive contact experiences can produce expectations that advantaged outgroup members will behave in a fair, egalitarian manner (Saguy, Tausch, Dovidio, & Pratto, 2009). Likewise, exposure to prejudice can lead disadvantaged group members' to have less positive expectations about how future intergroup contact will go (Tropp, 2003). These altered expectations have the potential to change the impact of contact when it is next experienced. Past positive intergroup contact experiences have been found to buffer against some of the harmful effects of current negative contact, and this is argued to be because positive contact produces more positive feelings toward the outgroup and more positive expectations about interacting with outgroup members in future (Paolini et al., 2014).

Negative contact experiences, or a lack of positive contact experiences, also predict a desire to avoid outgroup members (Barlow, Louis, & Hewstone, 2009; Barlow et al., 2012). The valence of contact experiences can therefore predict the likelihood that individuals will attempt to engage in contact again in future. We propose that these experiences might also predict how contact is experienced when it does occur, particularly indirect forms of contact that cannot be as readily avoided (such as via the news). While the evidence reviewed above suggests that contact can shape expectations about future contact, there is also growing evidence that feelings toward the outgroup predict how one experiences and responds to intergroup contact. For example, individuals high in intergroup anxiety (which is often a result of past negative contact experiences, Stephan, Stephan, Demittrakis, Yamada, & Clason, 2000; Stephan et al., 2002) appraise a negative interaction as more threatening and therefore express more anger and offensive action tendencies in response to it compared with those low in anxiety (Van Zomeren, Fischer, & Spears, 2007). Furthermore, feeling positively toward the outgroup leads to making more outgroup friends in future, and makes those friendships closer (Binder et al., 2009). Evidence from the stereotype confirmation literature also supports this notion: beliefs about the outgroup and expectations about how outgroup members will behave can lead individuals to form impressions about specific outgroup members that fit with these expectations (see Neuberg, 1994). Thus, the beliefs and emotions that one holds about the outgroup not only predicts the likelihood that contact will occur in future, but also has the potential to alter how that contact will be experienced when it does occur.

Returning to the context of the current research, research into perceptions of policing has found that Black and White Americans'

personal experiences with police misconduct, as well as vicarious and media exposure to police misconduct, predict poorer perceptions of police conduct in general (Weitzer & Tuch, 2004). Further, there is evidence that these negative experiences are more predictive of public perceptions of the police than are positive experiences with the police (Li, Ren, & Luo, 2016). These studies examined responses to direct contact with the police, rather than with members of the racial outgroup as we aim to investigate here. However, the theoretical implication of the studies described is that our personal experiences and vicarious exposure to others' experiences predict general attitudes in the policing context, potentially with a bias toward the negative (Li et al., 2016).

In the present article, we argue that past negative contact experiences with racial outgroup members have the potential to make current contact between groups appear more negative. Likewise, past positive contact experiences may make current contact appear more positive. In the current study, we investigate whether past positive and negative direct encounters with racial outgroup members predict how current examples of real-world interracial contact are perceived; in this case, examples that are highly charged and conflictual. We contend that prior experiences of negative intergroup contact might be associated with appraising outgroup members more negatively in current contact situations, and the reverse might be true of positive contact. The current study provides the first test of whether direct contact with racial outgroup members in general has the potential to predict perceptions of specific encounters between White police officers and Black civilians in an interracial conflict situation.

More broadly, intergroup contact research has understandably focused heavily on the beneficial effects of positive contact (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006), but there has been a recent call to better understand the role that negative contact may play in intergroup relations (Pettigrew, 2008). Further to this, because positive and negative contact are typically inversely correlated (Barlow et al., 2012), it is important to distinguish the unique predictive effects of each type of contact. The relationship between positive contact and the outcomes can then be demonstrated to be due to the presence of positive contact rather than the absence of negative contact (and vice versa). The current study responds to this call by examining both positive and negative contact with the outgroup as simultaneous predictors of perceptions of intergroup conflict.

In line with findings that intergroup experiences can shape beliefs about the outgroup, and beliefs also predict how intergroup experiences are interpreted, we hypothesize that these relationships will be mediated by generalized outgroup attitudes. Indeed, there is a wealth of evidence demonstrating that positive contact is associated with more positive and less negative beliefs about and attitudes toward the outgroup (see Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006), whereas negative contact strongly predicts more negative outgroup beliefs and attitudes (Aberson, 2015; Alperin, Hornsey, Hayward, Diedrichs, & Barlow, 2014; Barlow et al., 2012; Dhont & Van Hiel, 2009; Graf, Paolini, & Rubin, 2014; Hayward, Tropp, Hornsey, & Barlow, 2017; Stephan et al., 2000, 2002; Techakesari et al., 2015). These general attitudes toward the outgroup may then influence how a specific intergroup

situation is appraised (i.e., to confirm and conform to these pre-existing attitudes). Thus, we propose a model where past direct contact experiences predict how specific instances of current intergroup conflict are perceived, via generalized attitudes toward the outgroup.

To gain a comprehensive understanding of how past contact might predict how current conflict is perceived, it is important to examine these processes among both groups involved in the conflict. Contact research has traditionally focused more on the perspectives of members of historically advantaged groups, and less is known about the perspectives of members of historically disadvantaged groups (Tropp & Pettigrew, 2005). Nonetheless, members of these groups often come to contact situations with different ideas and expectations about the contact (Tropp, 2006), suggesting that they may also perceive those interactions differently when they occur. Because contact is necessarily intergroup in nature, it is vital that we understand the experiences of both advantaged and disadvantaged groups (Pettigrew, 2008; White, Harvey, & Verrelli, 2015). We therefore wished to examine how White and Black Americans perceive the same events—incidents involving the deaths of Michael Brown and Eric Garner—as well as how these perceptions might be predicted by one's past direct contact experiences with the other group.

2 | THE PRESENT STUDY

Black American and White American participants reported on the frequency of their past positive and negative contact experiences with the outgroup. Participants were then provided with some information about the events surrounding the death of either Michael Brown or Eric Garner. Participants reported on the extent to which they blamed the officer and perceived that race was a factor in the event. We then presented information about the protests that occurred around the country in response to these events, before asking participants to report on why they felt the reactions to these two cases were so strong—was it because people were tired of injustice and inequality in the United States, or was it because people were “playing the race card”?¹ Examining these outcomes provides a novel test of intergroup contact theory in an applied context. Intergroup contact may not only predict beliefs and attitudes toward the outgroup, but may also extend beyond the immediate contact situation to shape perceptions of intergroup events. In an applied sense, examining the outcomes of officer blame and beliefs about racial profiling in relation to these events may have implications for how decisions are made in the criminal justice system. We also assess perceptions of why others have reacted strongly to these events, to see whether people's own contact experiences with the outgroup predict how they see others' responses to conflict situations.

¹Participants also indicated their agreement with the grand jury decision not to indict the officer, whether the officer was guilty or innocent, and support for those protesting for and against the officers. These measures were highly correlated with the measures reported, and showed very similar results. Officer guilt and agreement with the grand jury decision showed similar results to officer blame, and findings for support for protestors were in line with perceptions about why people reacted strongly to the case.

Generally, we hypothesize that White and Black Americans will judge the events differently, with Black Americans more likely than White Americans to blame the police officer, believe that the victim was racially profiled, and believe that people reacted strongly because they were tired of the injustice faced by Black Americans, rather than because they were “playing the race card” (Hypothesis 1). Moreover, we posit that frequency of past positive and negative intergroup experiences will predict Black and White Americans’ assessments of these events. For White Americans, we hypothesize that negative contact with Black Americans will predict defending the officer more—blaming him less, downplaying the issue of race and inequality, and emphasizing the problem of political correctness—whereas positive contact with Black Americans will predict defending the officer less (Hypothesis 2). For Black Americans, we hypothesize that negative contact with White Americans will predict greater officer blame and greater perceptions that the officer’s transgressions were racially motivated, whereas positive contact with White Americans will predict less officer blame and weaker perceptions of racial motivation on behalf of the officer (Hypothesis 3). Finally, we hypothesize that these relationships between contact and perceptions of the events will be mediated by attitudes toward the outgroup as a whole (Hypothesis 4). Examining these two particular cases allows us to assess people’s beliefs about the strong reactions to the events, but with two events that are quite different in nature. We do not hypothesize any differences between the cases, but controlling for case in our analyses goes some way to ensuring that any findings are not due to particularities about any one incident.

3 | METHOD

3.1 | Participants and procedure

In March to April 2015, community samples of White Americans and Black Americans participated in an online study via Amazon’s Mechanical Turk (MTurk). Black American participants were contacted directly on MTurk because they had previously participated in studies from our lab (that were unrelated to the current research question) and had provided their ethnicity. This allowed us to obtain a relatively large sample of Black Americans. The final samples consisted of 207 White Americans (92 women, $M_{\text{age}} = 33.55$ years, $SD_{\text{age}} = 10.23$) and 116 Black Americans (68 women, $M_{\text{age}} = 33.87$ years, $SD_{\text{age}} = 10.11$). Participants were divided into one of two conditions: in one condition, participants were presented with information about the fatal shooting of teenager Michael Brown in Ferguson; in the other condition, participants were provided with information about the chokehold death of Eric Garner in New York City. This study was conducted shortly after two separate grand juries had decided not to indict the police officers.

3.2 | Measures

Participants completed measures of positive and negative contact with the outgroup before being presented with information about one of two incidents. The information included photographs of the victim and

the officer as well as a description of the event and a list of known facts about the case. Participants then completed a range of measures regarding their judgments of the incident. At the end of the survey, participants completed a measure of general attitudes toward the outgroup before providing demographic information (including confirmation of their ethnicity) and being debriefed.

3.2.1 | Predictor variable

Intergroup contact

Participants completed five items assessing how frequently, overall, they had experienced positive (*positive/pleasant/good/friendly/enjoyable*) contact with the outgroup and five items assessing how frequently they had experienced negative (*negative/unpleasant/bad/unfriendly/unenjoyable*) contact with the outgroup, on a scale from 1 (*never*) to 7 (*very frequently*). White American participants reported on their contact with Black Americans, and Black American participants reported on their contact with White Americans. All scales showed high reliability ($\alpha s > .93$).

3.2.2 | Mediating variable

Negative intergroup attitudes

Attitudes toward the outgroup was measured with nine items from the Blatant Prejudice Scale (Pettigrew & Meertens, 1995; e.g., “[Black/White] Americans have jobs that [White/Black] Americans should have”), with a response scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). These items were adapted for Black American participants to respond in relation to White Americans ($\alpha = .75$) and for White American participants to respond in relation to Black Americans ($\alpha = .87$).

3.2.3 | Outcome variables

Officer blame

Attributions of officer blame were measured with eight items; for example, “Officer [Wilson/Pantaleo] is entirely to blame for the death of [Michael Brown/Eric Garner],” and “Officer [name] was simply attempting to make a lawful arrest” (reverse-scored), on a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree; $\alpha s > .89$ for Black Americans about each case; $\alpha s > .92$ for White Americans).

Racial profiling

Participants completed four items assessing their beliefs regarding whether the victim had been racially profiled during the incident (e.g., “[Victim] was targeted by police because of his race,” on a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree); $\alpha s > .86$ for Black Americans about each case; $\alpha s > .92$ for White Americans).

Beliefs about the reactions to the case

Nine items assessed participants’ beliefs about why the reactions to these cases were so strong.² Five of these items reflected the belief that people were “playing the race card” (e.g., “People have turned this

²For the first 71 White American participants, an introduction to these questions described the reaction to the cases as “riots.” Upon feedback that the term “riots” might conjure up images inconsistent with the majority of the events, we changed the term to “protests.” Controlling for which version participants were presented with did not change the results.

TABLE 1 Descriptive statistics for White and Black Americans

Variables	White Americans		Black Americans	
	M	SD	M	SD
1. Positive contact*	4.92	1.44	5.52	1.15
2. Negative contact	2.57	1.19	2.74	1.15
3. Blame for officer*	3.63	1.37	4.98	1.38
4. Belief in racial profiling*	3.77	1.80	5.15	1.55
5. Reactions—playing the “race card”*	4.10	1.63	2.82	1.37
6. Reactions—tired of injustice*	4.50	1.47	5.59	1.06
7. Negative intergroup attitudes*	2.48	1.08	2.94	0.96

Note. These means are collapsed across condition.

*Significant *t* test for mean difference between groups at $p < .001$.

into a conversation about race when, in fact, race had nothing to do with it.”; $\alpha_s > .76$ for Black Americans about each case; $\alpha_s > .86$ for White Americans). Four items reflected the belief that people were reacting strongly because they were tired of injustice (e.g., “The response to this case has been strong because people feel that too many Black Americans have died at the hands of police.”; $\alpha_s > .70$ for Black Americans about each case; $\alpha_s > .83$ for White Americans). All items were on a response scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree).

4 | RESULTS

4.1 | Analytic strategy

We first examined mean differences between White and Black Americans on all variables to test Hypothesis 1. To examine Hypotheses 2 and 3, we conducted a series of moderated multiple regression analyses with positive contact, negative contact, and participant group (White American or Black American) as predictors of perceptions about the event. Finally, in order to test Hypothesis 4 we conducted a series of mediation models separately for each group using *PROCESS* (Model 4; Hayes, 2013). In each model, positive and negative contact were entered

as predictors of judgments about the case through attitudes toward the outgroup. The indirect effects were tested using a bootstrap estimation approach with 5,000 samples. All bias-corrected percentile bootstrap confidence intervals are reported at the 95% confidence level.

4.2 | Group means and correlations

Means and standard deviations for all variables are presented in Table 1. Consistent with Hypothesis 1, Black Americans scored higher than White Americans on blame of the officer, belief that the victim was racially profiled, and belief that people were reacting strongly because they were tired of injustice. White Americans reported greater beliefs that people were reacting strongly because they were “playing the race card.” In addition, Black Americans reported more frequent positive intergroup contact than White Americans, but there was no difference on negative contact. Black Americans also reported more negative intergroup attitudes than White Americans.

Bivariate correlations among the variables for both White and Black American respondents are reported in Table 2. For White Americans, negative contact with Black Americans was associated with defending the White police officer more, whereas positive contact was associated with greater blame of the officer. Among Black Americans, positive contact with White Americans was associated with less officer blame, and negative contact was associated with more officer blame.

4.3 | Moderated regression analyses

We ran a series of moderated regressions to test the hypotheses that positive and negative intergroup contact would predict beliefs about current intergroup conflict (Hypotheses 2 and 3). Because we were interested in the general patterns of contact predictions irrespective of the intergroup incident about which participants read, we conducted these analyses controlling for case (Michael Brown vs. Eric Garner) at Step 1. It should be noted that this variable did not have a significant relationship with any of our outcome variables (all $ps > .145$). Further, case did not moderate any of the relationships tested here (i.e., between participant group and the outcomes, positive or negative contact and the outcomes, or the interactions between participant group and contact), $\beta_s < .11$, $ps > .057$ (23 of 25 possible interactions were

TABLE 2 Inter-correlations among variables for White and Black Americans

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Positive contact	–	–.43***	.21**	.15*	–.14*	.11	–.46***
2. Negative contact	–.44***	–	–.26***	–.27***	.27***	–.28***	.57***
3. Blame for officer	–.26**	.21*	–	.82***	–.72***	.65***	–.39***
4. Belief in racial profiling	–.33***	.16	.71***	–	–.82***	.73***	–.43***
5. Reactions—playing the “race card”	.12	–.10	–.48***	–.65***	–	–.72***	.49***
6. Reactions—tired of injustice	–.11	.07	.40***	.61***	–.58***	–	–.44***
7. Negative intergroup attitudes	–.54***	.39***	.32**	.37***	–.19*	.18*	–

Note. Correlations are reported above the diagonal for White American participants and below the diagonal for Black American participants.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

$p > .10$). Given this, and the fact that we made no a priori predictions about differences across cases, this variable will not be discussed further. We also entered positive contact, negative contact, and participant group as concurrent predictors at Step 1. As highlighted earlier, including positive and negative contact as concurrent predictors allowed us to examine the unique predictive effect of each type of contact. At Step 2, we entered the two-way interactions of participant group \times positive contact and participant group \times negative contact.

Participant group significantly moderated the relationship between positive contact and negative outgroup attitudes, officer blame, and beliefs that racial profiling was a factor in the case ($\beta s > .11$, $p s < .035$). For White Americans, positive contact with Black Americans uniquely predicted less negative outgroup attitudes ($\beta = -.26$, $p < .001$, CIs $[-0.29, -0.11]$), but positive contact was not significantly related to officer blame ($\beta = .12$, $p = .107$, CIs $[-0.03, 0.26]$) and beliefs about racial profiling ($\beta = .05$, $p = .524$, CIs $[-0.12, 0.24]$). For Black Americans, positive contact with White Americans uniquely predicted less negative attitudes toward the outgroup ($\beta = -.46$, $p < .001$, CIs $[-0.53, -0.24]$), marginally less blame for the White police officer ($\beta = -.18$, $p = .068$, CIs $[-0.46, 0.02]$), and weaker beliefs that racial profiling was a factor in the case ($\beta = -.31$, $p = .002$, CIs $[-0.69, -0.15]$). No significant main effects of positive contact or interactions between participant group and positive contact were found for beliefs about reactions to the events ($\beta s < .07$, $p s > .352$).

Participant group also significantly moderated the relationship between negative contact and all outcome variables ($\beta s > .12$, $p s < .032$). For White Americans, negative contact with Black Americans uniquely predicted more negative attitudes toward Black Americans ($\beta = .46$, $p < .001$, CIs $[0.30, 0.52]$), less blame for the White police officer ($\beta = -.21$, $p = .005$, CIs $[-0.42, -0.08]$), weaker beliefs

that racial profiling was a factor in the event ($\beta = -.26$, $p = .001$, CIs $[-0.62, -0.17]$), stronger beliefs that people's reactions to the events were an example of "playing the race card" ($\beta = .26$, $p = .001$, CIs $[0.16, 0.56]$), and weaker beliefs that people's reactions were due to being tired of injustice ($\beta = -.29$, $p < .001$, CIs $[-0.54, -0.18]$). In contrast, for Black Americans, negative contact with White Americans only modestly uniquely predicted more negative attitudes toward White Americans ($\beta = .18$, $p = .042$, CIs $[0.01, 0.30]$) and was unrelated to all perceptions about the case (all $\beta s < .16$, all $p s > .132$).

4.4 | Mediation analyses

To test the hypothesis that the relationships between contact and perceptions about the event are mediated by attitudes toward the outgroup (Hypothesis 4), we estimated the indirect effects of positive and negative contact predicting perceptions through outgroup attitudes (again controlling for condition). We expected outgroup attitudes to mediate these effects regardless of participant group; thus, results are reported separately for each group.

Among White American participants, although there were no total effects of positive contact on any outcome variable, significant indirect effects of positive contact through less negative outgroup attitudes were found for all judgments ($b s > |.08|$, CIs from $|.04|$ to $|.27|$). The relationships between negative contact and judgments about the events were significantly mediated by more negative attitudes toward Black Americans ($b s > |.18|$, CIs from $|.10|$ to $|.49|$). See Figure 1 for mediation models among White Americans.

Among Black Americans, positive contact with White Americans indirectly predicted less officer blame and weaker beliefs that racial profiling was a factor in the case through less negative attitudes toward

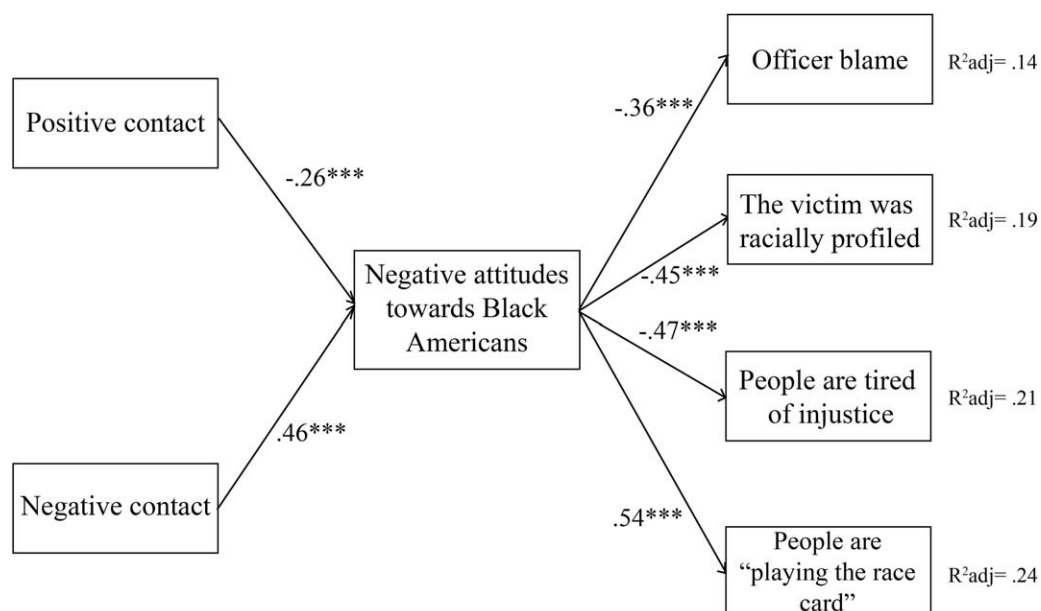


FIGURE 1 Mediation models of positive and negative contact with Black Americans predicting officer blame, racial profiling beliefs, and reaction beliefs through attitudes among White Americans, controlling for condition (Michael Brown vs. Eric Garner). All outcomes are reported together for sake of brevity; standardized coefficients are reported. *** $p < .001$

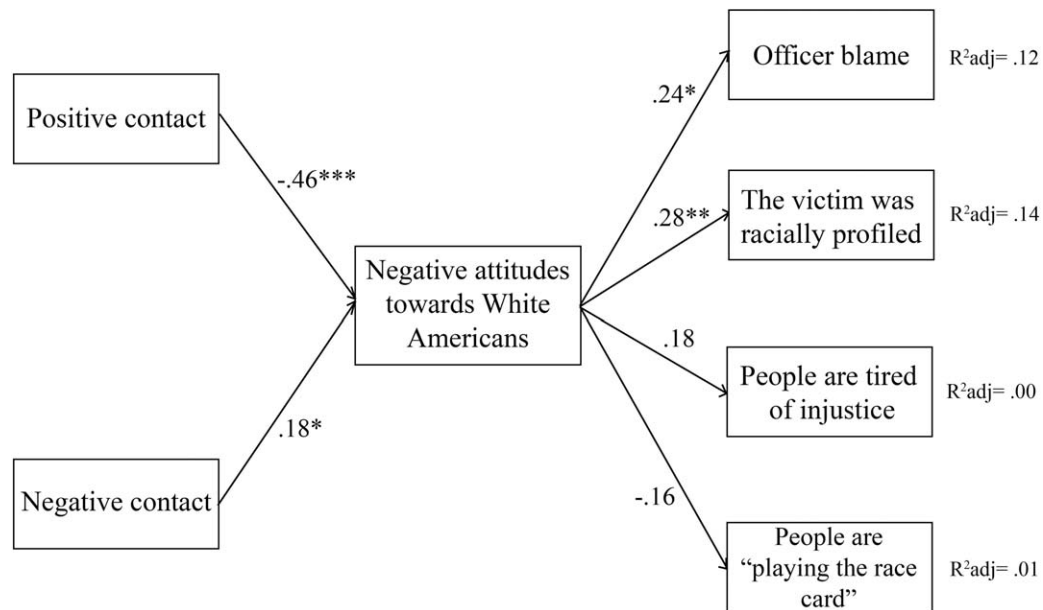


FIGURE 2 Mediation models of positive and negative contact with White Americans predicting officer blame, racial profiling beliefs, and reaction beliefs through attitudes among Black Americans, controlling for condition (Michael Brown vs. Eric Garner). All outcomes are reported together for sake of brevity; standardized coefficients are reported. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

White Americans ($bs > -.12$, CIs from $-.34$ to $-.03$). Additionally, although there were no total effects of negative contact with White Americans on any outcome variable, negative contact indirectly predicted greater officer blame and stronger beliefs in racial profiling through more negative outgroup attitudes ($bs > .04$, CIs from $.001$ to $.20$). In line with the zero-order relationships, no significant indirect effects of positive or negative contact were found on beliefs about why people reacted strongly to the events ($bs < .08$). See Figure 2 for mediation models among Black Americans.

Although we have hypothesized (and provided evidence) that positive and negative contact indirectly predict people's beliefs about specific intergroup conflict incidents through general outgroup attitudes, alternative models are also plausible and cannot be ruled out with cross-sectional data. For example, it is possible that contact directly influences one's appraisal of a specific intergroup incident, and this in turn predicts one's attitudes toward the outgroup as a whole. Indeed, the path between situation-specific beliefs and generalized outgroup beliefs is likely to be bi-directional in nature. We therefore conducted a series of reverse causal models whereby positive and negative contact predicted officer blame, beliefs that racial profiling was a factor in the case, and beliefs about why the reactions were so strong (in separate models), to see if these beliefs in turn predicted attitudes toward the outgroup. Overall, the indirect effects observed in these models were less consistent than in the original hypothesized model. Among White Americans, there were no significant indirect effects of positive contact on attitudes ($bs < |.022|$, CIs from $-.06$ to $.04$); among Black Americans, there were no significant indirect effects of negative contact on attitudes ($bs < .024$, CIs from $-.02$ to $.08$). There were, however, indirect effects from negative contact to attitudes through all beliefs among White Americans ($bs > .04$, CIs from $.02$ to $.14$) and from positive contact to attitudes through blame and racial profiling among Black

Americans ($bs < -.028$, CIs from $-.53$ to $-.001$). In summary, although we found some support for the reverse causal model, it appears that the hypothesized model has greater explanatory power than the reverse model, accounting for more relationships in the current data (indirect effects of both types of contact in both groups).

5 | DISCUSSION

Although past research has examined how positive and negative contact can influence prejudice, we know little about how these contact experiences may color the lens through which people interpret highly charged interracial incidents. We present the first test of this question and encompass in our investigation both positive and negative intergroup contact among members of both the advantaged group (White Americans) and the disadvantaged group (Black Americans).

In line with Hypothesis 1, Black Americans were more likely than White Americans to blame the White police officers for the events, an effect that replicates representative polls conducted shortly after the events (Pew Research Center & USA Today, 2014) as well as previous findings that Black and White Americans differ in their perceptions of police misconduct (Weitzer & Tuch, 2004). While consistent with a general tendency toward ingroup favoritism (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), the extent to which White Americans appear to defend the police officers is somewhat surprising as it seems to contradict the well-established "black sheep effect"—the finding that group members are especially harsh in their rejection of ingroup "deviants" (Guilherme, Pinto, & Marques, 2012; Hutchison, Abrams, Gutierrez, & Viki, 2008; Marques, Abrams, & Serjido, 2001; Marques, Yzerbyt, & Leyens, 1988; Pinto, Marques, Levine, & Abrams, 2010). However, recent research suggests that black sheep effects can disappear or even reverse when

the guilt of the group “deviant” is ambiguous (Minto, Hornsey, Gillespie, Healy, & Jetten, 2016; Van Prooijen, 2006). Although the level of ambiguity in the two cases presented here could be argued to differ (e.g., video footage of the Eric Garner altercation was released to the public whereas no such evidence exists in the case of Michael Brown), some ambiguity regarding the intentions and responsibility of the police officers is present in both situations and these aspects have been heavily contested in the media.

Black Americans were also more likely than White Americans to see the events as part of a broader trend toward racial injustice (e.g., racial profiling) and to see people’s responses to the events as reflecting broader concern about negative treatment of Black Americans at the hands of White police officers. These findings are in line with recent evidence that victim groups are more likely than transgressor groups to appraise transgressions through an intergroup, rather than interpersonal, lens (termed the “appraisal gap”; Hornsey, Okimoto, & Wenzel, 2017).

In support of Hypotheses 2 and 3, White and Black Americans’ perceptions of these conflict events differed as a function of their past positive and negative intergroup contact experiences. Generally, their past positive contact experiences predicted viewing the intergroup incident in less conflictual ways, whereas past negative contact predicted viewing the intergroup incident in more conflictual ways. This is consistent with previous evidence that our experiences with outgroup members can shape our expectations regarding future contact (Saguy et al., 2009; Tropp, 2003), and how we feel about interacting with the outgroup can predict how we appraise contact when it occurs (Van Zomeren et al., 2007). For White Americans, *negative* contact with Black Americans consistently predicted defending the police officer and downplaying the issue of racial injustice, speaking to a growing body of evidence showing that negative contact appears particularly influential in shaping intergroup relations (Barlow et al., 2012; Dhont & Van Hiel, 2009; Hayward et al., 2017; Paolini, Harwood, & Rubin, 2010; Stephan et al., 2000, 2002). This is also consistent with recent findings regarding contact *with the police*, with negative personal experiences with police officers found to be a stronger predictor than positive experiences of perceptions of the police in general (Li et al., 2016). With our novel outcome measures we have also demonstrated that, for White Americans, negative contact predicted dismissing a belief that is widely held by Black Americans: that the incidents were reflective of wider racism (see Table 1). Instead, negative contact predicted delegitimizing the reactions of Black Americans, claiming that they are simply “playing the race card.” Thus, negative intergroup contact experiences may be driving an even larger wedge between White and Black Americans in their views of what these incidents represent.

The finding that negative contact is an especially strong predictor of perceived injustice among White Americans can be contrasted with recent findings that *positive* contact predicts White Americans’ support for the broader *Black Lives Matter* movement, even when controlling for negative contact (Selvanathan, Techakesari, Tropp, & Barlow, 2017). In the current study, Whites’ positive contact uniquely predicted less negative attitudes toward Black Americans (which, in turn, was

associated with the outcomes examined), but positive contact did not uniquely and directly (when accounting for negative contact) predict views of the events. The distinction in the current study is that the outcomes refer to judgments about specific instances of police violence. It is possible that, for the advantaged group, positive contact is able to shape perceptions on a general level, including enhancing feelings of empathy toward the disadvantaged that may even encourage engagement in collective action (Selvanathan et al., 2017). Conversely, our data suggest that positive contact experiences may have limited capacity to promote perceiving injustice within a specific conflict situation. Instead, negative contact experiences appear to more strongly activate advantaged group members’ desire to defend their ingroup. Thus, positive contact may predict empathizing with the plight of racial minorities to the extent that injustice is perceived, but negative contact may inhibit the extent to which majority group members perceive injustice. This may particularly be the case when fellow majority ingroup members are implicated as contributors to that injustice.

Interestingly, for Black Americans, it was *positive* contact with White Americans that was the more consistent predictor of judgments about the incidents, predicting marginally less blame for the officer and weaker beliefs that the victim was racially profiled. These findings fit with growing evidence that positive contact with advantaged group members can produce “sedative” effects among the disadvantaged. Not only can positive contact reduce prejudice among the disadvantaged (Tropp & Pettigrew, 2005), but it can also reduce perceptions that one’s disadvantaged group suffers from discrimination (Dixon et al., 2010; Tropp, Hawi, Van Laar, & Levin, 2012) as well as increase perceptions that the ingroup will be treated fairly by the advantaged group (Saguy et al., 2009). Here we present evidence that these attitudes toward and beliefs about outgroup members and their treatment of one’s disadvantaged group may go on to predict how a specific conflictual intergroup incident is interpreted. Overall, our findings suggest that advantaged group members’ perceptions may be more strongly shaped by their past *negative* experiences with the outgroup, whereas disadvantaged group members’ perceptions may be more strongly shaped by their past *positive* experiences with the outgroup, in a direction that appears detrimental to the disadvantaged group. This further highlights the importance of understanding how contact may not only impact intergroup harmony, but also how it may contribute to a maintenance of inequality and injustice (Dixon, Levine, Reicher, & Durrheim, 2012; Wright, 2001).

It is interesting to note that the relationships between past direct contact and perceptions of current conflict appeared more consistent for White Americans. For example, although past contact predicted all outcomes among White Americans, contact did not predict beliefs about people’s reactions to the incident among Black Americans. These apparent differences speak to evidence that the relationship between contact and intergroup attitudes tends to be weaker for members of historically disadvantaged groups compared with members of historically advantaged groups (Tropp & Pettigrew, 2005). It is also possible that there is something different about assessing reactions to the incident among Black Americans than among White Americans. All other

outcomes (officer blame, belief in racial profiling, and negative intergroup attitudes) contain some direct reference to White Americans, either in terms of the specific police officer involved or White Americans in general. Although the measures regarding why people reacted strongly did not explicitly state who reacted strongly (Black Americans or White Americans), imagery of the *Black Lives Matter* protests was used to provide context, and Black Americans were the clear driving force behind these protests. Thus, these measures assessed beliefs about fellow *ingroup* members among Black American participants, something that is perhaps less likely to be altered by experiences with the outgroup. Mean scores were also quite extreme on the response scale for these two measures, with Black Americans typically agreeing that people reacted strongly because of wider racial injustice (5.51 on a 1 to 7 scale) and disagreeing that people were “playing the race card” ($M = 2.82$; see Table 1). Thus, ceiling and floor effects could be a factor in these findings.

Consistent with Hypothesis 4, we found that the relationships between contact and perceptions about the case were mediated by negative attitudes toward the outgroup. We also found significant indirect effects in the absence of total effects for positive contact among White Americans and negative contact for Black Americans (possibly due to increased power to detect indirect effects; Rucker, Preacher, Tormala, & Petty, 2011). Our results suggest that the positive and negative experiences an individual has with outgroup members predicts how they feel toward the outgroup as a whole, and this in turn predicts how they appraise a specific instance of intergroup contact. Of course, the correlational nature of the data necessarily means that we cannot make strong claims about causality here, particularly as participants responded to all measures after these conflictual events took place. Therefore, it is possible that the events and the subsequent media discussion surrounding them could have altered people’s reporting of their past direct contact experiences with the outgroup. We do not dispute this possibility, and assert that both causal directions are likely (and are in line with our cyclical understanding of past and future contact). Either way, however, intergroup contact experiences (in direct form or via the media) are predicting perceptions of outgroup members, both in terms of general attitudes toward the outgroup and in specific contact situations. Future longitudinal and experimental work would be valuable here, to disentangle causal pathways.

These findings have significant theoretical and practical implications. First, in responding to recent calls in the contact literature (Pettigrew, 2008), we have examined both positive and negative contact with outgroup members as predictors of intergroup beliefs and attitudes. This has allowed us to examine the unique predictive value of positive contact while controlling for negative contact, and of negative contact while controlling for positive contact. Thus, any significant findings are a result of the presence of that particular type of contact (and not the absence of the other type of contact). We have also addressed calls in the literature to extend the focus beyond historically advantaged groups, to better understand the perspectives of members of historically disadvantaged groups (Tropp & Pettigrew, 2005). In assessing

White and Black Americans’ positive and negative contact experiences and responses to the same events, we found that negative contact was a more consistent predictor among White Americans, whereas positive contact was a more consistent predictor among Black Americans.

Second, we have presented a theoretical argument about the cyclical nature of contact—that past positive contact experiences may allow individuals to view current contact through a lens of positivity, whereas past negative contact experiences may produce a negative lens. These findings have significant implications for extending our understanding of the effects of intergroup contact. Not only does contact predict general attitudes and beliefs about the outgroup, it also extends to judgments of individual group members in particular contact situations. This supports the basic premise of the contact hypothesis, while suggesting that contact may have far-reaching effects beyond the immediate situation, such that positive contact may breed more positive perceptions of intergroup encounters, and negative contact may breed more negative perceptions of intergroup encounters.

In an applied sense, we have provided correlational evidence that past experiences with the outgroup can predict different interpretations of significant, real-world intergroup conflict situations. Unfortunately, deaths of Black people at the hands of police, like those of Michael Brown and Eric Garner, are not uncommon (see Ross, 2015). People’s perceptions of such events are crucial as they have the potential to influence whether people push for systemic changes on a societal level. We have shown that White and Black Americans’ past direct experiences with outgroup members predicts how they interpret these events. The fact that advantaged and disadvantaged group members’ perceptions of intergroup incidents appear to correspond with their past experiences is of note (although the limits of our cross-sectional data must be acknowledged). Although there are clear mean differences between the groups, shifts in perceptions associated with contact carry the potential to downplay wider concern regarding racial inequality and injustice. Given that Black Americans continue to face significant discrimination and disadvantage (American Psychological Association, 2015; Pew Research Center, 2013; Tropp et al., 2012), this diminished concern could have damaging consequences for the more than 42 million Black Americans that live in the United States today.

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