

# The Contact Conundrum: Reducing Conflict Through Intergroup Contact

August 30, 2021



Individuals' experiences as group members can dramatically impact their interpretations and expectations of experiences with members of other groups. To explore the science behind this, APS President Jennifer L. Eberhardt interviewed [Linda R. Tropp](#), a professor of social psychology at the University of Massachusetts (UMass) Amherst who studies how group differences in status affect cross-group relations. Tropp has also worked with national organizations on initiatives to promote racial integration and equity, as well as with nongovernmental organizations to evaluate interventions designed to bridge group differences. The two began by discussing Tropp's formative childhood in Gary, Indiana, an industrial city in the American Midwest that was a major site of Black migration in the mid-20th century, followed by significant "White flight" starting in the 1960s. "My family just happened to be one of those who stayed," she told Eberhardt, a fact that helped foster her interest in social justice issues, particularly related to race and ethnic justice.

*Eberhardt and Tropp spoke on August 5. A recording of their conversation is below, and edited excerpts follow.*

[See all columns by Jennifer L. Eberhardt](#)



Jennifer L. Eberhardt

**EBERHARDT:** Given your interest in social justice, how did you land on being a psychological scientist, of all things, instead of going to law school?

**TROPP:** As an undergrad, I really wanted to be a grassroots organizer, but I knew it wasn't me. I'm a data geek and was one of those students who enjoyed statistics and research methods and just thinking about how to phrase questions in ways that were more accessible to the people we were trying to reach. I started off more in personality psychology and became interested in people's identities as group members, especially as members of groups that have been marginalized, and what they wanted to do about it in terms of collective action.

It was through all those experiences that I started thinking about research. Rather than going straight to graduate school, I spent a couple of years after undergrad in a variety of research positions in applied settings. I went to different Boston neighborhoods and interviewed children and their parents about their after-school childcare options. I was a project manager for a longitudinal study of Puerto Rican adolescent development and pilot-tested measures with Puerto Rican youth in different communities. I was a data analyst for a project on media bias and presidential election coverage in the '92 election.

**EBERHARDT:** I like that you were looking at research from different angles and vantage points. Tell me about your current research program. What's going on now?



Linda R. Tropp

**TROPP:** A lot of the work I'm doing still is very much related to intergroup relations—in particular, contact between groups. Through discussions with policy advocates and community-based organizations, we're trying to apply more rigorous research methods to contact-based programs in field settings. We also want to translate our insights to help folks in local communities and the organizations that sponsor them do their work better, and to make all of our scholarship more accessible to what they do.

We've also been thinking about people's motivations in intergroup relations—for instance, the concerns and experiences of White people and how they might change through contact, perhaps becoming more aware of racial privilege and more motivated to participate in collective action for racial justice. And since the 2016 presidential election, we've been conducting a program of research on how a lot of White people seem to be indifferent to racial justice. I recall White people being interviewed prior to the election who basically seemed to say, like, "Oh, racial justice issues. That's just not my thing." As if it were optional and not some sort of civic obligation to care. I've really been interested in how people don't see these issues as relevant to their lives and in the underlying factors that might promote greater interest or engagement, either with those issues or civics more generally.

**EBERHARDT:** That's a great topic. Can you say more about what you think produces this indifference or apathy?

**TROPP:** A couple of sociologists have been looking at what they call "racial apathy" over time; in particular, Tyrone Forman (University of Illinois Chicago) and Tony Brown (Rice University) have been doing longitudinal studies with panel data. Our studies have looked at whether we can distinguish indifference from empathy, because in psychology research, so much emphasis is placed on building empathy—trying to encourage people to care. We wanted to see whether apathy or indifference is the flip side of empathy or something different, with its own unique predictive value and role. We tend to find that even after you take into account common demographic indicators, you can incorporate additional measures, like forms of threat posed by out-group members, into a regression model [to predict policy

attitudes]. And when you add empathy and indifference, not only do they each predict [policy attitudes] independently, but they predict beyond what common measures of threat and prejudice and demographics usually predict. This suggests to us that there's something unique there, and that empathy and indifference are playing somewhat distinct roles.

**EBERHARDT:** What is the unique role empathy and indifference play?

**TROPP:** We're trying to figure that out. And we're wondering if people who say, "Well, I'm just trying to be objective," if they're actually saying they're not personally invested in the issues, which is not necessarily a positive thing. We're trying to understand how these terms are used in public discourse, how we can reframe our understanding of what objectivity is intended to mean, and the political consequences of apparent objectivity.

*I think about segregation on a daily basis— how it curbs not only opportunities for contact but also willingness to engage in contact. But instead of debating which is more important, I'm a synthesizer. I'm thinking, "How can we integrate the best of what we know about segregation and social norms?"*

Linda R. Tropp

I think we're grappling with this in our discipline. There's been a long debate about our purported role as "objective" when we engage in research or the scientific pursuit of knowledge. I've always leaned toward the side of the argument that we're not fully objective—that our values and prior experiences influence what we are motivated to study, how we phrase the questions we ask. My interests in racial justice issues are kind of converging with my interest in public engagement and outreach as I think about how we design studies and translate findings for policymakers and practitioners.

**EBERHARDT:** One of the things I love about your approach is that you not only collaborate with researchers but you also partner with practitioners who are trying to make a difference. Have partnerships changed your approach and what you've been able to discover?

**TROPP:** Honestly, what has changed the most for me over the last 20 years in trying to do this type of work is the broader acceptance of it in our discipline. As an assistant professor, I was given not-so-subtle cues, like, "Oh, it's nice that you do that, but it's not going to get you tenure." At the time, I kind of saw it as volunteer work, extracurricular. Now there's broader acceptance in social psychology, which encourages grad students to get involved and has even changed how I train grad students. But before, I faced a real tension between the dual goals of wanting to have a career in academia and wanting to make a difference in the world.

Especially in the last 5 years, we have seen radical change in people's openness to believing that we don't have to sacrifice scholarly integrity in order to cultivate partnerships with organizations. For me, what has been crucial has involved finding a middle path between two more common models of public engagement. The traditional model is scientist as all-knowing expert who shares insights and hopes something sticks to the wall. The other model involves community-engaged research, working in partnership with organizations throughout the scientific process and co-creating knowledge, as might be more typical of participatory action research.

I didn't really feel comfortable in either of those models, and I've been fortunate to find a number of colleagues at UMass Amherst who felt the same. We worked together on a paper to outline what we call a "relational model," whereby we do our best to cultivate trusting relationships with the communities and organizations and policy advocates that we seek to work with and at the same time maintain a certain degree of autonomy in terms of the research method.

**EBERHARDT:** I also want to know about your approach to reducing intergroup conflict, a central theme in your work. One of the most influential papers in the field of social psychology describes the meta-analysis on intergroup contact that you conducted with Tom Pettigrew (University of California, Santa Cruz). Tell us a little bit about the paper, the motivation for it, and the key findings.

**TROPP:** We've been surprised by its impact. In the paper, which we published in 2006, we did a quantitative integration—a meta-analysis—pooling data from 515 studies conducted from the 1940s through the year 2000, with about 250,000 participants from 38 countries. It showed that greater levels of intergroup contact tend to be associated with lower levels of intergroup prejudice. Over the years, we've identified a number of moderators for that effect. For example, contact involving closer relationships across group lines tends to produce stronger effects in terms of reducing prejudice. We've also found important differences in the magnitude of contact effects, depending on the status of the group members involved, such that overall, the positive effects of contact for prejudice reduction tend to be weaker among members of lower-status minority groups than among higher-status majority groups. On the dependent variable side, measures of prejudice more related to affective or emotional outcomes tend to show greater shifts with contact than those that are more cognitively based, like stereotypes or beliefs.

**EBERHARDT:** I'm also thinking about the whole debate now about where you even enter the problem. You were talking about cognitive processes, at the level of the individual, but there's more and more of a focus on looking at the broader context—at culture, policies and practices within institutions, and so forth. How does your work fit into that? Are we moving in that direction?

**TROPP:** I think we inadvertently set up false dichotomies by talking about processes at the individual level versus at the structural level, because of course both are relevant. In my own work, especially given valid critiques related to contact research, we're really trying to understand the conditions under which contact may or may not be effective.

To pursue some of those questions, we've conducted collaborations with colleagues in other countries, such as [working with Gábor Orosz \(Université d'Artois, France\) and others to look at contact effects in Hungary, where prejudice against the Roma is extremely blatant](#). Would contact be as effective in a context with explicit norms of discrimination as compared to where there might be a broader heterogeneity of norms—in the U.S. context, for example? We have found some evidence through experimental studies that when non-Roma Hungarians have contact with members of the Roma community, they develop more positive intergroup attitudes. Even those who perceive a lack of acceptance of the Roma among their peers see positive contact effects. So it's not just the societal level, but also what you see in your local community. Would my friends approve or disapprove if I engage with those folks? I feel that in some ways we've been trying to push the boundaries there.

With some colleagues in sociology, we've also been looking at implications for civic engagement—the

prospect that contact might also influence the extent to which we do or do not engage with our communities. For that study, with Dina Okamoto (Indiana University), Helen Marrow (Tufts University), and Michael Jones-Correa (University of Pennsylvania), we purposely examined these relations in two highly segregated cities, Atlanta and Philadelphia, and among four different groups: White and Black Americans as well as first-generation Mexican and Indian immigrants. We wanted to see [how structural differences between the status positions of U.S.-born people and immigrants might also shape the nature, duration, and outcomes of their contact experiences](#).

Basically, I think about segregation on a daily basis—how it curbs not only opportunities for contact but also willingness to engage in contact. But instead of debating which is more important, I'm a synthesizer. I'm thinking, "How can we integrate the best of what we know about segregation and social norms?" A lot of our studies now focus on how individuals' contact experiences might predict policy attitudes, voting behavior, willingness to live in integrated communities, civic engagement—their implications for broader structural issues and collective action for racial justice. At the same time, we're thinking about how the ways our societies are structured affect the nature of and opportunities for contact experiences.

**EBERHARDT:** Given the amount of polarization the world is experiencing, intergroup relations seem to be a lot more volatile.

**TROPP:** You've raised such an important point. People are really living in different worlds—not just having polarized attitudes but actually living in different Americas. If people are only exposed to polarizing rhetoric, then their ideas of others will be even more exaggerated, based on what we know about meta-perceptions. The same basic psychological processes are at play; it's just that they are going to result in more exaggerated meta-perceptions of how other groups see us that make us even more distrustful.

So we have these competing motivations as individuals. On the one hand, we might feel threatened by group difference or uncomfortable engaging with people who are different. On the other hand, there's the prospect for having positive experiences. Well, if you don't have any opportunities for positive experiences, then all you have is the threat, the stereotypes, the suspicion, discomfort, unease. I don't necessarily think that contact can undo all of that, but I do think it can mitigate it by offering new inputs—new attributions that people can make when they're relating to people who are different. Instead of saying, "I can't trust those people," they might say, "I've just never gotten to know them before. They don't seem so scary after all."

I'll share a little bit from a paper that Eric Knowles (New York University) and I worked on together, because there's been a lot of research on how neighborhood demographic characteristics might affect White Americans' attitudes, and usually in a negative direction. That is, greater proportions of racial or ethnic minorities where Whites live tend to be associated with a greater sense of racial threat and less positive attitudes toward members of other racial and ethnic groups. At the same time, studies from psychology and sociology show that greater proportions of racial and ethnic minorities in White neighborhoods are associated with greater opportunities for contact, which are associated with more positive attitudes and lower perceptions of racial threat.

So with some of the data that Eric collected, [we conducted further analyses where we basically](#)



[replicated that pattern—that greater racial and ethnic proportions exacerbate racial threat for White people as well as being associated with greater opportunities for contact](#), which is associated with less threat along racial lines. But then we also looked at the social-economic environments in which those groups came into contact, comparing the responses of White residents who were likely to be under conditions of extreme economic threat, using the indicator of high rates of unemployment, to the responses of Whites in areas with lower rates of unemployment. If you think about this as the threat effect versus the contact effect—the direct effect of neighborhood diversity on threat and the indirect effect of neighborhood diversity on threat through contact—we basically found that the magnitude of the contact effect was comparable in both contexts. It was kind of like, contact is doing its thing regardless of the economic conditions where Whites lived.

What really differed, though, was the direct effect of racial and ethnic diversity on threat. Where there was high unemployment, racial diversity was associated with much greater perceptions of threat, which seemed to drown out the contact effect. When you looked at areas with low unemployment, racial and ethnic diversity was associated with very little threat. So what you're basically seeing is, it's not actually racial and ethnic diversity per se that is driving these threat effects. It's really the economic conditions associated with the spaces where racial and ethnic diversity emerge. And so, if we really want to reduce threat and improve the conditions for contact, we need to focus on those economic indicators and ease the burden for everybody, so that racial and ethnic contact won't seem so threatening.

**EBERHARDT:** I'm also channeling some of what I'm seeing, which is that a lot of people are sad, angry, exasperated in this moment of racial unrest. They have lost hope. How do you help them believe in the possibility for real and lasting change?

**TROPP:** From my perspective, that feeling is totally justified. While many of us who are White can't necessarily relate to the experiences of having your own group being murdered by people who are supposed to protect them, I know that some proportion of the White community and other racial and ethnic communities want and are willing to work for greater equality and justice.

We explored this in another [study looking at how Whites witness discrimination](#)—for example, the Philadelphia Starbucks incident, where a Black man was picked up by the police while just waiting for a colleague, or an incident in a Yale University dormitory where the police were called on a Black student who had fallen asleep in the common room. We used footage from those cases to see if they made White people more willing to think about and potentially engage in collective action for racial justice. We have also found that [knowing and caring about people of color, Black people in particular, being invested in their welfare and in their communities—are associated with greater willingness to support racial justice efforts](#). But we also found that witnessing those moments helps White people realize at a deeper level that this would never happen to them. They become more willing to engage in collective action for racial justice through the mechanism of greater awareness of racial privilege. I think we've seen more of this, particularly since the murder of George Floyd led so many White people to go to protests and post Black Lives Matter signs.

*Frankly, I think one reason why we as a field haven't had the level of public influence as some other disciplines is because we haven't always been our own best advocates. In our pursuit to be as scientific and objective as possible, we haven't shared all of our insights with people who could potentially make a difference.*

Linda R. Tropp

**EBERHARDT:** But at the same time, there's a pushback against even talking about race. We're seeing kind of a staunch belief in colorblindness as the only way we can move ahead, that any mention of race is actually racist.

**TROPP:** Yes, I'm thinking of the recent debates against critical race theory. What I hope we can do, through research or advocacy or whatever channels we feel are appropriate, is push back on that opposition a lot harder than we have been pushing. I think about politics in this country, where there's a very loud, well-funded vocal minority that bashes critical race theory. This is where my concern with indifference really comes in, because I suspect that most Americans would value accuracy in reporting on the merit of our history as a country, in having our children learn who we are and be proud of some things and perhaps not so proud of other things in our past. To be honest with ourselves. I was recently on a call with some policy advocates and policymakers about how we need to be much more proactive in shifting the narrative—that it's not enough for us to just try to defend critical race theory, but to actually say, "What does it mean to be an American? It means looking out for our neighbors, it means helping out other people in need." Viewed in that light, I think we want to feel good about who we are and who we can be, recognizing that there's still some ways to go.

There's an incredible amount for us to do, and I think we just need to be more vocal, more willing to engage in public debates and policymaking. Frankly, I think one reason why we as a field haven't had the level of public influence as some other disciplines is because we haven't always been our own best advocates. In our pursuit to be as scientific and objective as possible, we haven't shared all of our insights with people who could potentially make a difference. Perhaps if we do more work at the local level focusing on inclusion and integration, creating the types of communities we want to live in, then we can build political will at the higher federal or political levels. That's very far afield from my research expertise, but that's honestly what I think.

**EBERHARDT:** I thought we could close out on something that's not far afield. You direct the [Public Engagement Project at UMass](#). Talk more about that so other psychological researchers can understand the mission there and what's driving it.

**TROPP:** When I started at UMass about 15 years ago, I was fortunate to meet a handful of like-minded scholars who were doing this type of engaged scholarship in sociology and economics and public health and a variety of fields. We kind of started the project on a volunteer basis and over the years became more formalized. Basically, we offer workshops, panels, and programming every semester to train faculty in conducting engaged scholarship, whatever that might look like. For some people, it might look like writing op-eds. For others, it might be working with local legislators or doing community-engaged research. However they wish to do that work, we seek to support them.

We also have a semester-long program where faculty apply to get in-depth training on a biweekly basis: media training; op-ed writing training; workshopping engagement products, such as white papers or policy briefs. They're also matched with faculty mentors outside of their cohort who have gone through the program. And before COVID, we would culminate the program with a visit to the state legislature in Boston, where they would meet with policymakers to talk about their work.



Now I co-direct [the program, which continues to give me more insights on the many different ways we can make a difference](#). Often, when we as psychologists and researchers think about public engagement, we think about getting an op-ed in the *New York Times*. I just want to reassure people that they can take so many different pathways to become engaged scholars. It really depends on the types of activities you want to do, the type of people you want to reach, what their needs are, and how you might be situated to help them meet those needs and make their work as effective as possible, given the insights you have.

**EBERHARDT:** Linda, it's been a pleasure and a privilege to spend this time with you. Thanks so much for all you do for the field and the larger society. Appreciate you.

**TROPP:** Likewise. It's a real pleasure, Jennifer. Thanks for taking the time.

*Feedback on this article? Email [apsobserver@psychologicalscience.org](mailto:apsobserver@psychologicalscience.org) or scroll down to comment.*