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## When contact counts: Intergroup contact on business and intermarriage resistance in the Caucasus region

Benjamin T. Gurrentz <sup>a, \*</sup>, Roger Finke <sup>b</sup><sup>a</sup> Department of Sociology & Criminology, The Pennsylvania State University, 211 Oswald Tower, University Park, PA 16802, USA<sup>b</sup> Department of Sociology & Criminology, The Pennsylvania State University, 402 Oswald Tower, University Park, PA 16802, USA

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### ABSTRACT

Intergroup contact theory has been empirically supported in a variety of social contexts, but few samples have been drawn from rapidly developing nations undergoing severe political and sociocultural conflict. Using 2012 Caucasus Barometer data from the three nations of the South Caucasus — Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia — we test the effect of interreligious contact on various forms of out-group resistance in a region of the world that is both historically and presently marked with severe religious and ethnic conflict. Additionally, we take into account self-selection effects using propensity score matching. Results overwhelmingly support intergroup contact theory in all three countries, but objections toward intermarriage still remain high for treated groups. In addition, there exist significant differences based on the out-group studied, with the contact effects being the strongest for groups posing little religio-cultural or organized threat. Weaker contact effects, though, appear less related to threat and more contextual/out-group specific.

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One of the most enduring social scientific explanations for reducing intergroup prejudice is some form of intergroup contact theory. Early versions of the theory began to appear shortly after World War II (Watson, 1947; Williams, 1947), but it was Gordon Allport (1954) *The Nature of Prejudice*, which subsequently produced more than 18,000 citations, that provided the most convincing and enduring introduction. According to Allport, contact with out-groups will reduce intergroup prejudice and tension under certain conditions. Intergroup contact theory proposes that interaction with members of out-groups can help dispel prevailing stereotypes, lead to discovery of similar values and attitudes, reduce anxiety over future out-group interactions and lighten prior tension between groups (Blascovich et al., 2001; Cook, 1978; Page-Gould et al., 2008). Although the origins of the theory date back to the 1940s, recent theoretical and methodological advances in the field have led to a resurgence of interest in how the theory can be applied and tested (see Hodson and Hewstone, 2013). Recent meta-analyses of past research (Pettigrew and Tropp, 2006; Pettigrew et al., 2011) have confirmed that intergroup contact theory is strongly supported by past research on racial and ethnic prejudice, as well as research on prejudice against homosexuals, the mentally ill, the elderly and those with mental and physical disabilities (see Harper and Wacker, 1985; Herek and Capitanio, 1996; Link and Cullen, 1986; Merino, 2013; Naor and Milgram, 1980). Moreover, intergroup contact tends to improve political tolerance toward stigmatized groups in terms of supporting their civil rights and promoting policies to improve their living conditions (Dixon et al., 2010; Jeffries and Ransford, 1969; Pettigrew and Tropp, 2011).

\* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: [btg138@psu.edu](mailto:btg138@psu.edu) (B.T. Gurrentz), [rfinke@psu.edu](mailto:rfinke@psu.edu) (R. Finke).

Yet, past studies have given little attention to the larger political, social, cultural and historical contexts in which such contact occurs; and few of the samples have been drawn from less developed nations undergoing rapid political transitions, where many of the most severe conflicts are actively occurring. As a result, questions persist on how widely past research can be generalized across all countries and if the theory can be applied to real world settings where intergroup conflicts are present.

We address this concern by testing the theory in a region of the world that is both historically and presently marked with severe religious and ethnic conflict. Using the 2012 Caucasus Barometer data from the three nations of the south Caucasus — Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia — we test the effect of interreligious contact on various forms of out-group resistance. Despite being located in the same region and sharing a recent political history as part of the former Soviet Union, each of these nations varies by religion, language, culture and ethnicity and each has a unique history of religious tensions and conflicts. Genocide and wars have only reaffirmed the social boundaries between ethno-religious groups in all three countries. When combined with government and social institutions that currently favor the dominant religion, the Caucasus Barometer data allow us to evaluate the robustness of intergroup contact theory under unfavorable conditions with high intergroup tensions and in very diverse cultural contexts.<sup>1</sup>

Moreover, we will explore how the effect of intergroup contact varies based on the out-groups being studied and how these differential effects produce minority group hierarchies. Recent research suggests that perceived threat plays a role in the relationship between intergroup contact and resistance toward out-groups (Dhont and Van Hiel, 2011; McLaren, 2003; Schlueter and Scheepers, 2010). Some have even suggested that contact could heighten conflict for some groups (Jung, 2012; Forbes, 1997; Hewstone and Brown, 1986). Because the South Caucasus nations each favor a different dominant religion and each has multiple minority religions, the surveys offer an opportunity to study multiple intergroup combinations that vary in their levels of conflict and social barriers. Though intergroup contact may function as a solution to social inequality, it may also reflect social inequality by producing stronger effects for certain minority groups but weaker effects for others based on their relationship with the dominant group.

Another major concern with past research is that the consistently strong relationship between contact and reduced prejudice may be the product of a self-selection bias (Christ and Wagner, 2013; Hewstone and Brown, 1986; Pettigrew, 1998). Is the relationship the result of people “self-selecting” into interaction or avoidance with the out-group being studied? Although nationally representative probability surveys provide generalizable results, they typically rely on standard regression methods that are unable to effectively assess the potential for a self-selection bias. Using the logic of randomized experiments, we will employ propensity scores to match those who receive the treatment (e.g., contact with members of minority religious groups) with those who do not receive the treatment on observed characteristics. Through propensity score matching (PSM), we attempt to limit concerns that those who come in contact with minority groups are fundamentally different from those who do not (see Amir, 1969, 323; Christ and Wagner, 2013; Hewstone and Brown, 1986; Pettigrew and Tropp, 2011). In this way, we can produce estimates that are both generalizable and better suited for estimating treatment effects.

## 1. The South Caucasus Region

Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia are located near the borders of Europe and Asia in the southern Caucasus Mountains. In terms of religious composition, each country tends to be fairly homogenous. Fig. 1 shows that 96 percent of Armenia's population belongs to the nationally recognized Armenian Apostolic Church, 99 percent of Azerbaijan is Muslim, and 86 percent of Georgia's population belongs to the nationally recognized Georgian Orthodox Church. Of the three Caucasus countries, Georgia has the most religious diversity, with Muslims composing nine percent and Armenian Apostolic Christians composing three percent of the Georgian population. The size of religious minority groups tends to be smaller in Armenia and Azerbaijan, with the largest single minority group being Georgian Orthodox Christians and the smallest minority group being Jews in both countries.

Historically, the three nations that compose the South Caucasus have been subject to various political regimes, including the Romans, Byzantines, Mongols, Persian, Ottomans and most recently, the Soviet Union. After the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, they officially became independent nation-states along with 12 other former Soviet territories. The disputed boundary issues and territorial claims due to the fall of the Soviet Union have led to three major violent conflicts in the region: the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan (1987-present); the South-Ossetia-Georgian conflict (1989-present); and the Abkhaz-Georgian conflict (1989-present).

Political turmoil has been an ongoing reality of the region, but throughout the multiple regime changes, the distinct religious identity of each country has remained a constant. Georgia and Armenia are proud to represent some of the earliest nations to convert to Christianity, even prior to the Christianization of the Roman Empire in the fourth century (see Van der Leeuw, 1998, 129). As subjects of multiple empires, citizens preserved their culture and collective identity through the church (De Waal, 2010, 28). In Azerbaijan, Arab invaders brought Islam to the region as early as the seventh century and it remained a predominant characteristic of the nation despite Islam's repression by Russia in the 19th and 20th centuries. The Soviet Union's anti-religious propaganda was tolerated by citizens in all three countries but rarely internalized (Roudik, 2009, 91).

<sup>1</sup> These are the very conditions where the effect of contact on reducing prejudice appears unlikely, and may even increase out-group prejudice (see Allport, 1954; Amir, 1969, 338–339).

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