



# Intergroup relations in South Los Angeles – Combining communication infrastructure and contact hypothesis approaches



Garrett M. Broad<sup>a,\*</sup>, Carmen Gonzalez<sup>b</sup>, Sandra J. Ball-Rokeach<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup> University of Pennsylvania, Annenberg School for Communication, United States

<sup>b</sup> University of Southern California, Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism, United States

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## ABSTRACT

Amidst widespread demographic change in South Los Angeles, the issue of African American and Latino relations has become a frequent topic of discussion among local residents, media and researchers. However, little academic research has empirically assessed residents' own perceptions of "Black-Brown" relations in this community, nor have researchers investigated behavioral or communicative factors that might influence perceptions of intergroup relations. Drawing from discrete yet complementary theoretical frameworks – Allport's (1954) contact hypothesis, and Communication Infrastructure Theory (Kim & Ball-Rokeach, 2006) – this study uses data from a survey of over 800 South Los Angeles residents to explore intergroup dynamics. The introduction of communication theory into intergroup contact research responds, in part, to those who have called for work that situates intergroup contact research within a broader social context. Findings of the study suggest support for the influence of interpersonal contact on intergroup perceptions, with these effects more pronounced for Latinos than African Americans. In addition, several communication-related variables – including a measure of neighborhood belonging and residents' connections to local storytellers (interpersonal networks, local media, and community organizations) – demonstrated a significant, and in some instances negative, influence on intergroup perceptions. While the findings are specific to the community of South Los Angeles, this research has implications for the growing number of multiethnic urban communities across the United States and around the world.

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## 1. Introduction

Demographic changes that have occurred over the course of the last several decades should compel researchers to reorient their focus in the study of intergroup relations across race and ethnicity. Much of the ethnically focused intergroup relations research has focused on the interactions between a dominant – usually white – group and a minority – usually non-white – group (McClain et al., 2006). However, such an approach does not reflect the increasingly diverse nature of community, not only in the United States, but also in cities and towns across the globe. This is the case, for instance, in a place like South Los Angeles, a region that has experienced significant demographic shifts in recent years. Today, this multiethnic urban community is an often contested space in which primarily working class African-Americans and Latinos live. Within this context, local residents' conceptions of so-called "Black-Brown relations" in South LA, as well as media narratives that serve

\* Corresponding author. Tel.: +1 856 524 1088.

E-mail address: [garrettmcbroad@gmail.com](mailto:garrettmcbroad@gmail.com) (G.M. Broad).

to frame outsiders' perceptions of the area, have mostly focused on the conflict, gang violence, and crime that have emerged when intergroup relations intersect with broader issues of poverty, stress, and large-scale economic disinvestment in the urban community. Headlines such as "Black-Brown Violence Continues in South LA" (*La Opinion*, 2007), "Are Black vs. Brown Race Tensions Driving Homicides?" (The Los Angeles Times, 2007) and "Defusing Black-Brown Tension" (*Hutchinson*, 2008) have become a mainstay of Los Angeles-area media. Local residents and community organizations have lamented that such negative storytelling dominates mediated depictions of their community, and that these depictions have real-world impacts on how residents and outsiders perceive everyday life in the neighborhoods of South LA (*Ball-Rokeach, Moran Hether, & Frank*, 2009; *Gonzalez & Moreno*, 2008; *New Voices*, 2010).

With that said, while Black-Brown relations in South Los Angeles – as well as in other global cities with comparable multiethnic demographic compositions – are often a topic of interpersonal and mediated discussions, not much empirical research has investigated the factors that encourage positive or negative intergroup relations between these groups. To address this research need, the current study draws from surveys of 862 African American and Latino residents of South LA. This work is guided by two distinct but complementary theoretical frameworks. The first, *Allport's* (1954) contact hypothesis, has been used extensively in research on intergroup relations. Second, we introduce variables derived from Communication Infrastructure Theory (*Ball-Rokeach, Kim, & Matei*, 2001) into the study of intergroup relations. We posit that community-level media and communication variables are useful in the assessment of factors that influence intergroup relations, as well as in the assessment of residents' perceptions of intergroup relations. On this latter point we are influenced by the work of *Sampson* (2012), who has demonstrated that collectively shaped perceptions within community contexts have enduring material consequences within those communities. Residents' perceptions of intergroup relations, then, are likely to affect the actual quality of present and future intergroup interactions.

This study responds to several of the calls made by *Pettigrew* (2008) in an article that outlined potential avenues for future intergroup contact research. The introduction of communication and media-related variables extends traditional work by placing intergroup contact in a broader social context. Further, while intergroup contact research is generally concerned with factors that lead to positive contact, this work explores some of the factors that might lead to negative evaluations and negative perceptions of intergroup relations. While the dataset employed in this work is specific to the community of South Los Angeles, the findings have implications for an increasing number of urban communities around the world that are experiencing a growth in population diversity. The focus on intergroup relations between two ethnic minority groups should be pertinent to researchers whose work is situated in a variety of pluralistic contexts.

### 1.1. Population diversity and contemporary community

South Los Angeles (alternatively South Central LA) is a representative case of a diverse community that has transformed under the forces of globalization and international migration. South LA is one of the most densely populated communities in Los Angeles, and over time has experienced both significant population growth and ethnic change. In the first half of the 20th century, the community was primarily made up of non-Hispanic White residents, along with a significant Japanese American population and enclaves of African American residents. During World War II, Japanese Americans were forcibly removed and placed into internment camps; upon their return, many left the South Los Angeles area for other sections of the city (*Cheng & Yang*, 1996). Alongside other factors, this departure made way for a broader influx of African American families. Over the course of the next few decades, the predominantly White community became home to the highest concentration of African Americans in Los Angeles County, at the same time as the White population receded (*Ong, Firestine, Pfeiffer, Poon, & Tran*, 2008). In the late-20th century, an influx of immigrants from Mexico and Central America once again transformed the ethnic makeup of the area. Between 1990 and 2000, one-quarter of the African American population moved out of South LA, while the Latino population expanded by almost a third (*Myers*, 2002). By the end of the first decade of the 21st century, Latinos accounted for approximately 62% of the South LA population (compared to around 47% countywide), while African Americans accounted for approximately 31% (compared to just 9% countywide) (*Ong et al.*, 2008; *Sanchez & Ito*, 2011).<sup>1</sup>

Such demographic changes are not unique to the community of South Los Angeles. According to the 2010 US Census, the state of California is now 37.6% Latino and 6.2% African American. It is one of four states in the United States with a population composed of less than 50% non-Hispanic White residents (*US Census*, 2011). Even as immigration to the US appears to be slowing, nationwide demographic changes can be expected to continue for the foreseeable future. According to a recent report from the Pew Research Center, the total US population will rise from 296 million in 2005 to 438 million in 2050, with 80% of this growth attributable to immigrants and their children. By 2050, around one in five Americans will be foreign born, surpassing previous immigrant proportions of the late 19th and early 20th century. Latinos are expected to reach 29% of the total US population by 2050, while the African American population will remain fairly constant at around 13%, and Asians will grow to approximately 9% of the nation's population (*Pasell & Cohn*, 2008).

Ethnic diversity is thus changing at the local, state and national levels in the United States, as urban and rural communities are experiencing ethnic transformation due to migration patterns among first, second and third-generation immigrants

<sup>1</sup> Throughout this paper, "Latinos" is used to refer to persons who are of Latin-American origin, while "African Americans" is used to refer to persons having origins in any of the Black racial groups of Africa.

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