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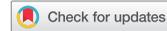
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Bursting bubbles: outcomes of an intergroup contact intervention within the context of a community based violence intervention program

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ABSTRACT

Intergroup contact theory has received much quantitative support. However few efforts have attempted to apply qualitative methodologies to understand the perceptions of individuals who experience these contacts. we conducted 19 interviews to explore the perceptions of stakeholders of a community-based fitness program whose goal was to increase intergroup contact among its stakeholders. Participants reflected on the program reducing their social isolation, increasing opportunities for engagement outside one's own group, and expanded world views.

Background

Racism and prejudice continue to be an enduring issue in U.S. society (Dominelli, 2018). Much of the prejudice between varying racial groups persists because of government-based sanctioning of housing segregation which kept American citizens from meaningful engagement across race (Imbroscio, 2020; Rothstein, 2017). Specifically, this segregation was targeted at keeping African Americans/Blacks from interacting with Whites and reinforced concentrations of Black poverty and White affluence (Howell, 2019; Johnson, 2008; Wilson, 1987). From a human service perspective, given the psychological impact of prejudice (Major & Vick, 2005), it is imperative that organizations actively integrate anti-racist practices both within their organizations (Ferguson, 2008; Nnawulezi et al., 2016) and throughout their provision of services (James, 1996; Santiago & Ivery, 2020). There are numerous ways organizations can engage in anti-racist work (Dominelli, 2018). One form of anti-racist work is increasing the level of intergroup contact with the goal of reducing prejudice and bias and increasing understanding (Allport, 1954), especially among Whites and minoritized populations in the United

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States. A key mechanism on which intergroup contact theory is based is the assumption that if members of different and often segregated groups come together, intergroup relations will improve.

Intergroup contact theory

Allport's (1954) formulation of intergroup contact theory was a coalescence of research that took place during the 1930s and 40s exploring the impact of intergroup exposure on individuals' attitudes toward different ethnic groups (Loader, 2015). A summary of that body of research suggested contact with Black Americans produced more positive racial attitudes among White Americans under specific conditions (T. F. Pettigrew, 1998). Using this research as a framework, Allport formulated a hypothesis arguing that intergroup contact only reduces prejudice in situations that meet four optimal conditions: equal group status within the contact situation, common goals, intergroup cooperation, and the support of authorities, law, or customs (Allport, 1954; Christ & Kauff, 2019). A meta-analysis of this body of work offered several conclusions regarding conditions that reduced prejudice through intergroup contact (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). First, intergroup contact can contribute meaningfully to reductions in prejudice across a broad range of groups and contexts. Second, although empirical studies that incorporated Allport's optimal conditions into their models reported higher effect sizes, Allport's conditions were not essential for intergroup contact to achieve positive outcomes. Overall, the body of literature unequivocally supports the idea that interventions seeking to reduce racial prejudice through intergroup contact are, in fact, effective.

Research exploring intergroup contact since Allport's (1954) work has been pervasive, however, it has tended to be quantitative, with laboratory studies garnering the highest value (Loader, 2015). A meta-analysis yielded 526 quantitative papers resulting in 713 independent samples between 1940 and 2000 alone (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). However, this overreliance on quantitative methods has limited our understanding of how intergroup contacts manifest in the real world and how the actors in these contacts perceive the interactions themselves (Dixon et al., 2005; Loader, 2015). Although the number of studies exploring intergroup contact with qualitative methods remains small, the few that have been conducted have shed light in how intergroup contact operates in everyday settings (Loader, 2015). These studies have focused on a variety of cultural contexts such as Muslims (Blackwood et al., 2013), the Maori and Pakeha of New Zealand (Fozdar, 2011), university students (Halualani, 2008), Arab and Jewish children in bilingual schools in Israel (Hughes, 2007), South Africans on beaches (Dixon & Durrheim, 2003), Catholic and Protestant children in Northern Ireland (Loader, 2015), and employees with disabilities (Novak et al., 2011). This study seeks to build on

this body of literature by presenting the results of a qualitative inquiry into the impact of an intergroup contact intervention within the context of a community-based gun violence program. The purpose of this study is to present the findings of qualitative inquiries among participants within the Inner-City Weightlifting program about their experiences with forming relationships with individuals of different racial and class backgrounds.

Program description

Inner City Weightlifting (ICW) is a nonprofit organization established in Boston, Massachusetts in 2010 (Malamut, 2013). The stated goal and purpose of ICW is to curb gun violence and ICW works toward this goal by extending opportunities for economic mobility and social inclusion to individuals who have engaged in gun violence and/or experienced incarceration. The organization helps these individuals achieve economic mobility by teaching them to become physical trainers, hence the moniker, ICW. Physical fitness is the main activity that facilitates the development of rapport between the organization and its students. When a potential student joins ICW, they matriculate through a four-stage process that includes pursuing their physical trainer certifications and forming relationships with their gym clients to create social capital.

ICW is a merging of two passions: fitness and social justice. While the track to becoming a physical trainer fulfills the fitness passion, the second passion of social justice is grounded in improving the plight of Black and Brown men from marginalized communities and eradicating racism, stigmatization, and prejudice through anti-racism work. This is manifested through the deliberate pairing of the students with their clients at Stage 3. To an observer, it appears that the intention of this match is for the benefit of the student. However, the real intention of the pairing according to the ICW staff is the expansion of the world view of the client and a reduction in their bias toward Black and Brown men specifically, and Black and Brown communities in general.

Participants and procedures

Seeking IRB approval and solidifying the planning for the study in terms of the design and instrumentation transpired during the Spring and Summer of 2018. Data collection for this study occurred across two groups of informants: students and their clients. ICW students were recruited remotely. Flyers targeting the students were posted around the ICW gym for students to be aware of the opportunity to engage in a semi-structured interview about their experience with the program. Those students who had e-mail addresses also received the flyer via e-mail. Additionally, word got around the gym that a researcher was coming to interview students who were willing to talk about

Table 1. # of interview participants by role and interview length.

Role	# of participants	Hours of Audio
Students	10	5 h 12 m (312 minutes)
Gym Clients	9	2 h 33 m (153 minutes)
Total	19	
Hours of audio		7 h 45 m

their experience with ICW. If the ICW staff did not identify a prospective individual respondent as a student, they would have been excluded from the potential pool of students eligible to be interviewed. The recruitment solicitation of gym clients to participate in focus group discussions took place through e-mail. All gym clients had a functional e-mail account that eliminated the need for phone calls and alternative forms of recruitment. A separate e-mail solicitation was created for the gym clients which an ICW staff member distributed through the client listserv. Follow-up correspondence regarding the study was directed to me or a research assistant via e-mail. Focus groups were conducted in a closed office at the Harvard Square site. Semi-structured interviews occurred in an available room/office at either the Harvard or Dorchester program sites.

The focus group discussion guide was comprised of 6–8 questions that focused on client experiences with their trainers and how their views/perspectives of Black and Hispanic men from marginalized neighborhoods may have changed as a result of their experience with ICW. The semi-structured interview guide for the trainers included 12 questions that focused on their history, how they came to join ICW, and their mentorship experiences. We proceeded to plan logistically for scheduling the in-person semi-structured interviews and focus groups. Students were the only interview participants who received a stipend for their time.

In total, the study collected data from 19 individuals for a total of 7 hours and 45 minutes of audio recorded content. Table 1 reveals that there were 10 student semi-structured interviews, and 2 focus groups that consisted of 9 clients. The age range for the nine gym clients shown in Table 2 was between 29 and 80 with a mean age of 47. Most of the gym clients who participated in the focus group were female. All but two of the gym clients reported graduate

Table 2. Select demographics of gym clients.

Name	Age	Gender	Occupation	Education
Gym Client A	80	F	Investment Analyst (R)	MBA
Gym Client B	54	M	Product Manager in Hi – Tech field	Bachelors
Gym Client C	58	F	Gerentologist	Masters
Gym Client D	29	F	Social Worker	Masters
Gym Client E	51	F	Life Coach	JD
Gym Client F	29	F	Systems Engineer	Bachelors
Gym Client G	61	F	Lawyer	JD
Gym Client H	31	M	Software Engineer	Doctorate
Gym Client I	31	F	Director Bio-tech company	Masters

Table 3. Select demographics of the student group (n = 10).

Name	Age	Race
Student 1	21	AA
Student 2	26	AA
Student 3	25	AA
Student 4	26	AA
Student 5	23	His
Student 6	33	AA
Student 7	30	His
Student 8	31	His
Student 9	34	His
Student 10	31	AA

level degrees and they held a variety of occupations. Data on the students are presented in Table 3. Student participants in the study were 28 years old on, average, and six self-identified as African American/Black and 4 self-identified as Hispanic.

Analysis

The data for this study involved semi-structured interviews with the students and focus groups with the gym clients with whom the students were matched. After transcription, all interviews were read independently and openly coded, consistent with a grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1999). After all transcripts were read and coded independently, the authors met to reconcile the free codes and arrive at agreement on a coding scheme. A second read through of all transcripts was conducted using the agreed upon coding scheme. The research team regrouped to discuss and reconcile the themes that emerged repeatedly from the coding scheme. After team deliberations, three themes emerged from these interviews associated with the research questions of this paper: (1) community building; (2) enhancement of social networks; and (3) beyond training/toward understanding. In the discussion of the generated themes, pseudonyms are used instead of actual names.

Results

Community building

ICW seeks institutional change through (1) providing opportunities to young men from communities plagued by gun violence with case management and career opportunities, and (2) challenging racial and class stereotypes through the purposeful matching of students with physical fitness clients from the opposite socioeconomic background with the goal of expanding the network of both clients and students. Inherent in the mission is the idea of community building between individuals who otherwise would not have had the opportunity to meet each other. Mario, who has been a trainer at ICW for just under

ten years, stated when they went to events: "I realized that – I mean he's [ICW staff] putting us in a position where we're meeting people we would never meet otherwise." Mario went on to say:

> How I explain it straight up is just I met White people that I never even would meet before. Rich White people. You know what I'm saying? That's it. You know what I mean? I felt like—it wasn't just White people. It was a bunch of people, you know, but it was the majority of White people. You know what I'm saying? I'm like, "Damn, this is like I would never meet these people." I felt like this could be connections to other things. You know what I mean? I felt like I could network properly if I went this avenue, so I stuck with it. You know what I mean?

Here, Mario is expressing his perceived recognition of the ICW staff trying to improve his social network and social capital by putting him in a position to develop relationships with individuals he never thought he would have an opportunity to do so otherwise. Another trainer Donald expressed a similar sentiment:

> Then I was just like, 'Al'ight, but what am I doin' while I'm here? Am I just gonna work out?' That's when we started meetin' these people from these affluent backgrounds … Like I said, that bridging them back out because relationships—that shit is big, yo. To me anyway, 'cause there are some influential people here and they rub shoulders with other influential people, and if you can just plant a seed over there that yo, we're not that bad. We al'ight over here. Some of us might need—the way this shit's designed, we might need a little help to come up out this shit because this was by design?

Here, Donald invokes the concept of "bridging." He understands the opportunity he has to develop relationships with individuals he views not only as affluent but as influential. Donald's comment also reflected his thoughts of not wanting to be viewed from the stigma of the "Black criminal stereotype" (Welch, 2007) which he views as so pervasive.

While the expressed need for an expansion of social capital and a social network is evident among the students, this same sentiment was also expressed among the clients, albeit, for different reasons. Carole expressed her feelings about segregation as a barrier to community building in this way:

> I feel like my ability or my opportunities to interact with people from different places, different backgrounds is getting more and more limited as the dynamic in this country changes, and we really don't interact a lot. I think that what—we were just talking about this with DC, right? DC with the changing of the neighborhood. Where you would have a neighborhood before that was multi-generational, and diverse, and multi-socioeconomical, we don't have that anymore. We have rich people; we have poor people. We have Black people; we have White people.

Carole described her ability to experience a diverse group of people as being constrained by the bifurcation of society into the haves and have nots. One Client, George, stated, "this is where I have exposure to people who are not in the bubble of life that I'm in," which also suggests a separation of sort.

A client named Shawn made this comment when asked the same question:

> . . . one thing I've been struggling with in Boston is that it is so segregated . . . It made me realize just how white Boston is, and I think the thing I've been missing is: Where is a community of people who are just coming from different experiences than myself?

Both the students and the clients experienced a sense of isolation and segregation in their daily lives that made it unlikely they would have the opportunity to interact and meet people of a races and class different from their own outside of the gym. ICW's facilitation of the gym space allows for these unlikely relationships to form and approximates a form of community building based on reliance, working together on concrete fitness tasks and creating human, family, and social capital that provides a base for a new type of community.

Enhancement of social networks

The social networks of both the students and the clients expanded because of their involvement with ICW. These relationships with their origin in the gym were also robust outside of the gym. One of the trainers, Hassan, describes his experience with receiving support while being incarcerated:

> I end up goin' to prison for three years. But I was the first to train a real client. Her name was [Sabrina] . . . She helped me down on my situation, too, when I was in jail for the whole three years, come and visit me, write me, send me money, all of that. You know what I mean?

Hassan and the client are still connected and it's been over ten years since they first met. Mario had a similar experience as Hassan with being supported throughout his incarceration. After Mario returned home from prison and started working again at ICW, he began forming relationships with his clients that expanded beyond the gym:

> Some of them give me jobs. Like one dude, I was down and out, one of my clients, he said his mom needed help moving, and gave his mom my number, and the mom called me, and I helped her move. You know what I mean? It's just networking. It's very big. You need that [in] life. I really don't have nobody to help me like that.

While the students expanded their network through building rapport with their clients, the clients expanded their network through the incorporation of the Black and Hispanic students into theirs. George expands on this below:

> What I found is that when I started working with the gentleman here by the name of [Jeffrey], and we found a lot—I wasn't expecting to dive into it, but we found a lot of common ground areas such as being parents, relationships, outlook, sports, maybe music. I thought I had—really, then that benefit for me is not only am I getting better physically, but also from my relationship with people, people of color.

George saw value in including a formerly incarcerated Hispanic male into his network and perceived it as value added. Carole refers to an incident where she felt supported by a trainer in her network:

> I do know, I was in a grocery store once, Star, in Lower Mills. I was in line, and one of the guys from the gym was there. There was this Black woman who was in back of me. She was giving me shit over something. It was ridiculous. Like in a bad way. She was just being a jerk to me. He came over, and he gave me this big hug. Her mouth dropped. Like, you're friends with this guy from the hood? It just completely changed the dynamics. That was a great moment for me, because—and I think it was a great moment for him, because I felt like oh my god, this is my friend. He felt like I'm her friend, I'm gonna stick up for her.

Here, Carole describes how her relationship with one of the ICW trainers afforded her an amount of social and cultural capital that legitimized her and helped her defuse a tense situation in which the perpetrator adjusted their stance toward her because of that legitimization. The quotes offered by both the clients and students above suggest that the expansion of the network was beneficial to both parties. Additionally, the activities that undergirded the expansion of the networks did not take place in the gym. Two of the trainers described support from clients while incarcerated and one of the clients experienced the support of one of the trainers sporadically in a grocery store. This demonstrates that although the initiation of the relationship begins in the gym, the salience of the relationship reaches well beyond it.

Beyond training/toward understanding

ICW is attempting to play a role in eradicating racism by creating lasting bonds between

individuals who would not have done so under ordinary circumstances. This bond between students and clients is precisely what ICWs approach is suggesting leads to the critical shift in perspectives. Here, Donald gives his perspective on his changing views on class: "I don't think my perspective on race changed. My perspective on rich White people changed." Although it is not clear what Donald's views were about rich White people before ICW, it appears to have changed for the better.

Hassan also expresses his appreciation for his exposure to the world and for the program being instrumental in changing his life. He states, "what I say about that is because [Steven], he's in the citizen world and at the same time opened my eyes about changin' my life, you know what I mean, gettin' my GED, movin' on the right path." Hassan's use of the term "citizen world" refers to the mainstream formal economy which he distinguishes from the informal underground economy that he is well familiar with. His experiences with ICW helped change his perspective on life which led him to improve his education as well as his access to various forms of capital.

Another trainer, Jesus, who has been a trainer for ICW about 9 years spoke of his transition under one of the staff:

> I think he introduced me to a whole different world outside the streets. I remember being up on the top of the floor, just some tall buildings up in downtown. You lookin' out the windows, the views. It was stuff like that that opened my eyes. Then when he won an award for some shit … he told me, he's like, "Yo, go get your passport." I'm like, "Motherfucker, how do I do that?" He helped me get my passport, we flew into Puerto Rico, and then after that we did a day in … It just amazed me. I'm from a whole different world. I'm from the city projects, the shootings, the drugs, the crack heads around, the broken families … When I seen that, that shit was like, "Wow, this is crazy, man.

From the client perspective, Laura, who describes herself as a middle-aged, White women from a well-educated family stated that her whole perspective of the criminal justice system changed because of her interaction with ICW.

> I have found my perception of how the justice system works, or doesn't work, has completely changed from what I thought it was, or what I learned it was growing up. I don't think it's a slam dunk anymore. I think there's always way more to the story. I actually happen to know somebody who had been arrested, and he's in this case, and they're not going to hear the case for a couple of years. Now I know, it's a terrible way to have to live your life, waiting. Being free, but not being free. Going out, waiting to try to carve out a life, and figuring out that it's just much more difficult, and then the attitude of some of the cops.

While Laura's view of the criminal justice system was impacted, another client Michelle explained how her experience with ICW has led her to begin to shift how she views Black men:

> I think, too, I look at people that I might've used to be afraid of, like on the bus or in the train, as human beings a little bit more. I think, as females, you're automatically pretty scared of all men *[laughter]* for a lot of reasons. It's just kind of ingrained in you but coming here and learning that they're not all out to get you, but particularly, big Black men aren't necessarily all out to get you, I think has been a pretty big perspective shift. I try to think more of, you know, what? They might look a little scary, but so does Angel sometimes. *[Laughter]* He is actually really gentle at heart, and just trying to be open to that, and that they're probably not the evil people that the world wants to make you think that they are.

Lastly, Roslyn shares the shift in her perspective because of attending ICW:

> I had a lot of things to overcome in a sense, or to confront all these past things that were not true, but I inherited. I had to, first of all, recognize I had them. Then, what was I gonna do about them? The other thing that I found is that I have viewed, in my actions towards Black people, I've changed. Because I'm no longer afraid of them. I see the good part of them. I've experienced the good part. Now, when go around or whatever someone holds the door a little bit for me, I am positive that I'm going to say thank you. I do anyhow, but especially if it's a Black person. Because I think, maybe I'm wrong, but I

think that Black people are not accustomed to expecting this type of courtesy or recognition from a lot of White people. I just figure I'm gonna be sure that I act courteously towards these people.

Discussion

Intergroup theory suggests that contact with minoritized individuals produces more positive racial attitudes among White Americans under certain conditions. In order to better understand how intergroup contexts manifest in the real world and how the individuals involved in such contacts perceive the interactions themselves, qualitative interviews were conducted with program participants of a community-based violence intervention program. Overall, the findings suggest that the intergroup contact facilitated by ICW resulted in a shift in the worldview and attitudes of the clients. For example, some clients stated that they hold a more critical view of the criminal justice system after hearing about the experiences of some students and some have promised to reach out to more Black people now that they no longer see them as a threat. Additionally, the data suggest that the shift in attitudes of the clients also extended in some cases to individuals beyond the students themselves thus having a positive impact on how the clients viewed other minoritized individuals outside of the students at-large. Further, the shift in attitudes of the students included shifts in views around race and class as well as behavior changes that included desistance of crime. These findings suggest that the anti-racist efforts of the organization were effective in helping shift the views and behaviors of both parties. In addition to perspective shifting, contact between the students and clients resulted in community building and social network enhancement. Within the context of these three themes all four of Allport's (1954) conditions are visible within ICWs approach.

First, the condition of "common goals" is manifested through the emphasis on the activity of fitness. As a result, the relationships between the students and clients revolve around the client's fitness goals for which the student is invested. Second, the condition of intergroup cooperation without competition is inherent through the student-client relationship in the gym and the effort of both parties to further the relationship outside the fitness context and push the boundaries around stereotypes. Both students and clients want each other to succeed. Third, because this relationship is initiated under the sanctioning of the ICW organization, the norms under which the trainer-client relationship develops is established and supported by the authority of the program staff which serve as a form of structural support and encouragement. Lastly, Allport argues that it is important for "equal group status" to precede reduction in prejudice. While it can be argued that the student and clients were not of equal status socio-economically or in regard to fitness knowledge, these

are not the characteristics in which equality was achieved. Rather, it was achieved with the willingness of both parties to show up, be present and interact with each other with the goal of learning about each other. Both the clients and students are fully aware of the purpose of ICW which is to bring people together. Prejudice reduction requires an active, goal-oriented effort that leads to some sort of frequent sustained contact (T. F. Pettigrew, 1998). Thus, equality was achieved in their openness to each other and their willingness to be vulnerable to forming a relationship with someone that they otherwise would not have interacted with outside of the ICW context.

In a city characterized by social isolation and segregation, ICW goes beyond lip service by serving as a small oasis for individuals to interact and challenge biases and preconceived notions. ICWS approach address two of the 12 Grand Challenges of Social Work. It addresses smart decarceration through their reputation of working with students during and post- incarceration and it reduces extreme economic inequality by providing employment training, licensure and opportunities to a demographic that traditionally has a difficult time obtaining and sustaining employment.

Several lessons can be drawn from ICW for programs seeking to mirror these results. First, while the focus of ICW is on race relations, a program like this can be replicated for other issues that divide people, such as sexuality, politics, or religion. The main point is that there needs to be an activity that requires the actors to meet at some level of frequency; a sort of social arrangement that brings people together and reduces isolation. Second, organizations must be explicit in its marketing materials that it seeks to deliberately bring people together around an activity toward a goal or ideal. ICW makes clear on their website that it is not just a gym, but a place where people gain unique insight through personal connection thereby making the organization's goals clear to all participants. Third, the ICW staff engage in nudging (Hummel & Maedche, 2019) to methodically and strategically encourage both the clients and the students to explore interests outside of the gym and outside of fitness. Although the evidence around nudging is mixed, it is precisely this sort of encouragement that is thought to make the difference. Lastly, it has been suggested that all four of Allport's conditions are not essential for reducing prejudice and that these conditions are merely parts of a package that facilitate the effect of bias reduction (T.F. Pettigrew, 2008). Although all four conditions were present in this study, organizations need not wait for the condition to be present to implement their approach. These lessons can provide the basis for meaningful activities geared toward promoting cross race and cross class engagement.

This study compliments a larger body of qualitative work exploring the impact of intergroup contact theory and sheds some light on what actually goes on during the contact from the perspective of the actors themselves. In spite of this contribution, the study has its limitations. First, the findings from

this study are derived from one program. The results and outcomes of this program cannot be extrapolated or hypothesized to operate similarly across other programs. Future qualitative research on the outcomes of intergroup contact theory should explore whether these themes emerge as salient in other contexts that may have opportunities to bring individuals of different racial backgrounds together such as afterschool programs and undergraduate college programs. Additionally, the self-selection of both the students and the clients for the interviews may have influenced the results. All clients do not engage in activities outside the gym with the students and all students do not get along perfectly with all clients, suggesting that self-selection may have introduced some bias by relying on program participants who possessed an overly positive outlook on the program. Future research would benefit from including the voices of those program participants who no longer frequent the gym as well as those who choose not to volunteer for such studies. A lack of these voices prevents an understanding of reasons for nonparticipation or reluctance to participate among clients.

In spite of these limitations, this study contributes to a growing body of qualitative work that seeks to explore the experiences of individuals engaged in relationships and programs with the goal of bias reduction. During this charged period in U.S. history fueled by divisive issues such as voting rights, critical race theory, and police use of force, it is incumbent among social service organizations that they begin to explore ways to incorporate anti-racist messaging and strategies into their approaches. With such a range of issues driving race to the forefront of political and social discourse, ICW provides one example of an initiative bursting the bubble of racism that currently grips our society.

Disclosure statement

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