

# Cross-Group Friends and Feeling Empowered in Intergroup Contact Programs: Mediating Pathways and Practical Strategies for Divided Societies

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**Supplementary Materials:** Code, Materials [see [Index of Supplementary Materials](#)]



## Abstract

Structured intergroup programs provide a unique opportunity for youth in divided societies to come together and engage in shared activities. This research examines what makes such programs effective, drawing on cross-sectional survey findings from youth participants ( $N = 431$ ) in an initiative that embeds intergroup contact within a sports program facilitated by the same global organization across Northern Ireland, Cyprus, Israel, and South Africa. Our hypotheses focus on the pivotal roles of cross-group friendships and empowerment in shaping intergroup contact intentions, ingroup-oriented reconciliation efforts, and self-efficacy development – outcomes crucial for bridging communities in divided societies. Using structural equation modeling, we find that program duration directly and indirectly predicts self-efficacy, whereas it predicts intergroup contact intentions and reconciliation efforts only indirectly through cross-group friendships and empowerment. Combining survey results with qualitative data, this paper highlights two important mechanisms for the success of structured intergroup contact programs and offers practical strategies for fostering them.

## Keywords

intergroup contact, divided societies, post-conflict, sports, youth



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When intergroup violence has ceased, intergroup relations are often deeply disrupted, sometimes for generations to come. At the elite level, the negative orientation toward other groups and perverse incentives – oftentimes institutionalized – to divide and conquer make peacebuilding more challenging (Hultman & Mousa, 2025). Accordingly, practical solutions for improving intergroup attitudes at the citizen level play a crucial role in post-conflict societies. Recognizing this, donors invest large amounts of money into grassroots peace-building efforts, hoping that they will accomplish the desired goal of improving relations between people in society (Ditlmann et al., 2017). Many organizations rely on intergroup contact to address intergroup relations at the grassroots level. Yet, despite extensive research on intergroup contact, we know little about how structured intergroup contact programs can succeed during or after violent conflict.

The current research presents results from a cross-sectional survey of youth in four different countries with relatively recent histories of large-scale intergroup violence. Youth are important in post-conflict contexts, as they are both vulnerable to the long-term effects of conflict and uniquely positioned to shape future intergroup relations. All participants were enrolled, for varying lengths of time, in the same intergroup contact and sports program. Our main aim is to illuminate the pathways through which time in the program shapes positive outcomes. Drawing on prior research from societies at peace (Davies et al., 2011; Hässler et al., 2022), we hypothesize that cross-group friendships and feelings of empowerment by the outgroup mediate the relationship between time in program and important intergroup, intragroup, and individual outcomes. We also examine whether time in program is directly associated with these outcomes. Using cross-sectional data from four countries, we test these pathways using structural equation modeling.

Going beyond past research on cross-group friendship and feelings of empowerment, we focus on structured intergroup programs in conflict-affected settings – contexts where intergroup violence is ongoing or occurred within the past several decades, remaining within living memory and leaving enduring institutional, social, and geographic effects. In such settings, everyday intergroup contact is less frequent, and intergroup contact expectations tend to be negative due to structural barriers, security threats, and political polarization (Albzour et al., 2023; Dixon et al., 2020). These conditions, combined with our focus on a real-world program, make this a valuable context for examining how cross-group friendships and feelings of empowerment emerge as mechanisms – and why they matter – within structured intergroup contact programs. Moreover, while previous research has linked these mechanisms separately to favorable intergroup outcomes (Davies et al., 2011; Hässler et al., 2022), we investigate how intergroup programs can activate these pathways in tandem, even in post-conflict societies, and explore the benefits they yield not only across intergroup, but also within intragroup and personal domains. By focusing on the channels through which intergroup contact operates in practice, we

offer a framework for understanding why some intergroup contact programs in the field appear to succeed (Grady et al., 2023) while others fall short (Mousa, 2020).

In addition, we provide unique qualitative insights into the program factors that foster these mechanisms: the use of sports as an intergroup contact tool, active and multifaceted authority support, and inclusive and egalitarian organizational norms. By identifying specific program elements that support these processes, our qualitative findings bridge theory and practice, offering concrete guidance for designing intergroup contact interventions in divided societies. Finally, our focus on an important yet understudied group – youth participants in structured intergroup programs in divided societies – adds external validity to the intergroup contact literature by examining its relevance in settings where contact is more challenging and its success less assured.

## Intergroup Contact in Divided Societies

The intergroup contact hypothesis posits that as people get to know members of an outgroup, they will reduce their prejudice towards the entire outgroup (Allport, 1954). A seminal meta-analysis found that intergroup contact, especially under conditions identified by Allport (1954), is reliably associated with reduced prejudice (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). This relationship is supported by subsequent reviews (Lemmer & Wagner, 2015; Paluck et al., 2019). Research in divided societies similarly finds a positive association between intergroup contact and improved outcomes, including reduced prejudice and anxiety, and increased openness to reconciliation (Hewstone et al., 2006), in contexts such as Israel (Faibish et al., 2023), Cyprus (Asimovic et al., 2023), South Africa (Fourie et al., 2022), and Northern Ireland (Reimer et al., 2022). More recent work, however, reassesses expectations about the magnitude of effects (Lowe, 2025), and highlights the need to better understand what constitutes effective intergroup contact in real-world settings.

Intergroup contact programs organized around shared interests, often facilitated by NGOs, are among the few opportunities that bring people from different groups together. These programs respond to a key challenge in divided societies: the numerous barriers to intergroup contact. Such barriers may include formal physical segregation, e.g. the checkpoints between the West Bank and Israel or the UN-patrolled buffer zone in Cyprus. But even in the absence of structural divisions, individuals may still choose to remain socially or spatially segregated (Dixon et al., 2020; McKeown et al., 2012). In these programs, volunteers meet regularly with members of the other group in a structured setting. Joining an intergroup contact program likely constitutes a major intergroup contact event (Shulman et al., 2025), as it may be the first time young participants encounter the outgroup in a social setting. Once enrolled, positive intergroup contact experiences are likely to accumulate over time. Initially, participants may remain within their own groups but gradually open themselves up to more meaningful engagement with the outgroup.

Unlike intergroup dialogue programs that focus on discussing the conflict (Nagda et al., 2018), intergroup contact programs often incorporate the encounter into appealing social settings. These programs typically follow a co-existence or joint projects model, which prioritizes shared experiences and highlights commonalities, rather than adopting the confrontational approach that often underlies intergroup dialogue programs (Maoz, 2011). Joint activities can include volunteering, arts or theater (Feuchte et al., 2020), with sports being particularly common (Kidd, 2008) due to its broad appeal and added physical and mental benefits. Despite their popularity, relatively little research within the broad field of intergroup contact research comes from such programs, and the existing evidence paints a mixed picture (Asimovic et al., 2024; Galily et al., 2013; Grady et al., 2023; Lowe, 2021; Mousa, 2020; Zhou & Lyall, 2025). Although these studies document varied outcomes, they generally do not examine the underlying mechanisms, leaving unanswered why certain interventions succeed while others fail. The current research moves beyond asking whether intergroup contact-based interventions are effective to instead examine *how* and *why* they work, thus advancing research on field interventions.

## The Importance of Cross-Group Friendships and Feeling Empowered

Simply bringing people together does not guarantee positive intergroup contact; in fact, exposure can worsen relations when the experience is negative (Enos, 2017). In divided societies with a history of group-based conflict, the quality of contact appears especially important: in fact, high-quality contact may be the only form capable of producing meaningful improvements in intergroup attitudes (McKeown & Psaltis, 2017). This underscores the need to better understand what constitutes meaningful engagement within structured intergroup programs, and the conditions under which it emerges. One form of meaningful engagement within structured intergroup programs is the formation of cross-group friendships, widely regarded as high-quality intergroup contact. The association between cross-group friendships and reduced prejudice is especially strong (Davies et al., 2011; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006) and, longitudinally, having more cross-group friends in elementary schools predicts lower racial bias two years later (Gaias et al., 2018). Friendships seem to be particularly effective because they reduce intergroup anxiety (Page-Gould et al., 2008) and promote intergroup empathy through self-disclosure (Turner et al., 2007). In divided societies, where many institutions are segregated and relations are particularly strained, cross-group friendships are rare. When they do form through intergroup programs, they can be especially meaningful and potentially drive changes that extend beyond the immediate context of the program.

While friendships clearly matter for engagement with the outgroup, another type of experience may matter equally or more: feeling empowered by the outgroup. Intergroup contact experiences where individuals feel that they are respected for their group's agency and competence have been referred to as empowering contact (Hässler et al., 2021).

Empowering contact was first documented and is primarily studied among members of minoritized groups, where it is positively associated with the motivation to strive for social change within one's ingroup (Hässler et al., 2021). Some evidence suggests that it may be relevant for everyone (Hässler et al., 2022), and this may be especially true in divided societies where there is some experience of victimization and submission on all sides (SimanTov-Nachlieli & Shnabel, 2014). The experience of victimization creates a need for empowerment, and if this need is fulfilled by an outgroup partner, it increases people's psychological readiness for intergroup reconciliation (Shnabel et al., 2009).

Structured programs may be the only setting in divided societies where the conditions for cross-group friendships and empowering intergroup contact are present. However, it remains unclear whether and how such programs succeed in ensuring that members of all groups form meaningful connections and feel empowered, especially given that this is often not the case in the broader social context. Our survey examines the role of cross-group friendships and feeling empowered as potential channels through which these programs achieve their impact. Building on these findings, we use expert interviews to explore how programs foster cross-group friendships and empowerment.

## Important Outcomes in Divided Societies

Scholarship on intergroup contact mostly focuses on between-group processes, such as prejudice or the intention for future intergroup interactions (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). Given past research, our first hypothesis (H1) states that forming cross-group friendships and feeling empowered by the outgroup within a structured intergroup program will be associated with increased intergroup contact intentions. In addition to their focus on between-group processes, structured programs often include an additional focus on within-community transformation (Ditlmann et al., 2017). Within-community transformation can take many forms, including ingroup policing (Ditlmann & Samii, 2016) or in-group based advocacy (Dixon et al., 2020). Indeed, engaging ingroup members in difficult conversations holds significant promise in divided societies. By sharing counter-normative information about the outgroup with their ingroup, program participants can "de-freeze" conflict-supporting beliefs of their community members (Hameiri et al., 2014). This can help disrupt the conflict-escalation spiral, paving the way for conflict resolution and eventual reconciliation. We measure the extent to which participants intend to prepare their communities for reconciliation through constructive dialogue. Thus, our second hypothesis (H2) states that forming cross-group friendships and feeling empowered by the outgroup within a structured intergroup program will be associated with an increased intention to prepare the ingroup for reconciliation.

Recognizing the challenging roles participants are expected to play within their societies, structured intergroup contact programs in divided societies often emphasize personal development. An important psychological resource for youth engaging in reconciliation efforts – both with the outgroup and within the ingroup – is self-efficacy.

Self-efficacy, the belief in one's ability to successfully accomplish tasks and achieve goals has recently been identified as a key predictor of intergroup contact intentions (Bagci et al., 2023). Thus, our third hypothesis (H3) states that making cross-group friends and feeling empowered by the outgroup in a structured intergroup contact program will foster the belief in one's ability to navigate difficult social situations outside of the program. This, in turn, can increase the likelihood that participants will engage in – rather than avoid – difficult situations in the future, thereby preparing them for further intergroup contact and successful dialogue within their own communities.

## The Present Study

We collaborate with an international organization that implements structured intergroup contact programs in divided societies. The program facilitates intergroup contact mainly through sport complemented by other social activities (e.g., occasional joint retreats where the kids spend a weekend together). Sport is well-suited as a vehicle for intergroup contact because Allport (1954)'s optimal conditions are usually met: youths have to cooperate to reach a common goal, they have equal status as players in the game, and important authorities, such as coaches and program leaders, approve of the encounter. Leading with quality sports training also allows the program to appeal to a broad range of potential participants, who are interested in playing sports but maybe less inclined to engage with the outgroup.

While specific activities and schedules vary by location and age (more in Appendix A), the program generally includes three components. First, integrated practice and game sessions are central across all sites, with frequency depending on participant age and local factors such as security concerns. For example, in Israel, children aged 10–12 meet outgroup teams for joint practices with mixed teams about once a month. In Northern Ireland, where security is less of a concern and schools are often supportive, many children participate in weekly mixed training during or after school. Second, participants engage in segregated practice and peace education with their ingroup. The peace education component emphasizes shared humanity and helps children develop empathy and perspective-taking through sports-based exercises. An emphasis on commonalities aligns with the joint projects model in intergroup contact programs (Maoz, 2011); we return to strengths and limitations of this approach in the discussion. Third, the program cultivates psychological resources such as self-efficacy and conflict resolution skills throughout its activities. For example, successfully playing on a mixed team can foster a sense of mastery (Bandura, 1997), strengthening participants' confidence in engaging with the outgroup. For older participants, formal leadership development components, which we refer to here as "league", prepare them to become coaches, take on organizational roles, or act as community peacemakers. While implementation varies by site, integrated training remains the program's core, with peace education preparing participants for

contact and leadership training helping them apply what they have learned within their communities.

## Research Context

The research for this paper was conducted in four countries with a relatively recent history of large-scale or organized intergroup violence. Our conceptualization of divided societies largely follows [Guelke's \(2012\)](#) definition, where “conflict exists along a well-entrenched fault line that is recurrent and endemic and that contains the potential for violence between the segments,” and where “the threat of political violence continually looms large in the concerns of its citizens.” The countries in our study – Northern Ireland, Cyprus, South Africa, and Israel – each have their own complex intergroup relations and distinctive historical contexts (described in detail in [Appendix B](#)). They differ in conflict salience, including the duration of the conflict, the recency of major violence, and the degree of structural barriers between groups. Despite these differences, the sites share certain similarities: all have suffered significant group-based violence within the past century, leaving behind enduring legacies and, in some cases, recurrent outbreaks of violence.

They are also characterized by pronounced segregation between main groups. This segregation manifests in various forms, from the tangible presence of checkpoints in Cyprus and Israel or peace walls in Northern Ireland to the less visible but deeply entrenched economic and social divides in South Africa. Participants in our programs navigate these divisions in their everyday lives, which are largely separated from those of the outgroup, and have little opportunities for high quality encounters with the outgroup outside of the program. The conflict dynamics within divided societies change frequently. This quantitative data was collected in 2022, so our results and descriptions are reflective of the events up to that date, whereas the qualitative data was collected in 2024.

## Method

### Participants and Procedure

As part of their Monitoring and Evaluation strategy, our partner organization recruited a sample of 431<sup>1</sup> youth participants who took part in intergroup programs across Cyprus, Israel, Northern Ireland, and South Africa (see [Table 1](#)). Local coaches that followed the encouragement of each site's Monitoring and Evaluation staff member collected the

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1) Data were collected from 449 participants but 19 were excluded because they had over 90% missing values as answers.

survey data during regularly scheduled practices in the second half of 2022, processed it and later shared it with the first author. All participants in the sample are below the age of twenty, with the mean age of 13.68 ( $SD = 2.42$ ). Gender distribution was largely proportionate across countries, with the exception of Israel. There, respondents are predominantly female, mirroring the broader composition of the program, which primarily targets girls in the Middle East. While the overall sample included a mix of sociopolitical minority and majority group members, the distribution varied across countries. In South Africa and Cyprus, the sample was disproportionately composed of sociopolitical minority participants, largely reflecting the program's broader composition in those contexts.

**Table 1***Summary Statistics*

Country	Age	Age (Min-Max)	Years in Program	Years in Program (Min-Max)	Female (%)	Majority (%)	Effective N
Whole Sample	13.68 ( $SD = 2.42$ )	8-19	2.35 ( $SD = 2.63$ )	0-12	52	19.501	431
Cyprus	13.3 ( $SD = 1.74$ )	9-17	2.19 ( $SD = 2.31$ )	0-10	44	26.168	107
Israel	11.8 ( $SD = 1.87$ )	8-16	2.16 ( $SD = 1.54$ )	0.5-6	82	46.970	54
Northern Ireland	15.4 ( $SD = 2.13$ )	9-18	4.96 ( $SD = 3.49$ )	0-11	54	63.793	59
South Africa	14.00 ( $SD = 2.53$ )	10-19	1.76 ( $SD = 2.28$ )	0-12	46	2.857	211

*Note.* Mean, Standard Deviation ( $SD$ ), and Effective Sample Size ( $N$ ). Majority is a binary indicator capturing the sociopolitical majority in each country: in Northern Ireland, Protestants are coded as 1; in South Africa, those identifying as White; in Israel, Jewish respondents; and in Cyprus, Greek Cypriots. Female is coded as 2, male as 1.

All questionnaires were translated into local languages by local teams, with team leaders consulted to ensure contextual accuracy. Most participants completed the survey electronically, with the exception of a small subset who did not have access to a device or reliable Wi-Fi connection and therefore completed the survey in person. The organization secured parental consent for program activities at the start of the year and informed consent from youth participants at the beginning of the surveys. The Hertie School Ethics Committee approved the research under the number 20231204-82.

## Measures

We describe the three dependent variables and two mediators in [Table 2](#) ([Appendix C](#) details the coding of the variables; [Appendix D](#) full survey questions).

**Table 2**

*Summary of Main Dependent Variables (Social Distance, Reconciliation Intentions, Efficacy) and Mediators (Cross-Group Friendships, Empowerment by Outgroup)*

Measure	Items
<i>Social Distance</i>	Willingness to (1) get to know, (2) chat with, (3) have as classmates, (4) live on the same street as, (5) be friends with, or (6) invite home someone from another community. 5-point scale; Cronbach's $\alpha = .90$ .
<i>Reconciliation Intentions</i>	Likelihood to (1) be respectful in disagreement, (2) share outgroup perspectives, and (3) advocate for them when speaking to others outside the program. 5-point scale; Cronbach's $\alpha = .83$ .
<i>Efficacy</i>	Confidence in the ability to (1) talk with unfamiliar people; (2) work in teams; (3) resolve conflict; (4) speak up in disagreement; (5) resist unfair treatment; (6) push back against unreasonable requests; and (7) discuss intergroup dynamics. 5-point scale; Cronbach's $\alpha = .88$ .
<i>Cross-Group Friendships</i>	Number of friends made from other communities in the program (4-point scale: 0 = no friends, 1 = 1-2 friends, 2 = 3-7 friends, 3 = 7+ friends).
<i>Empowerment by Outgroup</i>	Whether participants from other communities (1) listen to the respondent; (2) listen to their community; (3) see them as capable; (4) see their community as capable. 5-point scale; Cronbach's $\alpha = .84$ .

## Analysis

Our analysis examines how time spent in the program shapes participants' social distance, ingroup-oriented reconciliation intentions, and self-efficacy. We use structural equation modeling (SEM) to estimate associations between self-reported years in the program as our main predictor, representing opportunities for outgroup interaction, and each outcome, modeled as a latent variable to enhance measurement precision. While longer participation does not guarantee more or better-quality contact, it increases the likelihood of such experiences. SEM also enables us to assess theorized mediating mechanisms, namely cross-group friendship and empowerment. All models control for age, gender, country, majority status, and participation in the league, a higher-intensity version of the program. Alternative model specifications are presented in [Appendix D](#) as robustness checks.

## Results

Table 3 presents descriptive statistics and correlations for all independent, dependent, and mediator variables, both for the full sample and by country (see Tables 4 and 5). In the overall sample, years in the program are significantly and positively correlated with all three outcomes. However, this pattern does not hold in Northern Ireland or Israel. In Northern Ireland, consistently high means across outcomes suggest less variation to leverage analytically. In Israel, ongoing violence may make change on these outcomes more difficult, as in prior research (Asimovic et al., 2024).

**Table 3**

*Correlation Matrix (Whole Sample)*

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
1. Years	–	-0.32***	0.17***	0.27***	0.31***	0.40***	2.35	2.63
2. Social Distance	-0.32***	–	-0.37***	-0.26***	-0.42***	-0.31***	1.94	0.83
3. I-O Reconciliation Intentions	0.17***	-0.37***	–	0.09*	0.27***	0.24***	3.73	0.98
4. Efficacy	0.27***	-0.26***	0.09*	–	0.29***	0.28***	3.53	1.05
5. Empowerment	0.31***	-0.42***	0.27***	0.29***	–	0.36***	3.57	0.94
6. Number of Friends	0.40***	-0.31***	0.24***	0.28***	0.36***	–	2.56	1.13

\* $p < .10$ . \*\* $p < .05$ . \*\*\* $p < .01$ .

**Table 4**

*Correlation Matrix (South Africa & Northern Ireland)*

Northern Ireland	South Africa						<i>M</i> (SA/NI)	<i>SD</i> (SA/NI)
	1	2	3	4	5	6		
1. Years	–	-0.20**	0.16**	0.31***	0.26**	0.33***	1.76 / 4.96	2.28 / 3.49
2. Social Distance	-0.13	–	-0.44***	-0.25**	-0.24***	-0.27***	2.04 / 1.22	0.70 / 0.45
3. I-O Reconciliation Intentions	0.00	-0.37***	–	0.05	0.30***	0.29***	3.83 / 4.16	0.91 / 0.69
4. Efficacy	-0.01	-0.32**	0.24*	–	0.19*	0.20**	3.15 / 4.04	1.20 / 0.61
5. Empowerment	0.11	-0.54***	0.40***	0.52***	–	0.28***	3.39 / 4.35	0.94 / 0.82
6. Number of Friends	0.34***	-0.28**	0.001	0.44***	0.27**	–	2.32 / 3.21	1.04 / 1.02

\* $p < .10$ . \*\* $p < .05$ . \*\*\* $p < .01$ .

**Table 5***Correlation Matrix (Israel & Cyprus)*

Cyprus	Israel						<i>M</i> (IL/CY)	<i>SD</i> (IL/CY)
	1	2	3	4	5	6		
1. Years	–	-0.14	0.38**	-0.20	0.11	0.39***	2.16 / 3.34	1.54 / 2.66
2. Social Distance	-0.37**	–	0.20	0.01	-0.47***	-0.12	2.22 / 1.90	1.08 / 0.81
3. I-O Reconciliation Intentions	0.16*	-0.58***	–	-0.08	0.18	0.12	2.55 / 3.74	0.91 / 0.97
4. Efficacy	0.23*	-0.44***	0.53***	–	0.02	-0.13	3.76 / 3.67	0.75 / 0.98
5. Empowerment	0.23*	-0.50***	0.41***	0.46***	–	0.18	3.72 / 3.63	0.80 / 0.88
6. Number of Friends	0.39**	-0.34**	0.24*	0.42***	0.46***	–	2.45 / 2.53	1.10 / 1.18

\* $p < .10$ . \*\* $p < .05$ . \*\*\* $p < .01$ .

## Structural Equation Modeling

We begin with a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) to validate the structure of our latent constructs (Appendix E). The model shows good fit to the data: the Comparative Fit Index (CFI) is 0.956, the Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI) is 0.949, the Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA) is 0.055 and the Standardized Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR) is 0.045. These values indicate acceptable to good model fit, suggesting that the latent variables are well represented by their observed indicators (Hu & Bentler, 1999).

We then estimate a structural equation model (SEM) to assess the direct associations between years in the program and three latent outcomes: social distance, ingroup-oriented reconciliation intentions, and self-efficacy. In the baseline model without covariates (Table E1), years in program are significantly associated with lower levels of social distance ( $b = -0.091$ ,  $SE = 0.014$ ,  $p < .001$ ), higher reconciliation intentions ( $b = 0.072$ ,  $SE = 0.018$ ,  $p < .001$ ), and greater self-efficacy ( $b = 0.105$ ,  $SE = 0.018$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Substantively, participants with more years in the program report greater willingness to engage in intergroup contact with outgroup members. Additionally, they report a stronger inclination to prepare their ingroup for reconciliation through confronting ingroup members who insult the outgroup, sharing the perspective of the outgroup, defending their views, and remaining respectful during disagreements. Finally, they report higher self-efficacy, including the ability to converse with unfamiliar people, resolve conflicts, express opinions, and stand up for themselves. These associations remain robust after controlling for age, gender, country, majority status, and participation in the league, a higher-intensity version of the program (Table E2). We next examine the mechanisms underlying these associations by estimating a mediation model.

We test whether cross-group friendships and feelings of empowerment help explain the relationship between program duration and the three outcomes: social distance, self-efficacy, and ingroup-oriented reconciliation intentions. The model, estimated in R using the lavaan package on the combined sample, includes years in the program

as the independent variable, number of friends and empowerment as mediators, and accounts for their interrelationship. To obtain more reliable estimates of the mediation paths, we computed bootstrapped standard errors and confidence intervals using 5,000 bootstrap samples. Age, gender, country, majority status, and participation in the league, a higher-intensity version of the program, are controlled for. We report the total, direct, and indirect effects for the full sample in Table 6.

**Table 6**

*Structural Modeling Results*

Effect Type / Variable	Social Distance			Engagement			Self-Efficacy		
	Coefficient [CI]	SE	p	Coefficient [CI]	SE	p	Coefficient [CI]	SE	p
<b>Total Effects</b>									
Years in the Program	-0.034 [-0.063, -0.005]	0.015	0.025	0.028 [-0.015, 0.067]	0.021	0.184	0.111 [0.070, 0.153]	0.021	< 0.001
<b>Direct Effects</b>									
Years in the Program	-0.001 [-0.028, 0.027]	0.014	0.961	-0.011 [-0.055, 0.031]	0.022	0.623	0.074 [0.030, 0.119]	0.023	0.001
Number of Friends	-0.088 [-0.162, -0.010]	0.039	0.024	0.107 [0.006, 0.211]	0.052	0.041	0.129 [0.034, 0.231]	0.049	0.009
Empowerment by Outgroup	-0.243 [-0.371, -0.139]	0.059	< 0.001	0.272 [0.134, 0.437]	0.077	0.000	0.204 [0.086, 0.322]	0.060	0.001
Gender (Female)	-0.068 [-0.199, 0.062]	0.067	0.310	0.014 [-0.178, 0.195]	0.096	0.880	-0.131 [-0.310, 0.049]	0.092	0.154
Age	-0.059 [-0.097, -0.020]	0.020	0.003	0.049 [0.001, 0.100]	0.026	0.057	-0.080 [-0.130, -0.031]	0.025	0.002
Majority Group	-0.345 [-0.514, -0.185]	0.085	< 0.001	-0.249 [-0.558, 0.065]	0.158	0.116	0.228 [0.032, 0.435]	0.102	0.026
League Indicator	-0.116 [-0.266, 0.041]	0.078	0.139	0.179 [-0.025, 0.406]	0.108	0.098	0.329 [0.135, 0.522]	0.099	0.001
<b>Indirect Effects</b>									
Years in the Program via Number of Friends	-0.016 [-0.031, -0.002]	0.007	0.028	0.019 [0.001, 0.039]	0.010	0.046	0.023 [0.007, 0.042]	0.009	0.011
Years in the Program via Empowerment by Outgroup	-0.017 [-0.033, -0.008]	0.006	0.004	0.019 [0.008, 0.040]	0.008	0.012	0.014 [0.006, 0.029]	0.006	0.011

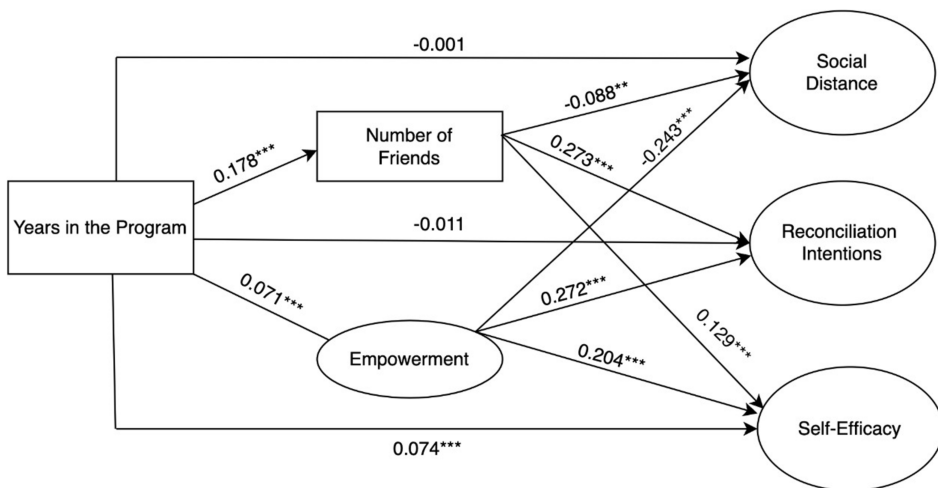
Note. Estimated using lavaan 0.6-19 with 5000 bootstrap draws. Model fit:  $\chi^2(268) = 547.459, p < .001, CFI = 0.932, TLI = 0.920, RMSEA = 0.053 [90\% CI: 0.047, 0.060], SRMR = 0.047.$

The structural modeling results (Table 6) reveal a nuanced relationship between years in program, the number of cross-group friends formed, and feelings of empowerment. As predicted, there are indirect effects of program duration through cross-group friendships and feelings of empowerment on all three outcomes: social distance, reconciliation intentions, and self-efficacy. For social distance, these indirect effects account for a significant total effect of years in the program. For reconciliation intentions, while the total effect is not statistically significant, the significant indirect pathways suggest that cross-group friendships and empowerment are still channels through which program participation can contribute to reconciliation. In contrast, for self-efficacy, a significant direct effect of years in the program, along with additional significant indirect effects through the same mediators, accounts for a significant total effect of program duration.

We conduct robustness checks for the mediation model presented here (Figure 1) – including a quadratic term for years in the program (Table E6), country fixed effects (Table E4)<sup>2</sup>, and different operationalizations of program modules (Table E5), leading to the same conclusions. Country specific results are in Appendix F, though we advise caution in overinterpreting them due to limited sample size.

**Figure 1**

*The Mediation Model With Structural Equation Modelling Results*



\*  $p < .10$ . \*\*  $p < .05$ . \*\*\*  $p < .01$ .

2) The effects on efficacy are less robust than for the other two outcomes, when controlling for country fixed effects.

## Expert Interviews

### Sample and Procedure

The survey results suggest that cross-group friendships and feelings of empowerment are critical for the success of structured intergroup contact programs in divided societies. However, the surveys do not explain how the program fosters these experiences. To address this, we conducted 11 semi-structured expert interviews. These members of the organization were identified and connected to us by the global executive director based on their potential willingness to participate. Following our guidelines, the list of suggested experts included participants from each divided group (except Cyprus, where the program ended) and the global team, representing a range of roles (programmatic, administrative, managerial) and seniority levels.

Interviews were conducted by the two authors via video conferencing in English between January and July 2024, each lasting 30 to 45 minutes. After transcription, both authors read all transcripts once and re-read their assigned transcripts multiple times. We analyzed the data using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), adopting a realist approach focused on participants' reported experiences and perspectives as intergroup contact practitioners. The analysis was theory-driven, guided by our research questions and intergroup contact theory. We coded the data at the semantic level, focusing on the surface meaning of the text given our view of interviewees as experts conveying applied knowledge. Themes were developed within relevant sections of the interviews, then refined collaboratively.

We identified four cross-cutting themes: (1) sports as a tool for intergroup contact, (2) the importance of active and multifaceted authority support, (3) the influence of social norms inside and outside the organization, and (4) the challenge and importance of preparing youth to act as peace ambassadors. Readers should note that while both authors are outsiders to the organization, we hold a favorable view of its work. Over several years of collaboration in various capacities, we developed friendly relations with some staff members (though not with those interviewed). While we aimed to remain neutral, our positive orientation may have shaped both the interview process and interpretation. As outsiders to the conflict contexts, our understanding is informed by the perspectives shared by interviewees and the organization more broadly.

**Sports** — The core intergroup activity, sport in mixed teams, is viewed as crucial in fostering cross-group friendship and experiences of empowerment from the outgroup. At the same time, despite sports being the main activity, interviewees emphasize that the program is not fundamentally about sports. Instead, sport is seen as a tool for intergroup contact. For it to be effective, the quality of sports training needs to be high, as a manager in the US highlighted:

*“Sports is our tool. That tool has to be sharp. We need to make sure that it is a quality sports program, no matter where you are.”* [white, female, American]

First, sport draws participants in, especially in settings with limited after-school opportunities or resources. As one manager in South Africa explained:

*“I think sports is a huge drawcard, especially in initially getting kids into the program. Without the tool of sport, if we were only offering free mentorship, it would be too abstract for kids. They would not relate to it.”* [white, female, South African]

Second, sport offers a long-term pathway for participants, allowing them to progress through increasing levels of program intensity and competitiveness as their skills develop. This is important, as spending more time in the program increases the likelihood of participants forming cross-group friendships. Third, sport helps foster these friendships by providing a shared goal for participants:

*“They didn’t know each other’s language – like the Jewish people didn’t know Arabic, and the Arabic girls didn’t know Hebrew. So they used to play sports to start making friends, and what I love about the organization is that they start playing without talking at all.”* [coach in the Middle East program, female, Palestinian citizen of Israel]

Fourth, while friendships can also develop through other enjoyable social activities, interviewees highlighted the distinct and possibly unique value of sport in fostering experiences of empowerment. Sport has a tradition of promoting friendly and fair competition, with mutual respect as a core shared norm among players. This norm often extends into intergroup interactions, making sport-based contact particularly empowering:

*“Well, I think respect is actually an easy one that we find very easy to kind of talk about. Obviously, because we use sport as our tool, respect is massive in the sport or as well. You know, we talk about respect and your team, the opposing team; we talk about respect and the referees, your coaches; respect is talked about through and through.”* [administrative staff and former coach in Northern Ireland, female, Protestant]

**Authority** — In addition to sport as a tool, the support of authorities within the organization is seen as crucial for fostering cross-group friendship and experiences of empowerment from the outgroup. What stood out in the interviews was the intensive effort of these authority figures – primarily coaches. For example, a manager from the Middle East programming explained:

*“Our coaches are much more than coaches. I’m sure it’s the case like in other settings as well, but they’re, you know, they’re facilitators. They’re mitigators. They’re role models.”* [female, Jewish]

Many of the interviews with coaches highlighted how effortful and deliberate their engagement is in helping young people develop friendships and resolve conflicts, especially in moments where they might feel disrespected or not heard by an outgroup member:

*“If you see that there’s a relationship blossoming in your team, you very much feed into that and help it to kind of come along.”*  
[administrative staff and former coach in Northern Ireland, female, Protestant]

The same coach described her role when situations of conflict arise:

*“I try, as much as I can, to hear everything from everybody’s side of the story. Whether it means that I sit at the sideline with a kid for an hour – I say tell me everything that’s happened and then do the same thing with the other kid. Afterwards, I tell the kids I want you to talk about it now and just be the mediator for that.”*

Interestingly, even though coaches play an active role in building relationships, there is also an emphasis on giving participants the space to make autonomous choices. One interviewee, a Catholic, female, coach in Northern Ireland explicitly linked this to feeling respected: *“..it’s about kids having their own autonomy and not having their ideas and thoughts and feelings shut down.”* Coaches appear to walk a fine line, offering as much support as possible without pushing or forcing participants. This balance was also emphasized by an interviewee from the Middle East program:

*“We don’t push the girls to start to talk to each other and to love each other. That comes naturally from themselves. [...]. We let them lead themselves alone. We do not push them to do anything.”* [coach in the Middle East program, female, Palestinian citizen of Israel]

In sum, coaches play a crucial role in creating the conditions for cross-group friendships to flourish and for participants to feel empowered by the outgroup, while also preserving participants’ autonomous choice.

**Norms** – In addition to sport and the support of authorities, inclusive and egalitarian ingroup norms are seen as crucial in fostering cross-group friendship and experiences of empowerment from the outgroup. These were mentioned in almost all the interviews, and seem to be pervasive throughout the organization. For example, a participant who became a coach in the South Africa program mentioned how: *“the main goal of [the organization] is for people from different societies to meet up and not like fight, but like*

*come together to fix the world.*" A coach from Northern Ireland, who has a mixed identity background, explained:

*"I kind of struggled a little bit to live it in Northern Ireland, but then to find an organization like [...] where like all identity and diversity is completely celebrated, I was really able to fit in."* [coach, female, Protestant]

When asked who creates this inclusive and egalitarian context, coach (female, Black) from the South African team said: *"it's everyone that works there, from the coaches to the managers, to the people that organize everything."* As expressed by a manager from the Middle East site (female, Jewish), this is an active and deliberate choice of the organization: *"we're celebrating and observing the [...] religious holidays [...] and I think it gives the ground for deeper respect [...]."* These inclusive, egalitarian norms tied to a shared organizational identity play a powerful role in bridging group divides. For example, a coach from the Northern Ireland site described this shared superordinate identity:

*"One person showed up in a, say, a Northern Ireland green football top and someone showed up with a Celtic football top and even though they were on the same team and they were like very opposing in football tops, the thing they had in common were they were [name of organization] players."* [female, Catholic]

This strong commitment to inclusive norms stands in stark contrast to the realities outside the program. As one manager from the Middle East site (female, Jewish), when asked about cross group friendships, emphasized: *"It's important to say that here in the Jewish-Arabic society, you don't see any cross cultural or cross group like friendships."* A coach in Northern Ireland similarly noted:

*"Outside politics really informs the way that kids are brought up here, and I know, especially since Brexit, especially since the conflict kicked off more harshly in Israel Palestine, that has really had an impact on the way that our kids interact with each other."* [female, Catholic]

Interestingly, sometimes interviewees explicitly emphasized how distinct the norms in the organizations are compared to the rest of society:

*"So yes, in the grand scheme of Northern Ireland, you may not feel comfortable doing that [...] Our participants [...] know that in the four walls of those programs that things are different than out in the community, that things are safer."* [administrative staff and former coach in Northern Ireland, female, Protestant]

Across interviews, it became clear that the organization's norms of inclusion and respect motivate participants to form cross-group friendships and engage with others respectfully regardless of their identity, fostering mutual empowerment.

**Peace Ambassadors** — Discussions of organizational norms also highlighted the difficulty participants face in creating change within their communities, given the stark contrast between norms inside and outside the organization. One coach from the Middle East Site described how difficult it can be for the participants to talk about the program to their peers:

*“They talk about us in their schools and they have a lot of friends against them. But then, you know, step by step and when they start to talk more and more and go deeper, the kids start to look at it from a different side and they want to come and to see our organization.”*  
[Palestinian Citizen of Israel, female]

In doing this challenging intra-group work, participants and the program can have a powerful impact on their communities:

*“[...] we reach families that don't necessarily, you know, support coexistence. But I feel that through the children, you know, we engage the families as well. [] the impact is even larger because we affect the entire family, the parents.”* [manager in the Middle East program, female, Jewish]

These quotes illustrate that the program's impact is not limited to improving participants' views of the outgroup; it also seeks to prepare them to influence members of their own group in positive ways, even without direct intergroup contact. However, the inclusive norms that support cross-group friendships and empowerment within the program may set participants apart from their ingroup peers, making it harder to translate these values back into their home communities. This tension highlights the importance of explicitly supporting intragroup outcomes and personal development to help participants bridge that gap and for intergroup contact programs to realize their full potential in divided societies.

## Discussion

Using data from youth participants in structured intergroup contact programs across four divided societies, we found that cross-group friendships and feelings of empowerment by the outgroup are strongly associated with key outcomes of success. Consistent with our hypotheses, Structural Equation Model (SEM) revealed that more years in the program is positively associated with intergroup contact intentions, intragroup en-

agement, and self-efficacy, through the mediating role of cross-group friendships and feelings of empowerment in the program. Importantly, these findings may help explain the mixed results observed in recent studies of structured intergroup programs in divided societies (Mousa, 2020; Scacco & Warren, 2018). Given the variation in program types and implementing organizations, it is plausible that some initiatives succeed in fostering cross-group friendships and a sense of empowerment, while others fall short.

For social distance and self-efficacy, the results suggest that these outcomes are significantly associated with the mediators. In both cases, the indirect effects via cross-group friendships and feeling empowered by the outgroup are statistically significant and account for the total effect of years in the program. For social distance, the total effect is significant, while the direct effect is not, suggesting that the association operates primarily through the mediators. For self-efficacy, both the direct and indirect effects are significant, indicating that additional program elements, such as its emphasis on leadership development, may also contribute to the outcome. Finally, for engagement with the ingroup, there is neither a total nor a direct effect of years in the program. However, significant indirect effects suggest that the mediators themselves are meaningfully related to the outcome, even in the absence of an overall program effect. Other unmeasured factors, such as perceived differences in norms in vs. outside of the organization, might be counteracting a potential total effect.

Our research highlights the role of cross-group friendships and feeling empowered as key ingredients of structured intergroup contact programs in divided societies. This expands on prior research underscoring the importance of these components. The significance of cross-group friendships is consistent with past findings from societies at peace (Davies et al., 2011), as well as with work emphasizing the quality of intergroup contact in divided societies (McKeown & Psaltis, 2017). Similarly, the importance of feeling empowered by the outgroup aligns with findings from a recent cross-national survey (Hässler et al., 2022). Our findings go further by demonstrating the role these mediators play within structured programs, and how such programs can actively foster them. Moreover, we show that these factors are not only associated with reduced intergroup distance but also with ingroup-oriented reconciliation intentions and self-efficacy. At the same time, even while recognizing their importance, facilitating these mediators remains a significant challenge. Through expert interviews, we identified several key elements that help promote them in structured intergroup initiatives: the use of sports, support from local authorities, and the establishment of inclusive norms.

The interviews reveal, first, that sport is seen as a valuable tool for intergroup contact, particularly in fostering the experience of being respected by the outgroup. The focus on “intergroup contact tools” opens space for future research on which are most effective in fostering different types of intergroup contact experiences. Second, as first proposed by (Allport, 1954), the support of authorities is crucial in promoting intimate, empowering intergroup contact. A key insight from the interviews is the multifaceted

role of coaches and program leaders, who act as facilitators, mediators, and role models. Despite actively encouraging intergroup contact experiences, many authorities we interviewed also emphasized the importance of volition (Paolini et al., 2024). Allowing participants to be agents of their own experience may explain the positive results for self-efficacy observed in the survey. Future research could investigate the multifaceted role of authorities in divided societies.

Third, inclusive and egalitarian norms are crucial, echoing research from societies at peace (Christ et al., 2014). Divided societies are distinct in that these norms often deviate from prevailing societal norms. This deviation could make indirect intergroup contact effects less likely and present challenges for participants who are seen as deviants from ingroup norms. The absence of a total effect or program duration on engagement with the ingroup supports this interpretation. The deviating norms may hinder efforts to influence the ingroup, even when cross-group friendships and feeling empowered motivate participants. Future research should investigate the complex transmission channels of indirect contact effects in contexts with negative intergroup contact norms.

Over half of our participants belong to a minoritized group in their country, raising an important concern. How desirable is it that participants change their orientation towards the outgroup and in what way? Advancing intergroup relations should not simply mean increasing mutual affection. As Dixon et al. (2010) argue, efforts to foster harmony can lead disadvantaged groups to downplay injustice and reduce their motivation to challenge inequality, revealing a tension between harmony and justice. This raises an important question: Could greater minority willingness to share and defend outgroup views (as reflected in ingroup reconciliation intentions) unintentionally weaken their advocacy? Program facilitators are keenly aware of this tension between harmony and justice. As the Global Director of programming put it: *“Can we do our job if we are not a space where opposing views can come for discussion? That’s been the push and pull of it. We don’t want to seem soft on things we feel very strongly about, but we also need to be able to invite other perspectives in order to change.”*

The current research has several limitations. First, given the challenges of gathering data from young participants in divided societies, our sample size is comparatively small. We bolster confidence in our findings through bootstrapped confidence intervals, latent variables with multiple indicators, and careful model specification and fit. Nonetheless, future research should aim to replicate these patterns using larger samples. Second, although we collected data from four sites and identified shared processes, the sample size is too small to statistically test site-specific differences. While the multi-country design enhances generalizability, the small sample size limits our ability to deeply examine country-specific dynamics or fully capture context-driven variations in program delivery. However, interviews offer valuable insights into how the context shapes what intergroup contact can realistically achieve. In Israel, where violent conflict is ongoing, the program appears to provide psychological survival by offering hope for peace. In

post-conflict Northern Ireland, it helps participants “*overcome baggage from the past*” and “*to have a better future*” (Northern Ireland coach). In South Africa, where “*the conflict that we experience in this country runs deep*” (South Africa program facilitator), the program challenges racial generalizations.

Third, none of our data permits any causal conclusions. While the SEM is consistent with a theoretical model that assumes directional effects, our research design does not allow us to establish causality. Moreover, despite efforts to minimize selection bias and retain a broad participant base, those who join and stay are at least somewhat open to these experiences. Similarly, youth with low intergroup contact intentions may be less likely to form cross-group friendships and more likely to drop out. In fact, past field experiments raise doubts about the potential for average treatment effects of structured intergroup contact programs in settings with high levels of intergroup conflict and violence (Asimovic et al., 2024; Mousa, 2020).<sup>3</sup> Future research should attempt to identify causal effects of intergroup contact with friendship and empowerment potential through randomized or longitudinal field designs.

Despite these limitations, we remain optimistic about the potential of structured intergroup contact programs if implemented well – one of the few spaces where youth can engage meaningfully in divided societies. Aligned with program goals, we expand our notion of success to include not only intergroup outcomes but also transformation at the intra-group and individual-level. In this paper, we examine an intergroup contact program operating across international sites and, in doing so, bridge theoretical insights with practical application. We highlight the essential pillars and components that make this transformation more attainable, specifically the importance of cross-group friendships and feeling empowered by the outgroup, as outcomes that, while not guaranteed, can be achieved through well-structured intergroup programs.

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3) In fact, the data in Asimovic et al. (2024) and Ditlemann and Samii (2016) come from the same organization; however, in those two papers the data was collected only in Israel, whereas in this paper the data is from different countries and was collected at a later point in time using a different sample.

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**Data Availability:** The data used in this study are not publicly shared in order to protect the privacy of respondents and the confidentiality of the partnering organization. Access to the data can be granted under a data confidentiality agreement. Interested researchers should contact the authors for further information.

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## Supplementary Materials

The Supplementary Materials contain the following items:

- Replication code (see [Asimovic & Ditlmann, 2026S-a](#))
- Codebook (see [Asimovic & Ditlmann, 2026S-a](#))
- Online appendices (survey questions, research context and additional results; see [Asimovic & Ditlmann, 2026S-b](#))

### Index of Supplementary Materials

Asimovic, N., & Ditlmann, R. (2026S-a). *Supplementary materials to "Cross-group friends and feeling empowered in intergroup contact programs: Mediating pathways and practical strategies for divided societies"* [Replication code and codebook]. GitHub.

<https://github.com/nejlaasimovic/JSPP-intergroup-contact-programs>

Asimovic, N., & Ditlmann, R. (2026S-b). *Supplementary materials to "Cross-group friends and feeling empowered in intergroup contact programs: Mediating pathways and practical strategies for divided societies"* [Online appendices]. PsychOpen GOLD.

<https://doi.org/10.23668/psycharchives.21757>

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