

DIVERSITY, EQUITY, AND INCLUSION, INTERGROUP CONTACT, AND SOCIAL JUSTICE IN U.S. URBAN PARKS

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Issues of interpersonal and systemic racism remain prevalent in the United States and can undermine park experiences for people of color. To manage public park and recreation services more effectively for our increasingly diverse population, we must work to remedy these longstanding inequities. Intergroup contact theory offers one potential strategy for addressing interpersonal and systemic racism. Contextualized in this dissertation to interracial contact, the theory posits that frequent, positive contact between people of different racial or ethnic groups reduces prejudice, and it has been suggested that contact may also increase awareness of systemic inequalities and encourage social justice civic engagement.

Urban parks have often been championed as diverse and democratic spaces with the potential to foster interracial contact. Although there is some evidence that interracial contact occurs in parks and can be positive (e.g., friendly conversations) or negative (e.g., dirty looks, racist comments), less is known about the conditions under which positive or negative contact occurs or the outcomes associated with contact in parks. Furthermore, despite evidence suggesting the importance of intentional management efforts to encourage positive interracial contact in parks, little is known about the actions taken regarding contact among park agencies. This dissertation provides a more comprehensive understanding of interracial contact from these stakeholders to inform evidence-based practices which encourage positive contact and limit negative contact, with the goal of improving park experiences, especially for people of color who have historically experienced greater negative contact and exclusion in these settings. This dissertation investigated interracial contact in U.S. urban parks from the perspective of park users and park agency leaders.

Chapter 1 presents the theory and conceptual framework, including an introduction to intergroup contact theory and orientation to the role and relevance of interracial contact within a diversity, equity, and inclusion management framework.

Chapter 2 extends intergroup contact theory to a park context to specifically test the relationships between interracial contact in parks and a variety of attitudinal and behavioral outcomes. Through a unique integration of the often-siloed theories of intergroup contact and civic engagement, this quantitative study investigated the interrelationships between interracial contact in parks, interracial trust, critical consciousness of racism, social justice civic attitudes, and social justice civic behaviors. Data were collected in Fall 2020 via a Qualtrics panel survey of racially and ethnically diverse urban park users in the U.S. (n=931). A structural equation model demonstrated that more frequent, positive interracial contact in parks was associated with lower prejudice, higher interracial trust, higher critical consciousness, stronger social justice civic attitudes, and greater engagement in social justice civic behaviors, with many of these relationships robust in comparisons across racial and ethnic groups. These findings demonstrate how parks contribute to important social justice outcomes, thus offering an avenue to address inequities at the interpersonal (prejudice, trust) and societal levels (civic engagement) as well as an opportunity to better position parks among key decision-makers as platforms for advancing social justice.

Given the practical merit to increasing positive interracial contact in parks, Chapter 3 focuses on understanding the conditions which facilitate more frequent, positive contact from the

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perspective of park users. This study assessed the interrelationships between a variety of conditions hypothesized to be associated with interracial contact in parks including community diversity, park use motivations, safety, sense of welcome and belonging, and perceived engagement and representation by the park and recreation agency. Grounded in prior research and current equity-focused park and recreation management practices, this study focused heavily on the development, testing, and validation of metrics to assess equitable engagement and representation as reflected through the inclusivity of programs and events, the extent of community input in decision making, and the extent of representation of racial and ethnic diversity within an organization's staff, leadership, and marketing. Data were collected in Fall 2020 via a Qualtrics panel survey of diverse U.S. urban park users (n=931). A structural equation model demonstrated more frequent and positive interracial contact when individuals felt a stronger sense of welcome and belonging and when they perceived more engagement and representation. Safety and engagement and representation also had indirect relationships with contact as mediated by sense of welcome and belonging. Results suggest that park agencies seeking to increase belonging and/or positive contact should focus on increasing safety and engagement and representation.

Informed by the findings of Chapter 3 identifying the connection between management factors and positive contact, Chapter 4 focuses on assessing perspectives on contact, as well as broader management for diversity, equity, and inclusion, among park leaders. This qualitative study of urban park agency leaders used stratified purposive sampling to ensure representation across race, ethnicity, gender, and U.S. region. Semi-structured interviews (n=16) were conducted in Spring 2021, and data were analyzed with thematic analysis. Leaders believed that structural factors including residential patterns/segregation, park type and location, park condition, safety, and park features influenced interracial contact in parks. They also felt that more equitable engagement and representation through programs, outreach, staffing, and acknowledgement of institutional racism helped people of color to feel more welcome in parks, and thus facilitated more frequent contact via increasing visitor diversity. Leaders generally discussed interracial contact as positive and associated with favorable outcomes, but several identified instances of negative contact, including non-verbal behaviors and white park users unjustly calling the police on users of color. Results document the variability of interracial contact and how negative contact can have significant consequences for safety, belonging, and park use among people of color. Findings illustrate the pivotal role of interracial contact in the park experience, especially for users of color, and underscore its relevance as either a support (in the case of positive contact) or barrier (in the case of negative contact) to increasing diversity, equity, and inclusion in parks.

Chapter 5 summarizes key findings and implications, with emphasis on the equity-oriented management actions (and metrics to monitor organizational progress) that can promote positive contact, limit negative contact, and create safer and more welcoming parks for people of color, thus contributing to the advancement of diversity, equity, inclusion, and justice in parks and recreation.