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Psychological Intergroup Interventions in Fragile and Conflict-Affected States

Why They Matter, What Works, What Doesn't and How to Deploy Safely

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Executive Summary

- We highlight a central paradox: many psychological intergroup interventions in fragile and conflict-affected states (FCAS) fail not because of ill intent, but because they overlook the psychological, social and contextual determinants of human behaviour.
- Psychological intergroup interventions are theory-driven, empirically tested strategies that aim to change attitudes, emotions, perceived norms, and behaviours that sustain intergroup hostility and discrimination. In FCAS contexts, marked by weak institutions, legacies of violence and deep distrust, these interventions address psychological barriers to peace alongside material constraints.
- Psychological intergroup interventions can shift behaviours relevant to violence, coexistence and political compromise in FCASs, but effects are highly context-dependent and often uneven across groups in complex conflict scenarios.
- This paper examines interventions that are proven relevant to stabilisation policy, and realistic pathways to scale through humanitarian, governance, security and economic programmes.
- Low-cost, scalable interventions (social norms; meta-perception correction; belief malleability; mass media) show the strongest evidence-to-cost ratios.
- High-intensity interventions (contact; empathy) can be effective but pose political, ethical and security risks if poorly sequenced.
- Behavioural change often occurs without attitudinal change – this has implications for monitoring, evaluation and expectations.
- Poorly designed interventions risk reinforcing power asymmetries, legitimising unjust settlements or triggering backlash in conflict-affected populations.
- Evidence supports layered, sequenced intervention portfolios, rather than single ‘silver bullet’ approaches.
- Psychological intergroup interventions are not substitutes for political settlements or institutional reform, but they are force multipliers when deployed carefully.

Contents

1 Psychological Intergroup Interventions in Fragile and Conflict-Affected Settings

Fragile and conflict-affected settings are contexts in which state, institutional, or community capacities are insufficient to manage political, social, economic or security risks. These result in persistent instability, violence, and reduced ability to provide basic services and maintain social cohesion.[1]

Fragility and conflict amplify threat, uncertainty, loss and scarcity, which reliably shift cognition and behaviour. They lead to narrower attentional bandwidth (shorter horizons), heightened vigilance, impaired executive control, and more substantial reliance on identity cues and social norms. These pathways are well established in stress neuroscience and development science (such as allostatic load,[2] stress effects on cognition,[3] and in behavioural science work on cognitive bandwidth under poverty or scarcity.)[4] In fragile conflict-affected settings, these mechanisms interact with weak institutions and grievance dynamics – which is why *purely material* programmes often underperform unless paired with psychosocial, social and governance components.[5]

Psychological intergroup interventions "…are based on psychological theory that deliberately attempt to alter attitudes, emotions, perceived norms, or behaviour that constitute barriers to – or that can facilitate the promotion of – tolerant, peaceful, and equal relations between members of different social groups".[6] In fragile conflict-affected settings, which are characterised by weak institutions, legacies of violence, identity-based grievances and distrust, we argue that these interventions target *psychological barriers* to peace, as well as material constraints.

The 2025 *Handbook of Social Psychology*[7] consolidates this insight: self-control, identity, moral judgment and intergroup perception are context-sensitive systems rather than fixed traits. Under conditions

1 OECD, *States of Fragility 2025: Addressing Multidimensional Risks* (OECD Publishing, 2025), https://doi.org/10.1787/81982370-en; Etienne Lwamba and Sanghwa Lee, "Evidence on Fragile and Conflict-Affected Situations: Insights from the Development Evidence Portal," *International Initiative for Impact Evaluation (3IE)*, July 16, 2025, https://www.3ieimpact.org/blogs/evidence-fragile-and-conflict-affected-situations-insights-development-evidence-portal; World Bank, *World Development Report 2011: Conflict, Security, and Development* (World Bank, 2011), https://doi.org/10.1596/978-0-8213-8439-8; World Bank Group, *World Bank Group Strategy for Fragility, Conflict, and Violence 2020–2025* (World Bank, 2020), http://hdl.handle.net/10986/34858.

2 Allostasis is the physiological process of achieving stability through change, allowing the body to adapt to environmental, psychological or physical stressors by adjusting internal parameters. Coined by Sterling and Eyer (1988), this concept moves beyond rigid homeostasis, emphasising dynamic, predictive and anticipatory regulation of body systems. Sterling, P., & Eyer, J. (1988). Allostasis: A new paradigm to explain arousal pathology. In S. Fisher & J. Reason (Eds.), *Handbook of life stress, cognition and health* (pp. 629–649). John Wiley & Sons.

3 Bruce S. McEwen, "Stress, Adaptation, and Disease: Allostasis and Allostatic Load," *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences* 840, no. 1 (1998): 33–44, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1749-6632.1998.tb09546.x.

4 Anandi Mani et al., "Poverty Impedes Cognitive Function," *Science* 341, no. 6149 (2013): 976–980, https://doi.org/10.1126/science.1238041.

5 World Bank, *World Development Report 2011*.

6 Eran Halperin, Boaz Hameiri, and Rebecca Littman, eds., *Psychological Intergroup Interventions: Evidence-Based Approaches to Improve Intergroup Relations* (Routledge, 2023), xi, https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003288251.

7 Daniel T. Gilbert, Susan T. Fiske, Eli J. Finkel, and Wendy B. Mendes, eds., *The Handbook of Social Psychology*, 6th ed. (Situational Press, 2025), https://doi.org/10.70400/NYKH3013.

typical of fragile conflict-affected settings, individuals and groups behave in ways that are locally adaptive but systemically destabilising.[8] Interventions employed in fragile conflict-affected settings that ignore these psychological mechanisms routinely underperform, whereas those that explicitly target them yield high returns relative to cost.[9]

These interventions are part of a broader shift from descriptive conflict analysis towards an interventionist behavioural science, emphasising causal identification through laboratory and field experiments, longitudinal designs and behavioural outcomes.[10] Interventions employed in FCASs succeed when they reduce threat, restore dignity, scaffold self-regulation, reshape norms and rebuild legitimacy, before expecting change in cooperation or growth.[11]. Indeed, recent advances in social psychology clarify *why* some interventions are employed in fragile conflict-affected settings work: they reduce cognitive load, enable identity change, address psychological needs, shift perceived norms, and restore procedural justice and dignity rather than merely changing attitudes.[12]

1.1 Why Psychological Intergroup Interventions Matter in FCASs

Violence and instability in FCASs are not driven solely by material scarcity or institutional weakness. They are sustained by psychological and social mechanisms, including:

- Entrenched intergroup hostility and dehumanisation[13]
- Zero-sum beliefs and competitive victimhood[14]
- Beliefs that adversaries are fixed, immoral or incapable of change[15]
- Inaccurate perceptions of outgroup attitudes, intentions and norms (that is to say, meta-perceptions[16]
- Maladaptive emotional dynamics (fear; humiliation; hatred)[17]

Recent advances in behavioural and social psychology demonstrate that these mechanisms are malleable, even in protracted conflicts. This has led to a shift from descriptive conflict analysis towards interventionist behavioural science, with increasing use of field experiments, quasi-experimental designs and behavioural outcome measures.[18]

8 Daniel Bar-Tal, *Intractable Conflicts: Socio-Psychological Foundations and Dynamics* (Cambridge University Press, 2013).
9 Gilbert, Fiske, Finkel, and Mendes, *The Handbook of Social Psychology*; see also Sabina Čehajić-Clancy et al., "Advancing Research and Practice of Psychological Intergroup Interventions," *Nature Reviews Psychology* 3, no. 9 (2024): 574–588, https://doi.org/10.1038/s44159-024-00330-z.
10 Halperin, Hameiri, and Littman, *Psychological Intergroup Interventions*.
11 Gilbert, Fiske, Finkel, and Mendes, *The Handbook of Social Psychology.*
12 Gilbert, Fiske, Finkel, and Mendes, *The Handbook of Social Psychology.*
13 For example, Nour S. Kteily et al., "Darker Demons of Our Nature: The Need to (Re)Focus Attention on Blatant Forms of Dehumanization," *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 26, no. 6 (2017): 487–494, https://doi.org/10.1177/0963721417708230.
14 For example, Masi Noor et al., "When Suffering Begets Suffering: The Psychology of Competitive Victimhood between Adversarial Groups in Violent Conflicts," *Personality and Social Psychology Review* 16, no. 4 (2012): 351–374, https://doi.org/10.1177/1088868312440048.
15 For example, Eran Halperin et al., "Promoting the Middle East Peace Process by Changing Beliefs about Group Malleability," *Science* 333, no. 6050 (2011): 1767–1769.
16 That is to say, meta-perception. For example, Samantha Moore-Berg et al., "Improving Intergroup Relations with Meta-Perception Correction Interventions," *Trends in Cognitive Sciences* 28, no. 3 (2024): 190–192, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tics.2024.01.008.
17 For example, Eran Halperin, *Emotions in Conflict: Inhibitors and Facilitators of Peace Making* (Routledge, 2016), https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315850863.
18 For a recent review, see Halperin, Hameiri, and Littman, *Psychological Intergroup Interventions*.

The intervention ‘families’ presented in this report are not intended to constitute an exhaustive typology of all socio-psychological and intergroup interventions used in FCASs. Instead, they represent a deliberate and transparent selection of approaches that the evidence suggests are among the most researched and most promising for influencing violence-relevant behaviour, social cooperation and legitimacy, in contexts of fragility.

Three considerations guide this selection. Firstly, each family draws on substantial empirical literature, including randomised controlled trials, systematic reviews, repeated field applications in FCASs and closely comparable high-risk environments. Secondly, the approaches are anchored in clearly specified psychological mechanisms, such as self-regulation under stress, identity and status repair, norm perception and intergroup threat reduction, which are well established in contemporary social psychology and behavioural science. Thirdly, these intervention families have demonstrated operational relevance for stabilisation policy, with feasible delivery pathways at scale through humanitarian, governance, security or economic programming.

Importantly, the report does not assume that these approaches are universally effective, nor that they function independently of context. Evidence from both FCAS programming and social psychology underlines that intervention effects are highly contingent on threat levels, political economy, institutional credibility and sequencing. The families identified here should therefore be understood as high-probability entry points for design and investment – appropriate starting places for adaptation, piloting and learning – rather than as prescriptive or comprehensive solutions.

March against the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) in the country's capital Bogotá (February 18, 2009).
Stevan_GP / Shutterstock.com

2 What Works: Evidence-Backed Intervention Families

Evidence from behavioural and social psychology shows that no single psychological intergroup intervention reliably 'works' across all FCASs. Instead, effectiveness depends on matching the intervention family to the specific conflict mechanism, power configuration and delivery context. The strongest results come from interventions that target core psychological barriers to stabilisation, such as rigid beliefs about adversaries, misperceived social norms and exaggerated threat perceptions, using designs that are empirically tested, scalable and sensitive to power asymmetries.

Significantly, successful interventions can shift behavioural outcomes even when attitudes remain unchanged, underlining the need to assess impact through observable behaviours rather than perceptions alone. In our view, the intervention families outlined below have the most robust and policy-relevant evidence base, along with clear guidance on where they are appropriate, where risks escalate, and how they should be sequenced within broader stabilisation strategies.

2.1 Belief-Focused Interventions (High Confidence, Low Cost)

Belief-focused interventions are socio-psychological approaches that target deeply held beliefs sustaining conflict – such as the perception that adversaries are fixed, inherently hostile or unwilling to change – and inaccurate beliefs about what outgroups think or intend.[19] Rather than relying on intensive contact or emotional engagement, these interventions work by reframing core cognitive assumptions – for example, through group malleability (implicit theory) interventions or meta-perception correction – which has been shown to reduce support for violence, increase openness to compromise, and improve intergroup attitudes in both laboratory and real-world conflict settings.

An illustration of this approach is provided by Bruneau et al.,[20] who tested a brief media-based intervention to reduce support for political violence in highly polarised settings. The intervention targeted a common meta-perception held by most Colombians, that Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) ex-combatants have been unwilling to peacefully reintegrate into Colombian society since the 2016 peace accord. Bruneau et al.[21] created a documentary-like media intervention using interviews with FARC ex-combatants, highlighting evidence

19 Daniel Bar-Tal et al., "Interventions to Change Well-Anchored Attitudes," *Social and Personality Psychology Compass* 14, no. 7, e12534 (2020), https://doi.org/10.1111/spc3.12534.
20 Emile Bruneau et al., "Exposure to a Media Intervention Helps Promote Support for Peace in Colombia," *Nature Human Behaviour* 6 (2022): 847–857, https://doi.org/10.1038/s41562-022-01330-w.
21 Bruneau et al., "Exposure to a Media Intervention," 847–857.

of successful coexistence between these ex-combatants and the neighbouring non-FARC Colombians, evidencing decreased endorsement of dehumanisation and increased (attitudinal and behavioural) non-violent engagement. Importantly, the study demonstrated operational relevance: the intervention was short, low-cost, and deliverable through existing civic and educational platforms, making it feasible for scale within stabilisation and governance programmes.

Belief-focused interventions are considered high-confidence because their effects have been replicated across multiple contexts, including intractable conflicts, using rigorous experimental designs in the laboratory and in the field. And they are considered low-cost because they can be delivered through brief texts, media content, surveys or light-touch messaging, without requiring sustained facilitation or face-to-face interaction. This combination of theoretical precision, empirical robustness and scalability makes belief-focused interventions particularly well suited to FCAS programming, where resources, access and political space are constrained.[22]

Interventions based on group malleability, rooted in implicit theories of groups' ability to change, target the belief that adversary groups are fixed and incapable of transformation. By challenging narratives that 'the other side will never change', these approaches have been shown to increase support for compromise, reduce endorsement of violence, and foster greater willingness to engage in cooperative solutions.[23] Such interventions are particularly powerful in FCASs where historical grievances and identity rigidity lead to fatalism and zero-sum thinking, which dominate public discourse as they reopen psychological space for imagining alternative futures and non-violent pathways. The policy relevance of this type of intervention lies in its strong cost-effectiveness profile for stabilisation and prevention programming.

2.2 Norm-Based Interventions (High Scalability)

Norm-based interventions are socio-psychological approaches that seek to change behaviour by shaping perceptions of what others do (descriptive norms) and what others approve of (injunctive norms).[24] Rather than attempting to transform deeply held identities or emotions, these interventions exploit the fact that individuals are highly responsive to social expectations, particularly in times of uncertainty and threat. Evidence shows that correcting misperceptions about peer attitudes or making prosocial norms

22 Bruneau et al., "Exposure to a Media Intervention," 847–857; A. Casas et al., "Giving Peace a Chance: Lessons from Translational Research in Colombia," *Peace and Conflict: Journal of Peace Psychology* 28, no. 3 (2022): 284–291, https://doi.org/10.1037/pac0000613; Smadar Cohen-Chen et al., "Hope in the Middle East: Malleability Beliefs, Hope, and the Willingness to Compromise for Peace," *Social Psychological and Personality Science* 5, no. 1 (2014): 67–75, https://doi.org/10.1177/1948550613484499; Eran Halperin et al, "Towards a New Framework of Personalized Psychological Interventions to Improve Intergroup Relations and Promote Peace," *Social and Personality Psychology Compass* 14, no. 5, e12527 (2020), https://doi.org/10.1111/spc3.12527; Elizabeth Levy Paluck et al., "Prejudice Reduction: Progress and Challenges," *Annual Review of Psychology* 72 (2021): 533–560, https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-psych-071620-030619.

23 For example, Eran Halperin et al., "Promoting the Middle East Peace Process," 1767–1769; see also Amit Goldenberg et al., "Testing the Impact and Durability of a Group Malleability Intervention in the Context of the Israeli–Palestinian Conflict," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 115, no. 4 (2018): 696–701, https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1706800115.

24 R. B. Cialdini et al., "A Focus Theory of Normative Conduct: Recycling the Concept of Norms to Reduce Littering in Public Places," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 58, no. 6 (1990): 1015–1026, https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.58.6.1015.

(such as restraint, coexistence and nonviolence) more visible can reduce discrimination, hostility and support for violence, even in polarised or fragile contexts.[25]

One prominent empirical example comes from Paluck's field experiment in post-genocide Rwanda,[26] which tested how mass-media interventions could reshape social norms to reduce intergroup prejudice and conflict. In this year-long randomised radio soap opera intervention, listeners in treatment regions were exposed to programming that depicted characters engaging in tolerant, cooperative and reconciliatory behaviours, and communicated new descriptive and injunctive norms around intermarriage, trust, empathy, open dissent and cooperation. Compared with control regions listening to unrelated health programming, those exposed to reconciliation-focused media reported shifts in perceived social norms and changes in conflict-relevant behaviours, even though personal beliefs remained more stable, suggesting that norm perceptions themselves were a key mechanism for behaviour change in a real conflict-affected society.

Norm-based interventions are highly scalable because they can be delivered at low marginal cost through mass media, public messaging, digital platforms and community signalling, reaching large populations simultaneously without requiring intensive facilitation or repeated individual engagement. Their reliance on existing communication infrastructures makes them particularly suitable for FCAS environments in which access, security and resources are constrained.[27]

Social norms signalling interventions operate by communicating that tolerance, coexistence, and behavioural restraint are socially approved and widely supported within a community. It aims at reshaping individuals' perceptions of what others do and consider acceptable. By correcting misperceptions and making prosocial norms visible, these approaches have been shown to reduce discriminatory attitudes, aggressive behaviours and support for violence, particularly in polarised or high-uncertainty environments. Their effectiveness increases when messages are delivered through credible and repeated channels – such as mass media campaigns, public messaging or community-level signalling – where individuals can observe consistent social endorsement of peaceful conduct. From a policy perspective, social norm signalling is especially well suited to large-scale applications – including urban violence reduction strategies, electoral stabilisation efforts and post-conflict normalisation processes – where shifting collective expectations can produce population-level behavioural change.

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25 Sohad Murrar and Markus Brauer, "Using Social Norms to Promote Positive Relations between Social Groups," in Halperin, Hameiri, and Littman, *Psychological Intergroup Interventions*.

26 E. L. Paluck, "Reducing Intergroup Prejudice and Conflict Using the Media: A Field Experiment in Rwanda," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 96, no. 3 (2009): 574–587, https://doi.org/10.1037/a0011989.

27 Graeme Blair et al., "Motivating the Adoption of New Community-Minded Behaviors: An Empirical Test in Nigeria," *Science Advances* 5, no. 3, aau5175 (2019): https://doi.org/10.1126/sciadv.aau5175; Murrar, S., & Brauer, M. (2019). Overcoming resistance to change: Using narratives to create more positive intergroup attitudes. *Current Directions in Psychological Science, 28*(2), 164–169. https://doi.org/10.1177/0963721418818552; Paluck, "Reducing Intergroup Prejudice," 574–587; E. L. Paluck et al., "The Salience of Social Referents: A Field Experiment on Collective Norms and Harassment Behavior in a School Social Network," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 103, no. 6 (2012): 899–915, https://doi.org/10.1037/a0030015; Margaret E. Tankard and Elizabeth Levy Paluck, "Norm Perception as a Vehicle for Social Change," *Social Issues and Policy Review* 10, no. 1 (2016): 181–211, https://doi.org/10.1111/sipr.12022.

2.3 Emotion-Focused Interventions (Moderate Confidence, Higher Cost)

Emotion-focused interventions are socio-psychological approaches that aim to reduce conflict by modifying destructive intergroup emotions – such as fear, anger, hatred and humiliation – that sustain violence and resistance to compromise. Drawing on affective science and emotion regulation theory, these interventions typically teach or prompt strategies such as cognitive reappraisal, emotional distancing and reframing, enabling individuals to reinterpret threatening events or outgroup actions in less hostile ways.[28]

A compelling case study of an emotion-focused intervention is provided by Hurtado-Parrado et al.,[29] who experimentally tested whether cognitive reappraisal training could influence emotional responses and peace-related attitudes during the Colombian government-FARC conflict. Conducted in the week preceding the 2016 peace referendum, the study exposed university students to conflict-related violent stimuli after randomly assigning them to either a brief reappraisal training session or a control condition. Participants trained in reappraisal were instructed to reinterpret emotionally charged information in a more analytical, psychologically distant manner. Results showed that the intervention significantly reduced negative emotions – including anger, fear and distress – and increased support for conciliatory policy statements associated with the peace agreement. Mediation analyses demonstrated that changes in political attitudes were driven by reductions in negative emotional reactions, providing causal evidence that emotional regulation mechanisms can shape intergroup preferences and conflict-related decision-making. By replicating earlier findings from other conflict settings in Colombia, this study illustrates how scalable, emotion-focused interventions can serve as practical tools for peacebuilding and policy design in intractable conflicts.[30]

The evidence base shows moderate confidence: well-designed studies demonstrate reductions in aggressive attitudes and increased openness to conciliatory policies, including in protracted conflicts, but effects are often context-sensitive and skill-dependent. These interventions tend to be more costly because they require trained facilitators, repeated engagement or guided exercises, and because emotional change is more fragile and more complicated to sustain without reinforcement. As a result, emotion-focused interventions are best used as complementary or sequenced tools, supporting belief- or norm-based approaches rather than serving as standalone stabilisation solutions.[31]

Emotion-regulation interventions aim to reduce destructive intergroup emotions – particularly anger and fear – that sustain hostility and resistance to compromise in conflict settings. By helping individuals reinterpret emotionally charged information through strategies

28 Sabina Čehajić-Clancy et al., "Social-Psychological Interventions for Intergroup Reconciliation: An Emotion Regulation Perspective," *Psychological Inquiry* 27, no. 2 (2016): 73–88, https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/1047840X.2016.1153945?utm_source=researchgate.net&utm_medium=article

29 Camilo Hurtado-Parrado et al., "Emotion Regulation and Attitudes Toward Conflict in Colombia: Effects of Reappraisal Training on Negative Emotions and Support for Conciliatory and Aggressive Statements," *Frontiers in Psychology* 10 (2019): 908, https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2019.00908.

30 Hurtado-Parrado et al., "Emotion Regulation and Attitudes," 908.

31 Smadar Cohen-Chen et al., "Hope: The Experience and Functions of a Seemingly Positive Group-Based Emotion," *European Review of Social Psychology* 36, no. 1 (2025): 35–70, https://doi.org/10.1080/10463283.2024.2347815; Eran Halperin, *Emotions in Conflict*; James J. Gross, "Emotion Regulation: Current Status and Future Prospects," *Psychological Inquiry* 26, no. 1 (2015): 1–26, https://doi.org/10.1080/1047840X.2014.940781; Tamar Avichail, Maya Tamir, James Gross, and Eran Halperin, "Using Intergroup Emotion Regulation Interventions to Reduce Intergroup Conflict," in Halperin, Hameiri, and Littman, *Psychological Intergroup Interventions*.

such as cognitive reappraisal, these approaches can weaken threat-based reactions and promote more constructive attitudes towards adversaries.

However, unlike simpler informational or norm-based interventions, emotion regulation typically requires higher levels of cognitive engagement and skilled facilitation to guide participants towards reflective processing rather than reactive responses. Moreover, their effectiveness is highly sensitive to timing and political context: interventions tend to work best during moments of openness or transitional political periods, while highly polarised or escalatory environments may limit their impact or alter emotional receptivity. As a result, emotion-focused strategies are most effective when carefully aligned with contextual dynamics and embedded within broader peacebuilding or policy processes.

2.4 Contact-Based Interventions (Mixed Evidence, Higher Risk)

Contact-based interventions are socio-psychological approaches grounded in the intergroup contact hypothesis, which posits that structured interaction between members of opposing groups can reduce prejudice and improve relations, particularly when status is equal, goals are shared, cooperation is fostered and institutional support is present.[32] These interventions include direct contact (such as joint activities, dialogue, sports and vocational training) and indirect forms such as vicarious, extended, parasocial or imagined contact.[33] While decades of research and meta-analyses show that contact can on average reduce prejudice, evidence from FCASs is mixed, particularly in large-scale field experiments where effects are often heterogeneous, short-lived or confined to behavioural outcomes without corresponding attitude change.[34]

Contact-based interventions are considered higher risk because they can reinforce power asymmetries, expose participants – particularly those from lower-power groups – to security or social harms, and trigger backlash when implemented without careful sequencing or safeguards. As a result, contact is best treated as a second-line, context-specific intervention, deployed only after power dynamics, safety, and enabling beliefs and norms have been addressed.[35]

Direct and indirect intergroup contact interventions are among the most extensively studied approaches for improving relations between social groups, with meta-analyses consistently demonstrating reductions in prejudice across diverse contexts, including settings affected by conflict. However, field experiments reveal more

32 G. W. Allport, *The Nature of Prejudice* (Addison-Wesley, 1954); T. F. Pettigrew et al., "Meta-Analytic Test of Intergroup Contact Theory," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 90, no. 5 (2006): 751–783, https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.90.5.751; Salma Mousa, "Building Social Cohesion Between Christians and Muslims Through Soccer in Post-ISIS Iraq," *Science* 369, no. 6505 (2020): 866–870, https://doi.org/10.1126/science.abb3153.

33 A. Al Ramiah and M. Hewstone, "Intergroup Contact as a Tool for Reducing, Resolving, and Preventing Intergroup Conflict: Evidence, Limitations, and Potential," *American Psychologist* 68, no. 7 (2013): 527–542, https://doi.org/10.1037/a0032603.

34 Elizabeth L. Paluck et al., "The Contact Hypothesis Re-Evaluated," *Behavioural Public Policy* 3, no. 2 (2019): 129–158, https://doi.org/10.1017/bpp.2018.25; Paluck et al., "Prejudice Reduction: Progress and Challenges," 533–560.

35 Bruneau et al., "Exposure to a Media Intervention," 847–857; A. Casas and B. Hameiri, "A Media Intervention Featuring Indirect Contact Promotes Peace in Rural Contexts Marked by Longstanding Internal Conflicts in Colombia," [Manuscript in preparation] (2026); Paluck et al., "Contact Hypothesis Re-Evaluated," 129–158; Paluck et al., "Prejudice Reduction: Progress and Challenges," 533–560; Pettigrew et al., "Meta-Analytic Test," 751–783.

heterogeneous outcomes than laboratory studies suggest, showing that behavioural cooperation can sometimes increase even when underlying attitudes remain unchanged.

Moreover, evidence indicates that the benefits of contact are often greater for the majority or higher-power groups, raising important equity and ethical concerns about who bears the psychological and social costs of engagement. Consequently, while intergroup contact can contribute to improved coexistence, it should not be treated as a default solution in FCASs; rather, it requires careful design, contextual sensitivity, and safeguards that account for power asymmetries, security risks, and justice perceptions to ensure responsible and effective policy implementation.

2.5 Narrative and Exemplarity Interventions (Context-Sensitive)

Narrative and exemplarity interventions are socio-psychological approaches that use stories, testimonies and symbolic figures – often moral exemplars who acted prosocially across group lines – to reshape how groups understand conflict, responsibility and the moral boundaries between 'us' and 'them'. These interventions work by reframing collective narratives, humanising outgroups and highlighting alternative moral choices within one's own group, thereby supporting reconciliation, forgiveness and reductions in dehumanisation in post-conflict settings. However, they are highly context-sensitive because narratives are deeply embedded in historical memory, power relations and claims to justice. If poorly timed or framed, they can be perceived as moral equivalence, denial of harm, or pressure to reconcile before accountability. Their effectiveness, therefore, depends on careful curation, sequencing, and alignment with transitional justice or memorialisation processes, making them most appropriate for post-violence or transitional phases rather than active conflict contexts[36]

Moral exemplar interventions focus on exposing individuals to narratives of ingroup members who assisted or protected outgroup members – often at significant personal risk – during periods of conflict or violence. By highlighting morally courageous behaviour within one's own group, these interventions can reduce defensive identity reactions, foster empathy without triggering accusations of disloyalty, and support processes of reconciliation and forgiveness in post-conflict societies. Such examples help expand perceived moral norms within the ingroup, demonstrating that cooperation and humanity towards former adversaries are socially and morally legitimate. However, these approaches carry important risks: if poorly framed, they may be interpreted as creating a false moral equivalence between perpetrators and victims, or as minimising historical responsibility, which could provoke backlash and undermine trust among affected communities. Careful contextualisation and acknowledgment of justice and accountability are therefore essential for their effective and ethical application.

36 Rezarta Bilali and Johanna Ray Vollhardt, "Victim and Perpetrator Groups' Divergent Perspectives on Collective Violence: Implications for Intergroup Relations," *Advances in Political Psychology* 40 (2019): 75–108, https://doi.org/10.1111/pops.12570; Sabina Čehajić-Clancy et al., "Moral-Exemplar Intervention: A New Paradigm for Conflict Resolution and Intergroup Reconciliation," *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 30, no. 4 (2021): 335–342, https://doi.org/10.1177/09637214211013001; Čehajić-Clancy et al., "Social-Psychological Interventions," 73–88; Marta Witkowska, Michal Bilewicz, and Sabina Čehajić-Clancy, "Interventions Based on Moral Exemplars," in Halperin, Hameiri, and Littman, *Psychological Intergroup Interventions*.

Recent work by Bilali[37] emphasises that narratives in conflict are not neutral stories but power-laden psychological infrastructures that shape how groups interpret violence, responsibility, victimhood and the legitimacy of social change. Bilali shows that dominant conflict narratives often stabilise existing power relations by normalising ingroup innocence, minimising harm to outgroups or framing inequality as inevitable. At the same time, counter-narratives advanced by marginalised groups are more likely to be dismissed, sanctioned or perceived as threatening. Critically for programming in FCASs, Bilali argues that narrative interventions that ignore power asymmetries – by promoting reconciliation, shared identity, or 'balanced' storytelling without addressing harm and accountability – risk reinforcing grievance and undermining trust. Effective narrative interventions therefore require power-aware design, including recognition of asymmetry, validation of victimised groups' experiences, and careful sequencing with justice and institutional reform, positioning narratives as tools for transformative rather than cosmetic stabilisation.

In the *Breaking Cycles of Conflict* mini-series episode from XCEPT, researchers Craig Larkin, Inna Rudolf and Rajan Basra discuss the complex challenges of post-conflict reconstruction, reconciliation and recovery in Iraq. They reflect on insights from field research, highlighting how legacies of violence have deeply affected Iraq's diverse communities and continue to shape social and political dynamics more than a decade after major hostilities. The conversation explores the practical hurdles that local practitioners face, including disillusionment with traditional peacebuilding approaches and the difficulty of rebuilding trust among groups fractured by war. This narrative underlines how post-conflict recovery in Iraq must grapple not only with physical reconstruction but also with social healing and inclusive reconciliation processes that account for the country's contested memories and fractured relationships.[38]

2.6 Identity-Based Interventions

Identity-based interventions are a family of socio-psychological approaches that seeks to influence attitudes, openness and behaviour, by reducing identity and moral threat rather than by directly persuading individuals or groups to change their beliefs. These interventions are grounded in the premise that resistance to policy reform, reconciliation or intergroup cooperation often stems from threats to self-integrity, group dignity or moral identity, rather than from disagreement over facts or interests.[39] By stabilising valued aspects of personal or collective identity – such as dignity, contribution, faith or moral worth – identity-based interventions reduce defensiveness and enable individuals to engage with challenging information, accountability processes or outgroup perspectives, without experiencing existential threat.

37 Rezarta Bilali, "The Need for Context in Intergroup Conflict Research," *Nature Reviews Psychology* 4 (2025): 501–502, https://doi.org/10.1038/s44159-025-00469-3; see also Bar-Tal, *Intractable Conflicts*.

38 Craig Larkin, Inna Rudolf, and Rajan Basra, "Breaking Cycles of Conflict: Reconciliation and Reconstruction in Post-Conflict Iraq," XCEPT, https://www.xcept-research.org/breaking-cycles-of-conflict-reconciliation-and-reconstruction-in-post-conflict-iraq/.

39 Geoffrey L. Cohen et al., "The Psychology of Change: Self-Affirmation and Social Psychological Intervention," *Annual Review of Psychology* 65 (2014): 333–371; David K. Sherman and Geoffrey L. Cohen, "The Psychology of Self-Defense: Self-Affirmation Theory," *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology* 38 (2006): 183–242, https://doi.org/10.1016/S0065-2601(06)38004-5.

Within this family, self-affirmation interventions are the most empirically established example. Self-affirmation operates by restoring a sense of global self-integrity, which dampens defensive cognitive processing and increases openness to counter-attitudinal information, compromise and institutional engagement.[40] Importantly, these effects are primarily cognitive-motivational rather than emotional: emotional changes, such as reduced anger or anxiety, tend to follow from reduced identity threat rather than drive the effect.[41] Related identity-based approaches include interventions that emphasise alternative valued identities, moral self-concepts or role-based recognition, all of which function by decoupling moral worth from contested political or intergroup domains.

A field experiment in Israel, conducted by Shuman et al.,[42] tested whether self-affirmation messaging could motivate members of an advantaged group (Jewish Israelis) to support policies that reduce inequality for Arab citizens. Researchers transformed the classic self-affirmation exercise into brief social media videos that asked viewers to reflect on their personal values before presenting evidence of unequal government budgets. Compared with information-only controls, the self-affirmation video increased willingness to share campaign content, support redistributive policies and engage in collective action, showing that threat-reducing messages can overcome resistance to equality initiatives. The study demonstrates how behavioural interventions can be embedded in real non-governmental organisation (NGO) campaigns to promote structural change.

Identity-based interventions are particularly relevant in FCASs, where chronic insecurity, humiliation, and blame narratives heighten identity threat and make direct persuasion, victimhood framing or emotional appeals prone to backlash. In such contexts, identity-based interventions function best as enabling or preparatory mechanisms, increasing receptivity to downstream interventions such as hope-based narratives, norm-change campaigns, justice processes or reintegration policies.[43] While they are not designed to produce immediate behavioural change on their own, the evidence suggests that identity-based interventions play a critical role in fostering cooperation and reducing resistance in high-threat environments by addressing a core psychological bottleneck in intergroup conflict.

2.7 High-Risk, High-Reward Approaches

High-risk, high-reward approaches are psychological interventions designed to disrupt deeply entrenched, rigid or extremist beliefs in contexts where more conventional strategies have limited impact. One prominent example is the use of paradoxical thinking interventions. Paradoxical thinking operates by presenting messages that are consistent with individuals' existing beliefs but pushed to an exaggerated or absurd extreme, thereby prompting cognitive

40 Geoffrey L. Cohen, "Reducing the Racial Achievement Gap: A Social-Psychological Intervention," *Science* 313, no. 5791 (2006): 1307–1310, https://doi.org/10.1126/science.1128317 ; T. Epton et al., "The Impact of Self-Affirmation on Health-Behavior Change: A Meta-Analysis," *Health Psychology* 34, no. 3 (2015): 187–196, https://doi.org/10.1037/hea0000116.
41 Cohen et al., "The Psychology of Change," 333–371.
42 Eric Shuman et al., "Advancing Support for Intergroup Equality via a Self-Affirmation Campaign," *Group Processes & Intergroup Relations* 26, no. 8 (2023): 1888–1908, https://doi.org/10.1177/13684302221128505.
43 Bar-Tal, "Interventions to Change."

dissonance and reconsideration of those beliefs. Evidence indicates that it can reduce ideological rigidity and support for violence among highly committed or hawkish audiences.[44]

These approaches are considered high reward because they can reach otherwise resistant populations and produce meaningful belief or behavioural shifts, but high-risk because miscalibration, misinterpretation or politicisation can lead to backlash, reinforcement of extremism or participant harm. As such, they require careful audience segmentation, extensive pre-testing, strong ethical safeguards and clear stop/go rules, and should only be deployed where lower-risk interventions are insufficient.[45]

As stated, paradoxical thinking interventions aim to promote attitude change by exaggerating individuals' existing beliefs or dominant societal narratives, thereby exposing internal contradictions and prompting cognitive reconsideration. Rather than directly challenging deeply held views – which can provoke defensiveness – this approach works indirectly by encouraging reflection through perceived self-generated insight, making it particularly effective among ideologically rigid or highly polarised populations resistant to conventional persuasion.

Evidence suggests that such interventions can reduce support for extreme positions and increase openness to compromise in entrenched conflicts. However, paradoxical thinking carries significant risks if poorly calibrated: exaggerated messages may be misunderstood as genuine endorsement of radical views, potentially reinforcing polarisation or unintentionally legitimising extreme narratives. Careful design, cultural sensitivity and rigorous pretesting are therefore essential to ensure that the intervention induces reflection rather than escalation.

44 Daniel Bar-Tal et al., "Chapter Three – Paradoxical Thinking as a Paradigm of Attitude Change in the Context of Intractable Conflict," *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology* 63 (2021): 129-187, https://doi.org/10.1016/bs.aesp.2020.11.003; Boaz Hameiri et al., "Challenges for Peacemakers: How to Overcome Socio-Psychological Barriers," *Policy Insights from the Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 1, no. 1 (2014): 164–171, https://doi.org/10.1177/2372732214548428; Boaz Hameiri et al., "Paradoxical Thinking Interventions: A Paradigm for Societal Change," *Social Issues and Policy Review* 13 (2019): 36–62, https://doi.org/10.1111/sipr.12053; Shira Hebel-Sela, Nadine Knab, and Boaz Hameiri, "Paradoxical Thinking Interventions in intergroup conflicts: A Promising Method to Affect Cognitions and Behavior Among People with Strongly Held Attitudes," in Halperin, Hameiri, and Littman, *Psychological Intergroup Interventions*.

45 Hameiri et al., "Challenges for Peacemakers," 164–171; Hebel-Sela, Knab, and Hameiri, "Paradoxical Thinking Interventions," in Halperin, Hameiri, and Littman, *Psychological Intergroup Interventions*; Béatrice Hasler, Yiftach Ron, and Patrice L. Weiss, "Improving Intergroup Relations through Interactive Media," in Halperin, Hameiri, and Littman, *Psychological Intergroup Interventions*.

Iraqis internally displaced by ISIS living in a displaced persons camp in 2015 within Iraqi Kurdistan. Erbil, Iraq (June 11, 2015).
Sebastian Castelier / Shutterstock.com

3 Platforms for Delivery in FCASs

The effectiveness of socio-psychological interventions in FCASs depends not only on the chosen intervention but also on where and how it is delivered.[46] Delivery platforms shape reach, cost, political risk, and who is exposed to harm or benefit. Evidence highlights three platforms with the greatest policy relevance in fragile contexts: mass media, education systems and digital/interactive technologies, each with distinct strengths and risks. Immersive and interactive media interventions – including virtual reality, interactive narratives and advanced digital platforms – aim to increase engagement, perspective-taking, or norm perception through experiential exposure rather than persuasion alone.

Mass media platforms (radio, television, social media and entertainment-education,[47] and cinemas[48] offer the highest scalability and cost-effectiveness, making them particularly suitable for norm-based, belief-focused, and meta-perception interventions. Media-based delivery enables vicarious and parasocial contact, norm-signalling, and narrative reframing at population scale, often without requiring direct participation or face-to-face interaction – an essential advantage in insecure environments. However, media interventions typically have smaller average effects (which are still meaningful when they reach large audiences), and require careful framing, pre-testing and monitoring to avoid politicisation, misinterpretation or elite capture.[49]

Education systems (schools; universities; vocational training programmes) provide structured, repeated exposure, and are especially effective for early- and mid-life interventions targeting prejudice, norms and belief malleability. Schools offer a relatively protected environment and a captive audience, which can reduce selection bias and increase the durability of effects. Their limitations in FCASs include uneven access, exclusion of key adult populations that drive violence, and vulnerability to political interference, making them more suitable for long-term stabilisation investments rather than rapid-response tools.[50]

Digital and interactive platforms, including interactive storytelling and immersive virtual reality, represent high-engagement but higher-risk delivery channels. These platforms can intensify emotional and cognitive engagement, making them promising

46 Behavioural Insights Team (BIT), *Mass Media: An Evidence Review* [Updated ed.] (BIT, 2021) https://www.bi.team/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/211124_MassMedia_EvidenceReview-1-updated-2.pdf; Halperin, Hameiri, and Littman, *Psychological Intergroup Interventions*.

47 Rebecca Littman, Rezarta Bilali, and Boaz Hameiri, "Promoting Peace through Mass Media Interventions," in Halperin, Hameiri, and Littman, *Psychological Intergroup Interventions*.

48 S. Polanía-Reyes, A. Casas, and B. Hameiri, *A Movie Reduces Intergroup Hostility and Promote Peace after Decades of Protracted Armed Conflict* [Manuscript in preparation] (2026).

49 Elizabeth Levy Paluck et al., "Prejudice Reduction: What Works? A Review and Assessment of Research and Practice," *Annual Review of Psychology* 60 (2009): 339–367. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.psych.60.110707.163607; see also S. Alonso-Diaz, A. Casas, S. Polanía-Reyes, and A. Fonseca, *Media Interventions Modulate Prosocial Choice Dynamics* [Manuscript in preparation] (2026); Casas et al., "A Media Intervention."

50 Dearbháile Counihan and Laura K. Taylor, "School-Based Interventions to Improve Intergroup Relations," in Halperin, Hameiri, and Littman, *Psychological Intergroup Interventions*.

for high-risk/high-reward interventions such as paradoxical thinking or experiential perspective-taking. Digital and interactive platforms can help change the views of elites or policymakers.[51] At the same time, they are more resource-intensive and carry elevated risks related to data protection, harassment, misinformation amplification and participant safety, and therefore require robust ethical safeguards and contingency planning. In FCASs, these tools are best deployed through small-scale pilots or tightly controlled programmes, rather than wide rollouts.[52]

The Colombian *Pathways for Peace* experiment illustrates the potential of immersive virtual reality as a peacebuilding tool. In a randomised trial in Bogotá and Medellín, participants who watched a UN documentary via virtual reality showed stronger empathy towards ex-combatants, greater support for the peace agreement, and a higher willingness to donate to reintegration efforts than those exposed to the same content in 2D or text formats. Some effects persisted for six months, suggesting that immersive narratives can foster durable prosocial attitudes in post-conflict settings.[53]

51 Casas et al., "A Media Intervention."
52 Hasler et al., "Improving Intergroup Relations."
53 Casas et al., "A Media Intervention."

4 What Does *Not* Work (or Works Poorly)

Evidence from behavioural and conflict psychology consistently shows that several commonly used approaches fail to deliver sustained stabilisation outcomes in FCASs, and in some cases can cause harm. One-off workshops without follow-up or reinforcement tend to produce short-lived attitudinal shifts which decay rapidly once participants return to unchanged social and institutional environments; without repetition, norm reinforcement or structural signals, effects rarely persist.[54] Similarly, generic 'peace education' programmes, detached from lived conflict realities, often lack credibility among affected populations, as abstract messages about tolerance or coexistence fail to engage with the concrete grievances, fears and power relations that shape behaviour in FCASs.[55]

Empathy-only approaches, particularly in high-threat and asymmetric conflicts, show weak and inconsistent effects and can backfire by increasing defensiveness, moral licensing or perceptions that victims are being asked to accommodate injustice. Experimental studies demonstrate that perspective-taking can produce 'ironic effects' in real intergroup interaction, heightening self-focus and evaluative concern rather than openness, especially when identities are polarised.[56] Related work shows that symbolic expressions of moral concern can license subsequent bias, allowing advantaged group members to feel absolved without supporting structural change.[57]

Moreover, intergroup contact and empathy framed around harmony may reduce disadvantaged groups' attention to inequality and weaken their motivation for collective action, thereby unintentionally reinforcing the status quo.[58] Consistent with needs-based models of reconciliation, interventions that emphasise shared feelings without addressing power asymmetries and justice claims risk being interpreted as demands for unilateral accommodation, which can delegitimise peace efforts among lower-power groups.[59]

More broadly, interventions that ignore power asymmetries and justice claims risk reinforcing the status quo, delegitimising peace efforts, and alienating lower-power groups whose participation carries higher social and security costs.

54 Paluck et al., "Prejudice Reduction: Progress and Challenges," 533–560.
55 Counihan and Taylor, "School-Based Interventions."
56 Jacquie D. Vorauer et al. "Helpful Only in the Abstract? Ironic Effects of Empathy in Intergroup Interaction," *Psychological Science* 20, no. 2 (2009): 191–197, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9280.2009.02265.x; J. D. Vorauer et al., "When Trying to Understand Detracts from Trying to Behave: Effects of Perspective Taking in Intergroup Interaction," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 96, no. 4 (2009): 811–827, https://doi.org/10.1037/a0013411.
57 B. Monin et al., "Moral Credentials and the Expression of Prejudice," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 81, no. 1 (2001): 33–43, https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.81.1.33.
58 Nils Karl Reimer et al., "Intergroup Contact and Social Change: Implications of Negative and Positive Contact for Collective Action in Advantaged and Disadvantaged Groups," *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 43, no. 1 (2017): 121–136, https://doi.org/10.1177/0146167216676478; Tamar Saguy et al., "The Irony of Harmony: Intergroup Contact Can Produce False Expectations for Equality," *Psychological Science* 20, no. 1 (2009): 114–121, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9280.2008.02261.x; Nicole Tausch et al., "How Does Intergroup Contact Affect Social Change? Its Impact on Collective Action and Individual Mobility Intentions among Members of a Disadvantaged Group," *Journal of Social Issues* 71, no. 3 (2015): 536–553, https://doi.org/10.1111/josi.12127.
59 Nurit Shnabel et al., "Promoting Reconciliation through the Satisfaction of the Emotional Needs of Victimized and Perpetrating Group Members: The Needs-Based Model of Reconciliation," *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 35, no. 8 (2009): 1021–1030, https://doi.org/10.1177/0146167209336610.

Victimhood-focused interventions, including those that promote a common victimhood identity or the acknowledgment of victimisation by an outgroup, have been extensively examined in the social and political psychology of conflict. This literature shows that collective victimhood can become a central axis of group identity in protracted conflicts, shaping moral perceptions, intergroup emotions and legitimacy dynamics.[60] Research has also documented how these dynamics can evolve into competitive victimhood, in which groups contest moral status based on suffering, thereby constraining empathy and willingness to reconcile.[61]

In response, some approaches have proposed inclusive victimhood or harm acknowledgment as mechanisms to reduce intergroup hostility. However, available evidence suggests that while these approaches may improve symbolic attitudes and moral recognition, they rarely produce sustained behavioural or policy-relevant change when implemented in isolation.[62]

Finally, attitude-only evaluation frameworks systematically underestimate both risks and impacts: behavioural change (such as reduced violence, discrimination or support for hardline policies) often occurs without corresponding attitudinal shifts, while apparent 'success' on surveys may mask unchanged or worsening real-world behaviour. Across FCAS contexts, these shortcomings underline the need for sequenced, power-sensitive designs, reinforced over time and evaluated through behavioural and institutional outcomes, not perceptions alone.[63]

60 Daniel Bar-Tal et al., "A Sense of Self-Perceived Collective Victimhood in Intractable Conflicts," *International Review of the Red Cross* 91, no. 874 (2009): 229–258, https://doi.org/10.1017/S1816383109990221; Gilad Hirschberger, "Collective Trauma and the Social Construction of Meaning," *Frontiers in Psychology* 9, no. 1441 (2018), https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2018.01441.

61 Masi Noor et al., "When Suffering Begets Suffering."

62 Bilali et al., "Victim and Perpetrator Groups' Divergent Perspectives," 75–108; N. Shnabel et al., "A Needs-Based Model of Reconciliation: Satisfying the Differential Emotional Needs of Victim and Perpetrator Groups," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 94, no. 1 (2008): 116–132, https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.94.1.116; Nurit Shnabel et al., "Overcoming Competitive Victimhood and Facilitating Forgiveness through Re-Categorization into a Common Victim or Perpetrator Identity," *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 49, no. 5 (2013): 867– 877, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jesp.2013.04.007; Johanna Ray Vollhardt, "Altruism Born of Suffering and Prosocial Behavior Following Adverse Life Events: A Review and Conceptualization," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 97, no. 3 (2009): 403–427, https:doi.org/10.1007/s11211-009-0088-1.

63 John Dixon et al., "'Let Them Eat Harmony': Prejudice-Reduction Strategies and Attitudes of Historically Disadvantaged Groups," *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 19, no. 2 (2010): 76–80, https://doi.org/10.1177/0963721410363366; Paluck et al., "Prejudice Reduction: What Works?" 339–367; Paluck et al., "Prejudice Reduction: Progress and Challenges," 533–560.

5 Key Risks and Mitigation Strategies (Risk Flags)

Psychological intergroup interventions in FCASs entail systematic risks that can undermine stabilisation objectives if left unmanaged. A central risk is political backlash, particularly when interventions are perceived as externally imposed or as bypassing domestic political processes: evidence shows that this can delegitimise peace efforts and strengthen spoilers, making local co-design, trusted messengers and conflict-sensitive framing essential mitigating measures. A closely related risk is the reinforcement of power asymmetries, in which interventions disproportionately benefit higher-power groups or pressure marginalised populations to reconcile without recognition or justice, thereby entrenching grievances. Mitigation requires equity-by-design, disaggregated impact monitoring, and alignment with justice or institutional reform pathways.

Risk	Description	Mitigation
Political backlash	Intervention perceived as foreign social engineering	Local co-design; narrative framing
Elite capture	Benefits accrue to dominant groups	Disaggregated impact monitoring
Moral equivalence	False symmetry between victim and perpetrator	Careful sequencing; justice alignment
Short-termism	Effects decay without reinforcement	Layered, repeated exposure
Measurement failure	Attitudes change but behaviour does not (or vice versa)	Behavioural indicators

A second major risk concerns harm to participants, including stigmatisation, reprisals or increased exposure to insecurity – risks that disproportionately fall on lower-power groups. Research underscores the need for do-no-harm assessments, safeguarding protocols, anonymisation, and clear exit and referral mechanisms in all FCAS programming. In addition, interventions can backfire by increasing reactance, polarisation, or ideological rigidity when messages are poorly calibrated or mistimed.[64] To address these issues, robust mitigation should include piloting, audience segmentation and predefined stop/go rules. Finally, there is a

64 Yasemin Gülsüm Acar, Sigrun Marie Moss, and Özden Melis Uluğ, eds., *Researching Peace, Conflict, and Power in the Field* (Springer, 2020).

persistent measurement risk: evaluations focused solely on attitudes may obscure real-world harm or miss meaningful behavioural change. Best practice, therefore, requires behavioural indicators, triangulation with administrative or incident data, and longitudinal follow-up. Collectively, these risk flags highlight that in FCASs, intervention success depends as much on risk governance and evaluation design as on psychological theory.[65]

Addressing power dynamics in FCASs is essential to ensuring that psychological intergroup interventions do not inadvertently reinforce existing inequalities or escalate tensions. In these contexts, power asymmetries often drive violence, instability and political deadlock, and interventions that ignore these dynamics can exacerbate existing grievances. Interventions that target higher-power groups, such as elites or security forces, often show stronger effects, but if left unchecked, may inadvertently soften the powerful without addressing the needs or risks faced by marginalised or lower-power groups. If socio-psychological approaches are not tailored to power imbalances, they risk being perceived as 'imposing' peace or reconciliation on those who have the most to lose, undermining legitimacy and further entrenching social divisions.[66]

To address power dynamics effectively,[67] interventions must be power-sensitive from the outset. This starts with diagnosing power relations through detailed conflict analysis to understand who holds political, economic and coercive power, and how these groups interact with others. From there, interventions should be designed to sequence engagement, starting with empowering lower-power groups, addressing the needs of marginalised populations, and only later fostering contact or empathy between groups. Critical to this approach is the idea of equity-by-design, ensuring that interventions do not merely address surface-level issues but actively engage with power structures. This requires disaggregating outcomes by group status and tracking who benefits and bears risk, ensuring that marginalised voices are heard and protected.

Finally, safeguarding agency and safety for lower-power groups is essential in any intergroup intervention, particularly in FCASs. Research shows that interventions are most effective and ethically sound when they address group-specific needs and explicitly account for structural inequalities rather than assuming symmetrical participation across groups.[68] Voluntary participation, informed consent, and trauma-sensitive facilitation therefore constitute minimum requirements to prevent interventions from imposing disproportionate psychological or social risks on vulnerable populations. Power-sensitive interventions should also be integrated with institutional reform and justice pathways, complementing broader efforts to ensure security, governance and accountability. When psychological interventions are disconnected from structural reforms, they risk becoming superficial or even reinforcing existing inequalities, ultimately

65 John Dixon et al., "'Let Them Eat Harmony'," 76–80; Halperin, *Emotions in Conflict*; Paluck et al., "Prejudice Reduction: What Works?", Paluck et al., "Prejudice Reduction: Progress and Challenges," 533–560.
66 Dixon et al., "Let Them Eat Harmony," 76–80; Paluck et al., "Prejudice Reduction: Progress and Challenges," 533–560.
67 Čehajić-Clancy et al., "Advancing Research and Practice," 574–588.
68 T. Hässler et al., "A Multinational Study of Pathways toward Social Change," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 123, no. 3 (2022): 553–578, https://doi.org/10.1037/pspi0000365.

undermining long-term stability. The overarching principle is clear: interventions in FCASs must actively reduce, manage, or at least acknowledge power imbalances to foster a more inclusive and just peacebuilding process.

Why Power Dynamics Must Be Addressed

A robust body of social and conflict psychology demonstrates that ignoring power asymmetries systematically weakens or reverses the effects of psychological intergroup interventions in FCASs. Evidence shows that commonly used approaches – such as contact, empathy and harmony-focused messaging – often generate stronger attitudinal and behavioural shifts among higher-power or majority groups, while leaving lower-power or victimised groups unchanged or worse off, thereby reinforcing existing hierarchies rather than enabling social change.[69]

Research on victimhood, emotions, and reconciliation further shows that premature calls for empathy or coexistence in asymmetric conflicts can undermine perceptions of justice and legitimacy, triggering backlash and disengagement among marginalised populations.[70] Reviews of prejudice-reduction and peace interventions emphasise that power-sensitive design, sequencing and equity-aware evaluation – including disaggregated outcomes and behavioural indicators – are critical conditions for effectiveness, not optional ethical add-ons.[71] Together, this evidence underlines that in FCASs, psychological interventions that fail to account for power dynamics risk entrenching grievances and destabilising political settlements. In contrast, those that explicitly address power dynamics can support more inclusive and durable stabilisation outcomes.

69 Čehajić-Clancy et al., "Advancing Research and Practice," 574–588; Dixon et al., "Let Them Eat Harmony," 76–80; Hässler et al., "A Multinational Study of Pathways," 553–578; Saguy et al., "The Irony of Harmony," 114–121.
70 Bilali et al., "Victim and Perpetrator Groups' Divergent Perspectives," 75–108; Eran Halperin, *Emotions in Conflict*.
71 Čehajić-Clancy et al., "Advancing Research and Practice," 574–588; Paluck et al., "Prejudice Reduction: What Works?" 339–367; Paluck et al., "Prejudice Reduction: Progress and Challenges," 533–560.

Fighters providing covering fire in Aleppo, Syria (September 3, 2017).
Mohammad Bash / Shutterstock.com

6 Implications for Programming: Portfolio and Sequencing Approach

For programming in FCASs, the evidence points to a portfolio and sequencing approach rather than reliance on single interventions. Belief- and norm-based interventions should be prioritised as first-line tools because they target core psychological barriers to stabilisation, demonstrate consistent effects across contexts, and – although their impact on the individual is relatively small – can be delivered at scale at low cost. Addressing psychological needs, for example through self-affirmation, is a good alternative.

Contact- and empathy-based interventions, by contrast, should be treated as second-line, context-specific tools, deployed selectively and only where power asymmetries, security risks, and enabling beliefs and norms have already been addressed. Across all intervention families, impact is most substantial when programmes invest in sequencing – for example, shifting beliefs and norms before promoting contact, rather than funding isolated pilots. This requires embedding behavioural science early in political economy and conflict analysis, so that psychological mechanisms are aligned with political incentives and institutional constraints from the outset.

Operationally, prioritising interventions evaluated in real-world conflict or post-conflict environments is preferable to relying exclusively on laboratory findings.[72] Programmes should be designed to measure and report disaggregated effects by group status, power and risk exposure, recognising that average effects can mask harm or inequity. Monitoring frameworks should prioritise behavioural outcomes, such as violence incidence, discriminatory actions or policy support over attitudinal change alone, as these are more closely linked to stabilisation objectives. Finally, socio-psychological interventions should be combined with institutional and material reforms, recognising that psychological change can open space for peace but cannot replace governance, justice and security guarantees; sustained stabilisation depends on the interaction between minds, institutions and material conditions.[73]

Bottom Line for Decision-Makers

Psychological intergroup interventions are not substitutes for political settlements or institutional reform, but they are force multipliers when deployed carefully. In FCASs, small, well-targeted psychological shifts can unlock disproportionate behavioural and political effects, or, if mishandled, exacerbate fragility. Current psychological interventions increasingly respect context as a core design principle,

72 Halperin, Hameiri, and Littman, *Psychological Intergroup Interventions*; Hans IJzerman et al., "Use Caution When Applying Behavioural Science to Policy," *Nature Human Behaviour* 4, no. 11 (2020): 1092–1094, https://doi.org/10.1038/s41562-020-00990-w.

73 Paluck et al., "Prejudice Reduction: What Works?" 339–367 ; Paluck et al., "Prejudice Reduction: Progress and Challenges," 533–560.

reflecting a shift away from universalised peacebuilding models towards approaches grounded in local histories, power relations and narrative environments.

Recent work by Hagai and Bilali[74] demonstrates that intergroup conflict and violence are shaped by collective narratives that embed local grievances within broader geopolitical frames, including perceptions of external threats, international alliances and global moral hierarchies. As a result, effective interventions now adapt their framing, messengers and sequencing to specific conflict ecologies – distinguishing, for example, between active violence, frozen conflicts and post-agreement transitions. By explicitly acknowledging asymmetries in harm and responsibility, and aligning psychological change with institutional and diplomatic realities, these context-sensitive interventions reduce the risk of backlash, moral equivalence and elite manipulation, thereby increasing both legitimacy and effectiveness in FCASs.[75]

At the same time, advances in the field reflect growing attention to who is represented in intervention evidence, not only where and how interventions are delivered. Research by Ghai et al.[76] highlights persistent problems of sample bias and limited representativeness in behavioural science, showing that many findings have historically relied on narrow, urban or relatively advantaged populations that do not reflect those most exposed to violence, coercion or marginalisation.

Additionally, the recent debate generated by the i-frame/s-frame controversy in Chater and Loewenstein[77] opens up the need for intervention frameworks to address this divide. Recently, Cardenas[78] proposed that community-level interventions trigger dynamics that bring about change in the s-frame, since sustained change implies a dynamic that involves the scaling up of local collective action processes, achieving an s-frame transformation. Behavioural sciences can offer insights into how these processes lead to transformational change.[79]

In response, contemporary interventions increasingly prioritise field-based designs, inclusive sampling strategies, and disaggregated analysis by group status and power, allowing implementers to detect heterogeneous effects that are critical for stabilisation outcomes. Together, improvements in contextual and geopolitical sensitivity,[80] and sample representativeness and external validity,[81] signal a maturation of socio-psychological interventions – moving them closer to the complex political, social and geopolitical realities that shape conflict dynamics and prospects for peace.

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