

Cultural Meanings of Gendered Intergroup Contact: A Qualitative Study in the Greek Context

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From Intergroup Contact to Collective Action



- Intergroup contact is widely recognized as an effective strategy for reducing prejudice and improving intergroup relations (*Allport, 1954; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006*).
- Yet, improving interpersonal attitudes does not necessarily translate into support for structural social change.
- This paradox has been described as the **irony of harmony**: positive contact may reduce prejudice while simultaneously decreasing disadvantaged-group members' willingness to challenge inequality (*Saguy et al., 2009*).
- These findings shifted attention from the effects of contact to the psychological conditions under which contact promotes or inhibits collective action.

Gender Relations as a Cultural Context of Intergroup Contact



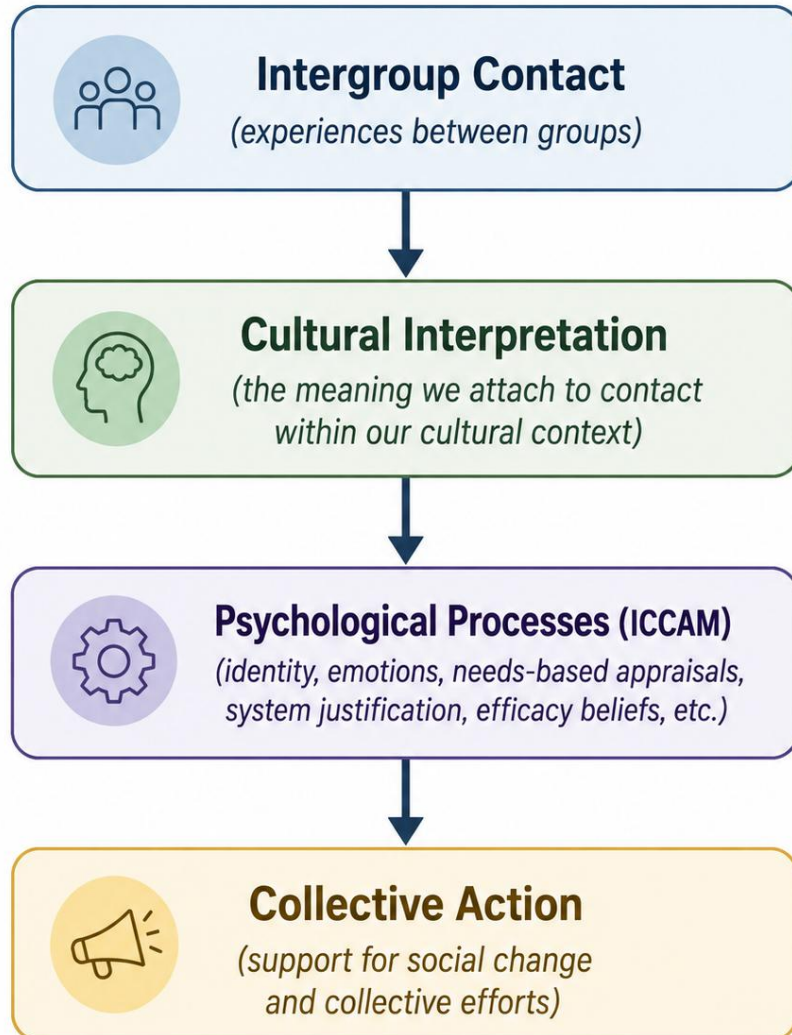
- Gender relations combine continuous, everyday intergroup contact with persistent structural inequality, making them a unique case for studying contact and social change (*Hässler et al., 2021*).
- Because gender relations are embedded in culturally shared norms, contact is not interpreted in a culturally neutral way (*Ridgeway, 2011*).
- Gender therefore provides an ideal context for examining how cultural meanings shape the relationship between intergroup contact and collective action.
- Within the contemporary Greek sociocultural context, where increasing support for gender equality coexists with enduring relational norms (Dimopoulou et al., 2026), our study asks how gendered intergroup contact is culturally interpreted and how these interpretations may facilitate or constrain social change.

A Psychological Model of Contact and Collective Action



- The Integrated Contact–Collective Action Model explains how intergroup contact may facilitate or inhibit collective action through different psychological pathways for advantaged and disadvantaged groups (*Hässler et al., 2021, 2022*).
- By integrating contact theory with collective action research, ICCAM explains not only whether contact changes intergroup attitudes, but also when it motivates or discourages support for structural social change.
- The model highlights key psychological mechanisms, including group identification, group-based emotions, needs-based appraisals, system justification, and perceived legitimacy of inequality.
- However, ICCAM does not explicitly theorize how culturally shared meanings shape the interpretation of intergroup contact before the above processes are activated.

Culture as an Interpretive Framework



- Cultural psychology views social experiences as interpreted through culturally shared meanings rather than as direct responses to objective situations (*Shweder, 1991*).
- Accordingly, gendered intergroup contact is not psychologically neutral but acquires meaning through culturally shared norms, values, and interpretive frameworks.
- We propose that these cultural meanings provide the interpretive framework through which contact acquires psychological meaning before activating the processes specified by ICCAME.

Research Aims and Project Context



- The present study reports findings from the qualitative phase (WP3.1) of the INSENTIVE project, which examines how intergroup contact may promote or inhibit support for social change in the domains of gender and sexual/gender diversity. Specifically, we addressed the following research questions:



1. How is gendered intergroup contact **culturally interpreted** in the Greek context?



2. How are these cultural meanings expressed **across different interactional contexts**?

Participants and Design



- Qualitative data were collected through three **focus groups** conducted in Athens ($N = 20$):
 - ✓ one with cisgender heterosexual men ($n = 7$)
 - ✓ one with cisgender heterosexual women ($n = 7$)
 - ✓ and one mixed-gender group ($n = 6$)
- Focus groups **were facilitated** by two trained research assistants. In the single-gender groups, one facilitator belonged to the gender group under study; the mixed group was co-facilitated by one woman and one man.
- The **discussion guide** explored everyday intergroup contact, perceptions of gender inequality, and support for social change.

Analytic Strategy



- Data were analyzed using **Reflexive Thematic Analysis** (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2022).
- Themes were developed through **iterative discussions** among researchers, treating multiple interpretations as a resource for analytic depth rather than seeking inter-coder agreement.
- Themes were then reinterpreted through a comparative contextual reading across the three interactional contexts, informed by ICCAM and Cultural Psychology, to identify **culturally shared interpretive frameworks** shaping the meaning of intergroup contact.

RQ1: How is gendered intergroup contact culturally interpreted?



Across the three focus groups, participants tended to interpret gendered intergroup contact through three culturally shared meanings that shaped how participants understood relationships, inequality, and social change.

- **Harmony.** Positive contact was primarily understood as maintaining harmonious interpersonal relationships rather than confronting structural inequalities.
- **Individualized responsibility.** Gender inequality was frequently framed as depending on personal character, maturity, or individual choices rather than broader social structures.
- **Moralized social relations.** Support for social change was often evaluated in moral rather than political terms, emphasizing respectful dialogue, fairness, and personal responsibility.

RQ1: How is gendered intergroup contact culturally interpreted?



Relational Harmony and Boundary Maintenance

- Gendered contact was often interpreted positively when it preserved relational comfort, role clarity, and manageable interpersonal boundaries.
- Equality was generally endorsed, but interpreted as compatible with differentiated gender roles and relational boundaries.

“We should not flatten everything. He is the man; I am the woman.” *F, women-only group*

“I feel more comfortable sharing personal things with women, but when I’m with men I speak differently and behave more freely.” *M, men-only group*

RQ1: How is gendered intergroup contact culturally interpreted?



Individualized Responsibility

- Gender inequality was frequently reframed through individual character, personal experience, maturity, or interpersonal style.
- This shifted attention away from structural gender arrangements and toward “the kind of person” one is dealing with.

“I give my relationships with men a positive sign, but it definitely depends on the person; I don’t want to reduce it to gender.” *F, mixed group*

“Maybe it would be better if we stopped thinking, ‘this is a man’ and ‘this is a woman,’ and instead saw them simply as a person behaving in a certain way” *F, women-only group*

RQ1: How is gendered intergroup contact culturally interpreted?



Moralized Social Relations

- Social change was often imagined through morally appropriate interaction: respect, dialogue, calmness, and personal decency.
- Conflict was not necessarily rejected, but it had to remain civil, controlled, and relationally acceptable.

“All views should be heard freely—not by shouting at each other or becoming aggressive just because we disagree. Such a dialogue could really bring results..” *F, mixed group*

“A good person may have a bad idea... I think change can come through dialogue and open discussion, not by going against them.” *M, men-only group*

RQ2: How are cultural meanings expressed across different interactional contexts?



The three cultural meanings were shared across all focus groups, but each interactional context highlighted different aspects of these meanings.

- ♂ **Men's group:** Cultural meanings were often discussed through self-reflection on masculinity, privilege, and social expectations.
- ♀ **Women's group:** Cultural meanings were grounded in everyday experiences of inequality, safety, and relational negotiation.
- ♂♀ **Mixed group:** Participants emphasized dialogue, mutual understanding, and negotiated perspectives.
- 👉 Rather than revealing different cultural meanings, the three group contexts highlighted different expressions of the same shared interpretive frameworks.

RQ2: How are cultural meanings expressed across different interactional contexts?



Relational Harmony Across Gender Group Contexts

- Positive contact was valued across all three groups, but participants emphasized different aspects of relational harmony depending on the interactional context.

♂

Harmony was discussed mainly as **comfort in self-disclosure** and the negotiation of masculine norms.

“I feel more comfortable sharing personal things with women, but when I'm with men I speak differently and behave more freely.”

♀

Harmony was linked to **maintaining differentiated gender roles** while endorsing equality.

“We should not flatten everything. He is the man; I am the woman.”

♂ ♀

Harmony was framed as **mutual understanding and balanced dialogue** b/w women and men.

“In larger groups –whether at work or in any other setting– you have not chosen everyone around you. And that's where it becomes much clearer that gender equality does not always exist.”

RQ2: How are cultural meanings expressed across different interactional contexts?



Individualized Responsibility Across Gender Group Contexts



- Across all three groups, gender inequality was frequently interpreted through the characteristics of individuals rather than structural gender relations. However, each interactional context emphasized different sources of individual responsibility.

♂

Responsibility was linked to **personal reflexivity** and the willingness to question one's own stereotypes.

"I have noticed a change in myself. What matters to me now is being with people –women or men– who are kind, thoughtful, and genuinely good people."

♀

Responsibility was linked to **individual personality and interpersonal behaviour**, regardless of gender.

"Social inequality is ultimately a combination of lack of knowledge, lack of understanding, and selfishness –regardless of whether you are a man or a woman."

♂ ♀

Responsibility was negotiated through both **personal qualities and situational context**, acknowledging that experiences vary across people and settings.

"I generally have positive relationships with men, but it definitely depends on the person –I wouldn't reduce it to gender."

RQ2: How are cultural meanings expressed across different interactional contexts?



Moralized Social Relations Across Gender Group Contexts

- Across all three groups, social change was primarily framed as a moral rather than political process. However, participants emphasized different moral pathways through which change should occur.

♂

Change was understood as **persuasion through everyday conversations** rather than confrontation.

“There is no need to get into conflict... Just tell a story. That's how we help, every day.”

♀

Change was linked to **maintaining relationships while expressing disagreement**, avoiding unnecessary interpersonal rupture.

“I recently learned that I can say I don't like something without thinking that everything will fall apart.”

♂ ♀

Change was framed as **inclusive dialogue**, where different viewpoints should be openly expressed and respectfully discussed.

“Everyone should be able to express their views freely, without shouting or becoming aggressive. Only that kind of dialogue can really bring change.”

Explaining the Contact–Collective Action Relationship



Our findings suggest that cultural meaning-making helps explain why positive intergroup contact does not necessarily translate into support for structural social change.

- ICCAM identifies the psychological processes linking contact to collective action (Hässler et al., 2021, 2022). Our findings suggest that these processes operate through culturally shared interpretive frameworks.
- Consistent with the irony of harmony (Dixon et al., 2017; Saguy et al., 2009), positive contact was valued primarily for preserving harmonious relationships rather than challenging structural inequality.

Rather than challenging ICCAM, our findings situate its psychological mechanisms within a broader cultural system of meaning-making.

Toward a Cultural Process of Depoliticization?



- Taken together, the three interpretive frameworks suggest a broader cultural process through which **structural inequality becomes culturally depoliticized.**
- This interpretation may help explain why contact can improve interpersonal gender relations without necessarily strengthening support for collective action.

Reflections and Future Directions



- The proposed process of cultural depoliticization is best understood as a theoretical interpretation emerging from the present qualitative findings rather than an empirically established causal sequence.
- Our findings point to culturally situated interpretive frameworks emerging within the contemporary Greek sociocultural context. Future research should examine whether these interpretive frameworks operate similarly across cultural contexts and different forms of intergroup contact.
- The present findings provide the conceptual basis for the ongoing longitudinal quantitative phase of the INSENTIVE project, where these culturally informed hypotheses will be examined alongside established psychological mechanisms linking intergroup contact to collective action.

*Culture is not merely the context in which contact occurs;
it is how contact becomes meaningful.*

Thank you for your attention!

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