

Research Statement

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I am a development and behavioral economist with two main strands of research. The first explores the economic forces that shape intergroup relations and group-based inequality—with work on caste, religion, partisanship, race, and gender. The second explores the causes and consequences of religiosity and rituals, both of which shape group identity. Alongside these core strands, I have contributed to broader development economics through work on behavioral firms, and on developing country policy-making during the pandemic. Methodologically, I use field and natural experiments to test theories drawn from economics, psychology, and sociology. I have raised roughly US\$2 million in funding for my research. Note: In the paper descriptions below, asterisks indicate the 10 co-authors who are current or former PhD advisees or pre-docs.

Intergroup Relations and Inequality. The first phase of my work on intergroup relations unpacks the black box of the contact hypothesis, the social-psychological theory that interpersonal contact between groups can reduce prejudice under certain conditions ([Allport 1954](#)). The contact hypothesis has been considered “one of the best-supported theories in social psychology” ([Pettigrew 2021](#)), though surprisingly, no field experiments had tested for the importance of the conditions of contact prior to my work ([Paluck et al. 2019](#)).

[Allport \(1954\)](#) conjectured that intergroup contact would reduce prejudice only if four conditions were met: common goals, intergroup cooperation, equal status, and the support of authorities. I ran the first field experiment varying the type of contact, in **Types of Contact: A Field Experiment on Collaborative and Adversarial Caste Integration** (*American Economic Review*, 2021; Winner of the 2019 CESifo Award for Best Paper in Behavioral Economics; named a “landmark study” in [Paluck et al. \(2021\)](#)). I worked in the context of caste in northern India, where residential segregation is widespread, inter-caste marriage nearly nonexistent, and discrimination against low-caste groups (“untouchability”) still common. I recruited 1,261 young men to play in cricket leagues, randomly assigning them to play in the leagues

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or remain in a control group. Among those assigned to the leagues, I randomly assigned players to teams—varying cross-caste collaborative contact—and randomly assigned teams to opponents—varying cross-caste adversarial contact. Collaborative contact increases post-league cross-caste behaviors, including friendships and trading, while adversarial contact has negative effects (albeit imprecisely estimated). These findings constitute the first field experimental test of the common goals condition of the contact hypothesis. Further results speak to two of the remaining three conditions. First, conditional on having common goals, cross-caste outcomes are not affected by monetary incentives for more *intergroup cooperation*. Second, the positive effects of collaborative contact are present across all castes, despite clear evidence of *unequal status* within teams (e.g., low-caste groups being less likely to be selected as captains). Subsequent work by other researchers has built on mine by showing that the effects of contact in the workplace depend on the type of production technology (Ghosh 2025), and that equal-status contact has more enduring effects on cross-partisan tolerance than unequal-status contact (Greene et al. 2025).

In principle, intergroup contact may have its most consequential impacts among elite decision-makers: through impacts on policy-making and hiring, for example. I explore this in **Legislature Integration and Bipartisanship: A Natural Experiment in Iceland** (with Donghee Jo; *Journal of Politics*, 2025). In Iceland, national politicians are randomized to seating at the start of each new legislative session. We find evidence of limited peer influence: different-party MPs randomized to sit next to each other are 0.5 to 1 percentage points more likely to vote alike, with this effect disappearing after seating is re-randomized for the following session. Contrary to the core mechanistic claim of the contact hypothesis, the limited effects we find are more consistent with a channel of cue-taking, rather than enduring persuasion.

For Has Intergroup Contact Delivered? (*Annual Review of Economics*, 2025) I carry out a meta-analysis of contact experiments. To avoid the reporting and publication biases detected in earlier meta-analyses (e.g., Paluck et al. 2019), I hold the literature to a high bar: I restrict to the 41 pre-registered experiments, and track effects only on the outcomes pre-registered as primary outcomes. I find the average effects of intergroup contact to be positive, but small, at around one-tenth of a standard deviation. Using treatment effect-level data and only within-experiment variation, I also document a *generalization problem*: contact is considerably more effective at changing behavior and attitudes toward people met than toward the outgroup as a whole.¹ This paper poses a challenge for a theory that has previously been considered among the best-supported in social psychology as a whole. Why do experimental contact interventions tend to have limited positive effects, even when the four Allport conditions are met? And how

¹For a specific experiment that exemplifies this pattern, see Mousa (2020).

can we design interventions to ensure that effects generalize to the outgroup as a whole?

We make progress on the latter question in **Learning About Outgroups: The Impact of Broad Versus Deep Interactions** (with Anujit Chakraborty, Arkadev Ghosh*, and Gareth Nellis). This paper starts with a simple Bayesian idea: to learn about the outgroup as a whole, one plausibly needs to sample many distinct outgroup members—a Bayesian learner should not generalize much from only meeting one. On the other hand, some psychologists emphasize *friendship potential* as a fifth condition of intergroup contact: contact may be more effective when the context allows the possibility of forming a deep intergroup friendship, which in turn may facilitate more intimate disclosure. We test these hypotheses in the context of Hindu-Muslim relations in India. We randomize whether intergroup contact is broad—a participant works with a different outgroup member each day for six days—or deep—a participant works with the same outgroup member each day for six days. We find evidence in favor of the economic hypothesis: broad contact leads to more accurate beliefs about outgroup strangers than deep contact. But even so, we do not find effects of either type of contact on *behaviors* toward outgroup strangers, echoing the generalization problem I highlighted in the *Annual Review* paper.

My research demonstrates that the design of contact interventions matters for impacts, and that even well-designed contact often has limited effects. These takeaways have led me to consider alternative approaches to prejudice-reduction. One approach from psychology is *recategorization*—relations between two groups may be reshaped if members of those groups can see themselves instead as members of a superordinate group (e.g., as co-nationals), or as members of cross-cutting groups (e.g., class may cut across religion). We take these ideas from the lab to the field in **Are Social Identities Substitutes? Evidence from the Introduction of School House Systems in India** (with Arkadev Ghosh*, Gareth Nellis, Meghna Sinha Ray*, and Johny Tom Varghese). We randomized the introduction of school House Systems across almost 200 schools in southern India. Treated schools randomized students to four cross-cutting Houses, with subsequent activities and rewards built around the new House groups. The Houses take root as a new social identity: treated students have stronger House identity than caste or religious identity. And yet the new identity does not substitute for the old: downstream outcomes related to pre-existing social identities are largely unaffected.

The recategorization-based approach we studied has similarities with typical contact-based interventions: both are relatively light-touch and short-term. A complementary approach is to take the longer and more structural view: how do deeply rooted prejudices evolve over time, and what structural features ultimately lead to their demise? I take this approach in ongoing work on untouchability practices in India, entitled **The Evolution of Discriminatory Norms:**

Evidence from Untouchability in India (with Anahita Karandikar* and Jeff Weaver). Untouchability practices are explicit discriminatory norms against Scheduled Castes (SCs). For example, researchers in 2001 found that SCs were prohibited from entering non-SC homes in 73% of villages and from accessing water sources in 48% (Shah et al. 2006). While anecdotal evidence suggests that untouchability practices have declined in recent decades, the only existing quantitative datasets are cross-sectional. As a result, we lack knowledge of basic facts (e.g., which practices have declined and which have persisted?), and we have little understanding of the forces, policy-related or otherwise, that cause the decline of discriminatory norms. For our project, we are revisiting hundreds of villages for which we have tracked down micro-data on untouchability practices from a 2005-08 survey (Armstrong et al. 2010). The two-wave panel will allow us to document basic descriptive facts and explore causal drivers of change (including political and economic shocks), motivating the design of future intervention-oriented experiments.

While the aforementioned papers focus on the *reshaping* of intergroup relations, another plank of my work on group identity takes relations as given, and instead asks: how can policymakers and marginalized groups best manage group divides? One approach to managing intergroup interactions is to mask group identity—a common strategic response of Scheduled Caste individuals in Indian cities, and, historically, of Black individuals “passing” for White in the US. While economists have begun to study passing and the social construction of group identity descriptively (e.g., Adukia et al. 2025), we offer the first causal evidence in **Identity Uncertainty** (with Anujit Chakraborty, Arkadev Ghosh*, and Gareth Nellis). We hired mixed-caste pairs to work together on a one-day data entry task. We randomly assigned each mixed-caste pair to either be: (i) introduced by full names, making caste common knowledge; (ii) introduced by first names only, making caste disclosure a choice; or (iii) instructed not to disclose caste. By the end of the day, workers in the two caste-masking conditions are less likely to guess the caste of their partner correctly, and less confident in the guesses they make. Surprisingly, partner relations are significantly worse when caste is masked. The negative effects appear to be driven by the identity uncertainty created by our treatments—uncertainty prevents coordination on shared norms of interaction, making workers less friendly and interactions less authentic. These results are consistent with the idea of Goffman (1959) that social interactions are a form of theatrical performance, requiring a shared script or working consensus of the situation to be successful. As a result, in a world in which social identity is important, its suppression may actually harm intergroup interactions, at least in the short run.

Again taking existing discriminatory attitudes as given, an alternative approach to identity management is to identify *allies* among the majority group. If marginalized group members can

sort toward non-discriminatory employers, for example, the impact of discriminatory attitudes in equilibrium will be reduced (Becker 1957). We study the problem of identifying allies in academia in **Virtue Signals** (with Deivis Angeli^{*}; Revise & Resubmit, *Journal of the European Economic Association*). Speaking to a large literature on the informativeness of strategic communication, we ask: are social media statements in support of racial justice predictive of offline discriminatory behaviors? Using an audit experiment with over 11,000 tweeting academics, we find that tweets are highly predictive: academics who do not tweet about racial justice are 18% less likely to accept a meeting request from an ostensibly Black student than from a White student. Academics who tweet in support of racial justice are 6% more likely to accept a meeting request from a Black student. Consistent with economic theory (Frankel and Kartik 2019), we also find that tweets are less informative about discriminatory behavior when the social image returns to tweeting about racial justice are higher. From this result, we might conjecture that Becker’s idea of sorting away from discriminators might be hindered in contexts in which non-discriminatory attitudes are socially desirable.

My work on gender inequality furthers this line of research by studying whether gender gaps are best addressed through changing the *person* (e.g., the beliefs and attitudes of individuals), or through changing the *situation* (e.g., the institutional context in which individuals make decisions). I apply this question to the highest level of British politics in **Internal Versus Institutional Barriers to Gender Equality: Evidence From British Politics** (with Noor Kumar^{*}, Uyseok Lee^{*}, and Olaitan Ogunnote^{*}; *American Economic Review*, 2026). We study the participation of Members of Parliament (MPs) in Prime Minister’s Questions (PMQs): a high-stakes weekly opportunity for MPs to ask the Prime Minister a question in front of hundreds of their parliamentary peers, and voters watching on television. Using weekly lotteries, we show that asking a single question boosts subsequent vote margin by 4%, yet women are 10 to 15% less likely to participate in the PMQs lotteries than same-cohort men. This gender gap does not narrow through lottery-induced experience in question-asking, but it almost completely closes following a COVID-19-induced format change that reduces the adversarial nature of PMQs. The broader message of this paper is that many workplace norms and rules are the persistent legacy of an era with few women workers. As sectors diversify, the resultant mismatch may then create gender gaps that can be addressed through institutional changes.

In **Coupling Labor Supply Decisions: An Experiment in India** (with Madeline McKelway; Accepted, *Journal of the European Economic Association*), we consider an intra-household gender inequality in India: women are much less likely to work outside the house than men, and wives and husbands often disagree on the appropriateness of women working outside, with wives more likely to be in favor. Similar to the paper on Prime Minister’s Questions, we ask

whether changing the decision-making environment can narrow the gender gap, while taking the preferences of both wives and husbands as given. We partnered with one of India's largest carpet manufacturers to offer married women trainee jobs as weavers, randomizing (i) whether a job ticket required for enrollment was delivered directly to the wife or to the husband, and (ii) whether the other spouse received no information about the ticket, information, or information and discussion with their spouse. Against the predictions of both academic experts and locals, we find that discussion reduces enrollment by 50%. This result suggests that policy-makers' attempts to involve more household members in decision-making may backfire, by creating a bias toward the status quo.

Rituals and Religion. The second strand of my research considers the role of rituals in shaping intergroup relations and mental health, and the drivers and consequences of religious experience.

Sociologists and anthropologists have long hypothesized that collective rituals—synchronized and repeated actions or speech, frequently imbued with symbolism—build shared identity among participants ([Durkheim 1912](#)). These claims suggest that such rituals might be used prospectively to bridge group divides. We take this idea to the field in **Creating Cohesive Communities: A Youth Camp Experiment in India** (with Arkadev Ghosh*, Prerna Kundu*, and Gareth Nellis; *Review of Economic Studies*, 2026). We randomized Hindu and Muslim boys either to participate in a two-week integrated youth camp or to a control group, and we randomized camp participants to either a camp with or without a bundle of collective rituals—e.g., raising the flag, singing the national anthem, synchronized dancing, etc. The camps improve intergroup relations—they reduce ingroup bias and increase willingness to interact with outgroup members—and increase psychological well-being. Remarkably, campers continue to have twice as many outgroup friends as control participants one year after the camps ended. The addition of rituals increases a sense of shared identity during the camps, but does not affect post-camp outcomes on average. The effects of rituals are, however, heterogeneous: they are more positive for the Hindu majority than the Muslim minority. Collective rituals may then be more effective for shaping the behaviors of a dominant majority in the presence of a marginalized minority than vice versa.

Throughout societies and history, collective rituals have often been bundled with substances or behaviors that induce altered states of consciousness. The role of these altered states for health is increasingly recognized in an emerging clinical literature on the effects of psychedelics on depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, and other mental health conditions (e.g., see [Goodwin et al. 2022](#)). This clinical literature tells us little about the role of *ritual* in psychedelic

ceremonies, given the lack of pure control groups and the individualized nature of FDA-compliant clinical regimens. We unbundle the effects of psychedelic rituals in **Psychedelics and Well-Being: An Experiment in Brazil** (with Patrick Francois and Ieda Matavelli*; Reject & Resubmit, *Journal of Political Economy*). We partnered with a center in Brazil that offers ayahuasca, a psychedelic tea, to run the largest psychedelic randomized controlled trial, and the first to measure effects on economic outcomes. We randomized whether group ceremony-attending participants received ayahuasca or a placebo. We also surveyed participants who did not attend their assigned group ceremony, allowing us to estimate effects of the ceremony in the absence of the drug, using a difference-in-differences approach.

Three days after the ceremony, 36% report that the experience was the single most meaningful experience of their lives, while a further 40% report the experience to be in their top five. Compared with those assigned to the placebo, ayahuasca has large positive effects on mental health: reducing distress and increasing happiness up to six months afterward, and increasing meaning and purpose by the two-year point. The ceremony alone improves mental health, making the combined effect of the drug and the ceremony even more positive. Given a ceremony cost of only US\$25, we estimate the mental health benefits to be at least 200 times larger than the costs to participants. Furthermore, we find that participants who report having experienced more “mystical” experiences are more likely to experience subsequent improvements in mental health, whether in the psychedelic or the placebo arm. These findings suggest that deep, spiritual experiences may promote well-being, regardless of whether they are triggered by a psychedelic or by a non-psychedelic group ritual.

In ongoing work, we are studying the economic effects of ayahuasca, relative to taking the placebo. Anecdotal accounts suggest that psychedelics may lead people to “turn on, tune in, drop out,” to quote counterculture leader Timothy Leary, which may imply negative effects on working hours and income. We find the opposite. Two years after the ayahuasca ceremony, participants assigned to take ayahuasca rather than the placebo report longer working hours, higher job satisfaction, and higher income. Psychedelics appear to facilitate meaning-making at the workplace, rather than a search for meaning elsewhere.

Psychedelic experiences are perceived to be spiritual, and thus we might expect similar mechanisms to be involved in the aftermath of religious experiences, particularly when such experiences are associated with altered states of consciousness, as in the church services characteristic of the charismatic strand of Christianity. In **Religious Revival and Social Order**, I study the case of the Welsh Revival of 1904 to 1905, in which 6% of the population converted to Christianity in only two years. The revival was characterized by mass displays of emotion: “...they preached and sang outside several public-houses. Crowds quickly gathered. Here again

there were heard heart-broken outbursts of contrition among the listeners – men and women sobbing like children” (a contemporary account from the *Western Mail* newspaper). Using two complementary difference-in-differences designs, I find that the Revival reduced drunkenness offenses by 40% and reduced the number of pub workers by 10 to 12%. These effects persisted despite the revival only temporarily increasing church membership.

My paper on the Welsh Revival shows the influence of the dissenting (non-state) Christian movement in the United Kingdom—a movement with more “emotionalism” than the state Church of England. In **Investing in Angels: The Impacts of Lottery Grants to State Clergy** (with Benjamin Milner and Cory Smith), we explore the role of financial support in preserving the dominance of the established church. We make use of a natural experiment: the state issued lottery-based grants to support poor state clergy throughout the 1700s. Winning parishes are less likely to report the presence of dissenting (non-state church) households in the short term, and less likely to construct dissenting churches in the long term, yet score lower on a composite index of religious service provision. These results support Adam Smith’s argument about our exact setting: that by limiting competition in the marketplace of ideas, state sponsorship of religion can negatively affect religious life ([Smith 1776](#), Book V, Ch. 1, Part III).

Development Economics. I have three papers on other topics in development economics. I contribute to the behavioral firms literature in **Do Microenterprises Maximize Profits? A Non-Randomized Vegetable Market Experiment in India** (with Abhijit Banerjee, Greg Fischer, Dean Karlan, and Benjamin Roth; *Revise & Resubmit, American Economic Journal: Applied Economics*). Many papers in development economics show that firms remain small because they are constrained—they lack capital, labor, managerial skill, or information. We study a setting in which vegetable vendors demonstrate that they can materially increase their scale and profits—i.e., they are not constrained—but choose not to. In a non-randomized market-level experiment in India, we provided temporary subsidies for vendors in three markets to increase their scale. Compared with 17 comparison markets, vendor scale and profits excluding the subsidy increase considerably during the subsidy period, but vendors revert to their previous scale after the subsidies end. Notably, the contemporaneous effect on profits is a *market-level* result, meaning that a market-level profitable deviation exists. We conclude that vendor behavior meaningfully diverges from profit maximization when considering take-home pay, likely due to a combination of high marginal costs of effort and feared sanctions from breaking (inefficient) anti-competitive norms.

My final two papers relate to the COVID-19 pandemic. In **Social Protection and Social Distancing During the Pandemic: Mobile Money Transfers in Ghana** (with Dean Karlan,

Robert Osei, Isaac Osei-Akoto, Benjamin Roth, and Chris Udry; *Journal of Development Economics*, 2025), we find no anticipation effects of cash transfers, some positive contemporaneous effects and, surprisingly, negative long-term effects on consumption and psychological well-being. In **India’s Food Supply Chain During the Pandemic** (with G. V. Nadhanael* and Benjamin Roth; *Food Policy*, 2021), we document the impact of India’s COVID-19 lockdown on the food supply chain. Food arrivals in wholesale markets dropped by 69% in the three weeks following the lockdown and wholesale prices rose by 8%, but both had fully recovered six weeks after the lockdown began.

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Note: current and former PhD advisees and pre-docs are indicated by asterisks.

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- [1] “Types of Contact: A Field Experiment on Collaborative and Adversarial Caste Integration.” *American Economic Review*, 2021.
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- [3] “Has Intergroup Contact Delivered?” *Annual Review of Economics*, 2025.
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- [9] “Religious Revival and Social Order.” 2021.

- [10] “Virtue Signals” (with Deivis Angeli*). Revise & Resubmit, *Journal of the European Economic Association*, 2025.
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- [15] “Investing in Angels: The Impacts of Lottery Grants to State Clergy” (with Benjamin Milner and Cory Smith). 2026.

Work in Progress

- [16] “Are Social Identities Substitutes? Evidence from the Introduction of School House Systems in India” (with Arkadev Ghosh*, Gareth Nellis, Meghna Sinha Ray*, and Johny Tom Varghese). 2026.
- [17] “The Evolution of Discriminatory Norms: Evidence from Untouchability in India” (with Anahita Karandikar* and Jeff Weaver). 2026.

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