

# Parallel Lives: 25 years on

## Findings from our first year

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## Introduction

This findings paper summarises the results from the first year of *Parallel Lives: 25 years on*<sup>1</sup>. This three-year ESRC funded project (2024-2027) is a partnership between the Universities of East Anglia, Oxford and Bristol, and the Belong Network. The project seeks to better understand some of the real-world complexities of inter-ethnic group contact experiences. Past research has tended to focus on the impact of contact and much less on the drivers for contact. This timely and important study will focus on the factors and conditions that might encourage inter-ethnic group contact to occur in the first place. It will be examining the role of place, individual psychological characteristics, and importantly, the interplay between them, in helping or hindering positive inter-ethnic group contact. We will also examine the factors that predict whether positive or negative contact occurs, and how different factors predict contact engagement for different ethnic groups in the UK. For a full description of the project and each of the three research stages please see [Belong | Parallel Lives Research Project Launch Event Presentation - Belong](#)

Please see the academic research paper for more information and additional findings.

Meleady, R., Peetz, H., McKeown-Jones, S., Leckie, G., Broadwood, J. (under review). A longitudinal multilevel analysis of neighbourhood and individual-level predictors of cross-ethnic friendships in the UK. Manuscript submitted for publication. Available at: [https://osf.io/preprints/psyarxiv/n4fpx\\_v1](https://osf.io/preprints/psyarxiv/n4fpx_v1)

### What will this piece of research add to current knowledge about inter-ethnic group contact?<sup>2</sup>

During the last 25 years inter-ethnic group contact has been a key element of local and national government strategies and programmes designed to foster stronger relationships between different ethnic groups. This is because decades of research have told us that:

- Positive inter-ethnic group contact can result in decreased prejudice and increased empathy towards other groups.
- Positive interactions between different ethnic groups fosters tolerance and mutual understanding.
- The more we mix and interact with other ethnic groups, the more accepting and open-minded we become.
- We know that sustained positive inter-ethnic group contact over time, for example, inter-ethnic group friendships, is one of the most powerful ways of reducing prejudice and promoting empathy between different groups.

<sup>1</sup> The Cantle Report (2001) revealed deep divisions in UK towns and cities. Communities were described as living “parallel lives” due to ethnic segregation in towns and cities across the UK.

<sup>2</sup> See the reference section at the end for academic papers drawn on to clarify what this research adds to current knowledge.

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- We also know that this can have a ripple effect on the immediate friends and wider community of those directly involved in inter-ethnic group friendships, helping to break down stereotypes and promote empathy more widely.

However, in the UK growing ethnic diversity coexists with persistent patterns of avoidance and informal segregation, with nearly half of British adults reporting they have no friends from a different ethnic background. Much of past academic research into inter-ethnic group contact has focused on what happens after people have a positive experience of mixing. As such inter-ethnic group contact has been heralded as our best hope in combatting racial prejudice and strengthening good relations between groups. But we still don't know enough about the factors that encourage people to mix in the first place.

In addition, there are structural and psychological barriers to engagement in inter-ethnic group contact:

- For people to interact regularly across different ethnic groups they need to live, work or study in close proximity to each other. Even then there is no guarantee the contact will be 'meaningful', that is, result in friendships which impact prejudices or empathy.
- Various studies have shown how individual psychological traits and perceptions predict whether or not people engage across ethnic groups. For example, higher openness and agreeableness are associated with more inter-ethnic friendship. But we don't know enough about the interplay between the local neighbourhood context and individual psychological traits. For what type of person, in what type of context, will greater opportunity for contact translate to greater engagement?
- The quality of the contact is important. High quality interactions are more strongly linked to positive attitudes than the quantity of contact, with inter-ethnic group friendships representing a particularly powerful and meaningful form of positive inter-ethnic group contact. It is therefore important to understand better the factors that predict positive and negative contact.

Also, past research has not engaged so much with the interplay between different drivers for mixing. Recent research findings from *Belong* indicate that mixing is experienced differently by different ethnic groups, mediated by how directly someone is affected by discrimination and prejudice. Overall, we do not know enough about the factors and conditions that might encourage UK White Majority and UK ethnic minorities to mix.

*Parallel Lives: 25 years on* aims to flip the focus from *measuring the impact* of inter-ethnic group contact to *understanding how psychological and environmental factors combine* to shape people's willingness to interact with people from a different ethnic group to their own.

## The first year of research

In the first year of the project, we examined data from the **Understanding Society** study (waves 3,6, and 9) as well as other openly available datasets from the UK government and census data. We looked at neighbourhood- and individual-level predictors in relation to inter-ethnic group friendship and the interplay between them, to answer the question when, or for whom, does greater neighbourhood diversity translate into greater inter-ethnic group contact.

18,807 people were included in the analyses, 1490 (8% of total responses) of whom were Asian and 713 (3.8% of total responses) were Black. People came from 11,181 LSOAs<sup>3</sup> and 320 different LADs<sup>4</sup>.

The Understanding Society study asks people to indicate the proportion of their friends that are of the same ethnic group as themselves, based on respondents' perceptions of their friendship networks, and according to their own definition of what qualifies as a 'friend'. For White respondents, this includes all UK minority ethnic groups. For Black or Asian respondents this includes friendships with White individuals and with members of other UK minority ethnic groups. This broader definition is important to bear in mind when interpreting patterns in this set of results for the first year of the study, as they may reflect both majority–minority and minority–minority inter-ethnic group ties.

The neighbourhood-level predictors were chosen because we wanted to capture neighbourhood level variables such as levels of hate crime, ethnic composition and political orientation as we know that some of these predictors act as proxies for prevailing attitudes toward diversity and towards immigration. Individual-level psychological predictors were chosen so that we could investigate how individual perceptions, and character traits predicted inter-ethnic group contact.

Our primary aim in this study is to provide an overall picture of how predictors of inter-ethnic group contact operate across majority and minority groups, rather than to examine within-minority differences. We are fully aware that there are within-minority differences, however that is not the focus of this study. We have also been reliant on the broad ethnic categories (Asian, White, Black) that have been used in the Understanding Society dataset. We are aware that these groupings don't reflect the different UK minority ethnic communities and their distinct histories, cultural backgrounds, and experiences of inter-ethnic group relations in the UK. As we begin to collect our own data, we hope to be able to develop a more nuanced analysis that will take some of these differences into account.

<sup>3</sup> LSOA stands for Lower Layer Super Output Area. LSOAs are small, statistical geographic areas in the UK, created by the Office for National Statistics (ONS), that are used to report small-area statistics. Each LSOA contains a population of typically 1,000 to 3,000 people and is made up of several smaller Output Areas (OAs).

<sup>4</sup> Local Authority Districts (LADs): In the UK, LADs are a generic term for the district level of local government. They include London Boroughs, Metropolitan Districts, Unitary Authorities, and Non-Metropolitan Districts in England, Unitary Authorities in Wales, Council Areas in Scotland, and District Council Areas in Northern Ireland.

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## What we learnt

Both individual traits and neighbourhood context shape inter-ethnic group friendships, but their effects vary across ethnic groups. Consistent with expectations, individual dispositions mattered with openness emerging as a robust predictor of inter-ethnic group contact. And at the contextual level the structural opportunity for contact remained paramount. Importantly a central contribution of this study lies in demonstrating that the structural opportunities and neighbourhood context do not operate in isolation from individual psychological characteristics and that the interplay between them for different groups is complex.

### Both individual level and neighbourhood level predictors play a role for White participants

For White participants, several individual factors emerged as significant predictors of inter-ethnic group friendships:

- Participants who scored higher on openness, agreeableness, and neighbourhood belonging tended to have more inter-ethnic group friendships.
- Personal political orientation and perceiving more discrimination in the local area were also associated with more inter-ethnic group friendships.

For White participants, several neighbourhood factors emerged as well:

- Participants living in more diverse areas and in areas with more hate crimes tended to have more inter-ethnic group friendships.
- Participants living in areas that had a high percentage of Brexit 'leave' votes had less inter-ethnic group friendships.

In other words, the makeup and attitudes of the wider community also shape opportunities for friendships across groups in different ways.

### Individual level predictors interact with neighbourhood diversity

Our findings showed that the individual level predictors of agreeableness, openness and neighbourhood belonging interacted with the neighbourhood level predictor of neighbourhood diversity for White participants:

- Of the neighbourhood level predictors neighbourhood diversity was a strong predictor of inter-ethnic group friendship for White participants. Individual traits of agreeableness and feelings of neighbourhood belonging enhanced the effect of neighbourhood diversity and was linked to more inter-ethnic group friendships.

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- Even when there was little to no neighbourhood diversity, one group of people were still more likely to form inter-ethnic group friendships: Participants who were high on the individual trait of openness had more inter-ethnic group friendships when there was little neighbourhood diversity as compared to participants low on openness.

This highlights that even when there are few opportunities for inter-ethnic group ties in the local environment some participants might search for other contexts and opportunities to form friendships because of individual psychological characteristics.

### **Age and neighbourhood diversity are consistent predictors of inter-ethnic group friendships for all three ethnic groups**

Across all three ethnic groups (Asian, Black, and White), both age and neighbourhood ethnic diversity emerged as predictors of inter-ethnic group friendship.

- Older participants reported significantly lower levels of inter-ethnic group friendship in each ethnic group.
- Residing in less ethnically diverse neighbourhoods was strongly associated with reduced inter-ethnic group friendship across all groups.

The difference in older and younger age groups may be attributed to migration patterns over the last 60 years and an increase in UK ethnic minorities as a proportion of the overall population meaning that younger age groups are more likely to have had inter-ethnic group contact at school, college, in the workplace, and online. Whereas for older generations this may have been rarer. It may also indicate the influence of greater diversity in sport, popular culture, music and film over recent decades and that the internet and use of social media means that particularly for younger people, communities extend beyond local geographical boundaries.

### **Neighbourhood diversity does predict contact but not to the same degree for each ethnic group**

Beyond the impact of age and neighbourhood diversity we discovered a much more complex picture. Diversity does predict contact but not to the same degree for each group. Different factors, such as income, education, neighbourhood deprivation, and race hate crime affected contact and not always in the direction that one might expect. For example:

- Higher levels of income were positively associated with inter-ethnic group friendships for Asian participants indicating that income/education levels may be a factor for Asian participants in inter-ethnic group friendships, but not for White or Black participants.



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- Higher levels of education was a positive predictor of inter-ethnic group friendships for White participants and Asian participants but unrelated for Black participants.
- Racial based hate crimes in a neighbourhood were positively associated with inter-ethnic group friendship for White participants, but unrelated for Asian and Black participants. This is counterintuitive as it might be assumed that higher race hate crime locally would have a cooling effect on Black and Asian people's desire to mix with White people.

### Some predictors affect contact for different ethnic groups but in opposite directions

In addition, some predictors were associated with inter-ethnic group friendship for different groups but in opposite directions:

- Extraversion predicted more inter-ethnic group friendships for Asian participants but not for White or Black participants.
- While greater neighbourhood belonging was positively associated with inter-ethnic group friendships among White and Black participants, it was negatively associated with inter-ethnic group friendship for Asian participants.
- Neighbourhood deprivation was associated with more inter-ethnic group friendships for Black participants but not for White or Asian participants.

Lower levels of inter-ethnic group friendship for some groups might be explained by a combination of different factors including patterns of migration and residential segregation; patterns of discrimination, newer migrants feeling a lower sense of belonging, and living in neighbourhoods with high rates of churn leading to lower levels of trust.

## What this might mean for current policy and practice

The current findings underline the importance of understanding the particularities of place and how neighbourhood level predictors such as diversity levels, deprivation and levels of race hate crime affect interethnic contact, and not always in the direction that one might expect.

They also emphasise the importance of individual psychological factors and the interplay between them and the neighbourhood context, and asks how might these individual psychological traits be encouraged to translate into meaningful interethnic friendships?

A national social cohesion policy should take this into account, and in particular the impact of levels of diversity on positive interethnic group friendships. Entrenched education and residential segregation could be tackled by re-affirming and strengthening the duty to foster good relations in education and through housing policy and workplaces. A positive national conversation about the benefits of diversity, which highlights the specific advantages and opportunities gained by those with more diverse networks, would support structural efforts to foster stronger relationships between different ethnic groups.

The findings also suggest that structural opportunities for mixing are likely to be most effective when paired with initiatives that cultivate residents' personal capabilities and motivations. For example, programmes in schools, workplaces, and community settings that develop social and emotional skills, perspective-taking and empathy may amplify the natural advantages of individuals high in openness or agreeableness and help those less predisposed to engage more confidently with diverse others.

In low diversity areas where there are less opportunities for inter-ethnic group contact, investing in **social and cultural infrastructure**, and interventions such as **schools linking** could play an important role in increasing residents' openness to diversity and new experiences. Linking these to broader health and socio-economic outcomes such as tackling **social isolation and loneliness**, and **improving upward social mobility**, may help to build a more compelling story of inclusive belonging.

Measures have been developed to identify **target areas for investment in social infrastructure**. Local areas need to be provided with resources and tools that can respond to the specificities of place, particularly regarding neighbourhood level predictors. Local authorities are currently under acute resource constraints. Without capacity, even well evidenced social contact programmes can falter. At the same time there is a wealth of evidence from previous cohesion programmes of cost-effective strategies and toolkits for embedding cohesion interventions in local areas. Belong's work to build an **accessible bank of evidence-based approaches** is an important resource.

Feelings of neighbourhood belonging emerged as a strong predictor at the individual level of inter-ethnic group contact. This suggests that efforts to cultivate a sense of collective neighbourhood belonging at a local level may support personal motivation to form cross-group relationships. Initiatives that build a sense of collective identity and pride in the neighbourhood such as opportunities for shared decision-making, well



designed public spaces and regular community events that encourage joint participation could all strengthen the social glue that makes people more willing to connect meaningfully with others.

Effective interventions must also consider how neighbourhood level predictors affect contact differently for UK White majority and UK ethnic minorities. The impact of higher levels of race hate crime on inter-ethnic group friendships is particularly interesting. For the UK White majority, our findings suggest that high-tension or high-threat environments for ethnic minorities do not necessarily suppress inter-ethnic group engagement; rather, they may create a motivation to build bridges. Policies and programmes that provide structured opportunities for constructive dialogue, cooperative projects, and collaborative problem-solving in these contexts may channel this motivation into meaningful inter-ethnic group interaction and friendship formation.

For UK ethnic minorities one would expect higher levels of race hate crime to have a cooling effect on their willingness to engage in inter-ethnic group friendships. However, our findings suggest that is not the case. Community programmes that publicly affirm inclusion, for example, through visible anti-discrimination policies, inclusive local events, and political leadership, may be particularly valuable for encouraging ethnic minority residents to engage further across ethnic group lines. Engaging local community leaders in the coproduction and design of local strategies and interventions may further signal that cross-group friendships are socially supported, safe, and valued, thereby reducing anxiety or hesitation about forming new connections.

We may need to find additional ways of fostering stronger relationships between different ethnic groups that are less reliant on contact, particularly in areas of low diversity to develop resilience to extremist narratives. Importantly we need to understand the interplay between broader influences of dominant local, national and international narratives, including online narratives, about immigration, race and social mixing, and the particularities of place, and develop policies accordingly.

## The next stage of the research

In Phase 2 of this study, we will build on the national survey findings of Phase 1 by combining longitudinal surveys with daily diary surveys. This will allow us to capture both stable, and more immediate short-term predictors of contact (for example, daily circumstances, contact opportunity, motivation). By understanding the factors that shape contact behaviour in near-time we will be able to provide a more valid understanding of when and why inter-ethnic group contact occurs.

In the final year of the study, we will broaden the study out by working alongside five diverse local areas to examine the role of place and individual characteristics and the interplay between them in helping or hindering positive inter-ethnic group contact. In this stage of the study we will also be investigating the different drivers of contact for different UK minority groups. By exploring the drivers of inter-ethnic group contact amongst different groups, and in different localities, this research will allow targeted interventions to be tailored to the needs of different populations and locations, addressing groups' specific needs and motivations, and increasing the likelihood of successful contact. As such, it will contribute to more nuanced interventions and policy measures aimed at building social cohesion.

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