Communicating anti-racism

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CHAPTER 7
Making contact

The meaning, practices and politics of social projects for intergroup contact

Introduction

Intergroup contact is increasingly central to current approaches to multicultural integration and anti-racism. Common sense and academic theory both assume that ‘contact’ reduces prejudice and improves interethnic relations (Allport, 1954, Amin, 2002, Pettigrew, 1998; Fortier, 2007; Shukra, Back, Keith, Khan & Solomos, 2004). This faith in the positive effects of intergroup contact has engendered its own genre of social projects and events for multicultural integration (Fortier, 2007). Despite their proliferation, however, little is known about the ways these projects are organized and the specific kinds of practices that they engender.

This lack of insight is somewhat paradoxical given the fact that ‘intergroup contact’ has been extensively researched (Pettigrew, 1998). However, intergroup contact has been studied mostly in experimental settings in which ‘optimal conditions’ for intergroup contact are artificially created (Dixon, Durrheim & Tredoux, 2005). These studies do not differentiate between different forms of intergroup contact and have been accused of falsely assuming that some kind of generic form of ‘contact under optimal conditions’ exists that will produce similarly generic effects (Ibid.). In ‘real world’ situations, optimal conditions are very difficult, if not often impossible, to establish and intergroup contact can take many different forms (Dixon, Durrheim & Tredoux, 2005). Dixon, Durrheim and Tredoux have argued that the results from these studies cannot help us to understand the forms, meanings and outcomes of intergroup contact in ‘real world’ situations where optimal conditions are difficult, if not impossible, to provide (Dixon, Durrheim & Tredoux, 2005).

One crucial problem in this respect is that it remains unclear when and how intergroup contact should be used as a social intervention. This lack of ‘evidence based’ strategies does not appear to have deterred the growth of social projects for intergroup encounters in policy circles. However, it does problematize the fact that, at present, it is unclear what kinds of practices and outcomes are being engendered by these projects and how these can be accounted for.
theoretically. In order to address these issues, empirical studies are needed that examine the discourses and practices at social projects for intergroup encounters in detail. On the one hand, such studies may shed light on the knowledge, ideals, hopes and common sense underpinning of the current proliferation of such projects. On the other hand, they can provide insights into the actual situated social practices, encounters and interactions that are being produced in such projects in the name of a generalized notion of ‘intergroup contact’.

This paper presents an empirical study of a number of social projects for interpersonal contact that took place in the city of Amsterdam in the Netherlands between 2005 and 2006. The main question that will be answered below is how are social projects for ‘intergroup contact under optimal conditions’ discursively and practically constructed and what can be said about their social and political implications? This question is answered below using policy documents, participant observations and in-depth interviews with organizers and volunteers. Data was collected at 5 different social projects from a recent campaign for multicultural integration in the city of Amsterdam, the Netherlands.

In the following pages, I will discuss the main concepts and issues confronting the academic study of interpersonal encounters and formulate a set of sub questions that have guided the data collection and analysis for this study. Next, I will discuss the method of the study. The results are then presented in the order of the sub questions. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the meaning of these results for practices for stimulating multicultural integration and anti-racism.

**Contact hypothesis controversies**

The insights from the social psychological ‘contact hypothesis’ (Allport, 1954, Amir, 1969, Gaertner & Dovidio, 2000) are central to academic engagements with the common sense belief in the effect of intergroup contact on social integration and cultural tolerance. At its most basic, the contact hypothesis holds that inter group hostilities and stereotypes will diminish if groups are brought into contact under favourable conditions (Allport, 1954). These conditions are, among others, equal status between individuals, common goals, intergroup cooperation and the support of authorities, law, or custom (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). When contact occurs under these conditions, individuals are expected to learn personal information about members of the groups they hold prejudices against (Ibid.). In so doing, they come to see similarities between themselves and these ‘others’ and realize that their prejudice is irrational and based on ignorance (Masson &

Critics have argued that the study of the contact hypothesis has focused too much on intergroup contact under ‘optimal conditions’ and therefore failed to study the patterns and consequences of contact in everyday life in divided societies (Connolly, 2000; Dixon, Durrheim & Tredoux, 2005). Due to quantitative methodological conventions, there has been an almost total neglect of the ways in which participants construct the meaning of their experience of contact and which local, biographical, sub-cultural, ideological and political factors play a role in this process apart from the local interpersonal interactions themselves (Connolly, 2000).

Consequently, a number of scholars have recently called for an expansion of the scope of theoretical and methodological approaches in the study of intergroup contact to address these criticisms (Connolly, 2000; Dixon, Durrheim & Tredoux, 2005). This agenda proposes to address the meanings, practices and effects of contact with a focus on their local, historical, social and ideological dimensions. Using qualitative methods such as participatory observation and in-depth interviewing studies might begin to assess the practices and meanings of intergroup contact in the ‘real world’ outside of the experimental laboratory. Through comparative case studies, the processes that occur during intergroup contact may be investigated to understand their local, social and historical determinants and the ways in which they relate to the struggles over power and ideology in contemporary society (Ibid.).

The studies that have already been carried out in this alternative paradigm have focused on experiences and meanings of intergroup contact in everyday life. There have been very few studies on the practices and meanings of intergroup contact in projects and events that claim to provide ‘optimal conditions’ for contact (cf. Connolly, 2000; Dixon, Durrheim & Tredoux, 2005). Despite the fact that they have been organized, these projects are also part of ‘real world’ intergroup encounters. Given that these arranged forms of contact are increasingly used as social interventions by policymakers, these everyday practices form a crucial domain of empirical investigation in the effort to develop a deeper understanding of the various meanings that intergroup contact can have in contemporary society.

**Intergroup contact and power**

The meaning of intergroup contact may be usefully defined as a product of discourse and power in the Foucault (1978) sense. The work of Foucault suggests that power is not a property of an
individual or institution but rather expresses itself in our self understandings and our constructions of social reality. From this perspective, the meanings that people give to intergroup encounters do not flow in the first place from their unmediated experiences. These meanings are instead enabled by the discourses that are available for speaking about, thinking about and experiencing these encounters (Foucault, 1978). Such a post-structural perspective takes a critical step back from the implicit assumption that intergroup contact under ‘optimal conditions’ somehow manages to evade the workings of power. As Fortier has argued, it is an illusion that power relations and conflicts ‘will be somehow suspended through dialogue and intimacy, and that the distance and hierarchy between those who tolerate and those who are tolerated will dissolve’ (p.111). Instead, the question becomes how certain kinds of meanings are reproduced or contested during intergroup contact within particular local, social and historical conditions that frame and shape each encounter.

Jackman and Crane (1986) provide an insightful example of how discourse and power pervade the meaning that is attributed to interpersonal contact. They note the paradoxical happy persistence of male sexist attitudes despite the widespread existence of intimate relationships between women and men. Such enduring and affectionate forms of contact with women have not generally failed to persuade men to support political reforms for women’s legal rights or equal job opportunities (Jackman & Crane, 1986). The explanation for this paradox is that contact between men and women is deeply produced and experienced through heterosexist discourses. These discourses shape the ways in which men can speak about, think about and experience their contact with women. As such, power pervades the minutiae of everyday discourse and practice and the most intimate experiences of many men. Jackman and Crane have argued that the principle also applies in intergroup contact (Jackman & Crane, 1986). Basing their conclusions on quantitative survey data, they conclude that commitments to ethnic in-group privilege remain intact even when people have sustained intimate contact with minority group members. Through contact, Jackman & Crane argue, political commitments to defend the white group’s privilege (as evidenced in low support for policy initiatives for the emancipation of blacks), did not fundamentally change but merely came to resemble sexist attitudes described earlier. Through positive contact, commitments to in-group privilege thus came to coexist with positive attitudes about subordinate groups.

Jackman and Crane rely only on quantitative data for their conclusions and say little about the dynamic interactions and negotiations that occur during contact and that result in the
superficial changes in attitudes and commitments. To increase our understanding of these processes, it is necessary to open the ‘black box’ of intergroup contact and investigate how it comes to take a certain form and meaning within a particular context. What does it mean, for instance, to recognize a ‘common humanity’ through intergroup contact as Allport (1954) has argued? What kinds of practices are considered appropriate to realize such a goal? From a post structural perspective, such an assertion that a ‘common humanity’ has been recognized needs to be regarded as an interactional achievement that is articulated in using available discursive resources and is therefore bound up with the workings of power and ideology.

This study of the selected social projects was guided by four sub-questions. First of all, most quantitative studies have approached ‘contact under optimal conditions’ as a decontextualised process and thus failed to appreciate the situated nature of any encounter and the role of wider political and historical processes in informing the meaning of intergroup encounters. In this study, this issue was addressed by asking: What was the political, local and historical context of the selected projects for intergroup contact?

Second, the theoretical approach outlined above suggests that the meanings of intergroup contact do not inhere in an isolated encounter alone. Instead, even under optimal conditions, intergroup contact needs to be understood as constituted in and mediated by locally used discourses. In the case of projects for social integration, the discourse of the organizers and volunteers is especially important as they decide on the ways in which intergroup contact will be structured in their projects and organize events in ways that might realize desired forms of contact. Therefore, a second question pertained to the discourse of organizers and volunteers: How do organizers construct the meaning of intergroup contact at their events?

Third, in order to understand what kinds of intergroup contact resulted from the efforts of organizers and volunteers, the actual organized encounters themselves were addressed. What forms of intergroup contact were produced at these projects?

The fourth and final question pertains to the ways in which the meaning and practices of contact under optimal conditions related to social integration. From a discursive point of view, this question points to the power relations that are produced when particular discourses position people in particular relations towards each other based on gender, class, ethnicity or other social distinctions. Who is allowed to say what to whom, and why? This requires analysing the meanings and practices of intergroup contact to determine the different roles and positions that they afford participants of different backgrounds. The fourth question that will be answered in the
case study therefore reads: *What are the ideological implications of the meanings and practices produced at the projects for intergroup contact under optimal conditions of the ‘We Amsterdammers’ campaign?*

**Method**

These questions were applied to the campaign launched by the city of Amsterdam after the Islamist inspired assassination of Dutch filmmaker and Islam critic Theo van Gogh. Within two weeks, a new campaign called ‘We Amsterdammers’ was set up with the intent to use new methods of interpersonal contact to decrease dormant conflict in the city, which could be released by triggers such as the murder of van Gogh (see below for more detail).xiii

Five projects were selected as case studies for this paper. The selection was made to reflect the breadth of the campaign’s social projects for intergroup contact. The first of these projects, called the ‘City Games’, was a sports, cooking and musical competition. The second project was a neighbourhood meeting project by an organization called ‘Spicy Food’ (‘Pittig Gekruid’) in which individuals with different backgrounds could cook together and get to know one another. The third project was called the ‘Ramadan Festival’ and was a city wide event in which Muslims and Dutch people could meet for shared meals and discussion nights on various topics associated with Islam and integration. The fourth project was called the ‘Speaking Stone’ and was a Dutch version of the speakers-corner in Hyde Park. It was established near the street where Theo van Gogh was killed and featured weekly debating sessions on Sunday afternoon. The fifth project was called ‘City Dinners’ and consisted of voluntary meetings between Amsterdammers that did not know each other yet over a dinner in a restaurant.

Policy documents and project websites were used to collect the official discourse of the projects. Participatory observations were carried out at a number of selected projects, concentrating mainly on one project for competition (the City Games (‘Stadsspelen’) and one for dialogue (‘the Speaking Stone’). A total of 26 informants from five projects were interviewed in order to understand the meaning of contact to its organizers and volunteers. Upon selection of the respondents, it became clear that volunteers and semi-professionals working on the projects were predominantly higher educated whites.xiv Care was taken to include sufficient non-white respondents but the composition of the sample was also intended to reflect the actual ratio of white and non-white of this group. Of the 26 respondents, 20 were of white Dutch nationality, 5 were of Moroccan descent and one had a Surinam background. Moreover, education levels of all
participants appeared to be very high; over 70% either had a university degree or was enrolled in university.

In the following, the results of the analysis are presented in the order of the four sub-questions formulated earlier. First, the social, political and historical context of the ‘We Amsterdammers’ campaign is discussed. Second, the social practices that participants engaged in are discussed. Third, this is followed by an analysis of the meanings attributed to these practices by organizers. Fourth, the ideological consequences of these social practices and meanings are discussed.

Results
Social, political and historical context

The social projects for intergroup contact were part of the municipality’s so-called ‘diversity policy’ that was set up in the early 1990s. This policy stresses individual citizenship and social cohesion and seeks to promote the equal participation of individuals with diverse ethnic backgrounds in socio-economic, labour, housing and educational spheres. However, its implementation has not yet crystallized into a clear practical strategy (Uitermark, 2003). When Theo van Gogh was murdered by a ‘home grown’ Muslim extremist and a tumultuous aftermath erupted in the country, a novel and practical implementation of diversity policy was devised. Drawing in part on the work of the psychologist Irving Staub (1989), the municipality concluded that the potential for conflict and terrorism in Amsterdam needed to be reduced through a number of social interventions (Municipality of Amsterdam, 2004). For organizers and volunteers, participating in social projects for intergroup encounters was also directly related to the social unrest and polarization that followed the murder of Theo van Gogh. They expressed a strong personal desire to contribute to the pacification of the conflicts between the white Dutch majority and the Muslim minority but felt powerless as individuals. The projects for intergroup encounters served as a way to participate in a collective effort to improve social relations in the city in this specific historical moment.

There’s people who go too far both on the left as well as on the right, in their, ehm, ways of thinking, and stuff like that. And so then you get the [Theo van Gogh’s killer] Mohammed B.’s on the one side and the Hirsi Alis, eh, on the other side and the Wilders and then you get people like that. And so that is not a society you want to be a part of.” And you can’t say, like, ehm, ‘I don’t want to be a part of people like that’ so I really
want, I am standing here, but well, if you don’t move, if you don’t take any steps to get these things moving, no matter how small they may be, nothing will change either.

*Jane, 32 year old white Dutch, City Dinners*

In the account above, Jane constructs participation in projects for intergroup contact as the only right thing to do in the radicalised political climate of the Netherlands after the murder of Theo van Gogh. She achieves this by constructing the political spectrum as polarized into two extremes in the multicultural debate (Muslim fundamentalism on the one hand, through referencing the killer of van Gogh, and extreme right xenophobia on the other, by referencing extreme right politician Wilders and Islam hostile politician Ayaan Hirsi Ali). At the same time, she denies the possibility of taking up any other political standpoints that might fall in between by omitting other politician involved in the debate completely. As both of these positions represent unwanted social trajectories (‘I don’t want to be part of a society like that’), her own apolitical contribution becomes a meaningful act of resistance against the polarization and radicalization of Dutch society.

This account illustrates how participation in these projects acquired its meaning against the backdrop of a polarized political climate in which both sides no longer represented the points of view of the reasonable regular citizen. The social projects for intergroup contact functioned as an outlet for a specific desire for civic engagement that sidestepped the polarized political debate of Islam versus the Dutch national majority. Drawing on their common sense understandings of intergroup contact, organizers and volunteers presented their projects and their own participation as the only reasonable way out of the false dilemmatic choice between xenophobic anti-Islam rhetoric of right wing politicians and anti-Dutch extremism. Crucial in this respect was the ways in which intergroup encounters were consistently presented in a pacified and apolitical way. This point is exemplified by the quote below.

*The city games will result in] more cohesion. More understanding, more awareness, friendship. Nice festival days. I think it is important.*

*Renske, 27 years old white Dutch*

In the above, an organizer constructs the social impact of her project as an entirely uncontroversial positive contribution to society. After labelling this effect ‘cohesion’, she subsequently constructs the meaning of this term as made up of ‘understanding, awareness and
friendship’. Through such apolitical accounting, the projects were constructed as transcending the political turmoil in which they were situated. In so doing, intergroup contact was constructed as the ideal solution to this turmoil as it would ‘merely’ let people develop their understandings and friendship for other social groups.

The meaning of contact
The official discourses of the social project elaborated on this general frame. As can be seen from the quotes below, the interpersonal encounters were generally constructed as encounters of equals in which the mutuality of understanding and respect between individuals of different groups is emphasized.xvi

“Spicy food”, to put it shortly, is a project that wants to bring residents of boroughs together in a fun, active and definitely non-condescending way. Because only personal contact can produce structural changes in the way we perceive social groups on a human level. Spicy food wants to show that different tastes in Amsterdam constitute an enrichment of daily life.

Spicy Food Website, translation FM

In the quote above, the meaning of intergroup contact is produced by drawing on a pluralist multicultural discourse. After first establishing that the project is entirely uncontroversial (‘fun and definitely non-condescending’), it presents personal contact as a way to demonstrate that cultural differences are a positive aspect of societal life (cultural differences are described here as ‘different tastes’, because of the central metaphor of food in this particular project). By emphasising that the project demonstrates this fact (using the word ‘shows’), this account suggests that objections to these kinds of celebrations are unthinkable. The project and the intergroup contact it seeks to produce thus can be perceived as the ultimate way to produce meaningful social change in intercultural relations (‘only interpersonal contact can produce structural changes’).

This particular construction was often reproduced by organizers and volunteers when they accounted for the meaning of intergroup contact at their own projects. The underlying argumentation in these accounts was that the interpersonal encounters served to enable the recognition of difference. Apart from the celebratory frame used in the official quote described above, a second way of viewing such recognition involved stressing the risks involved with leaving such differences unrecognised:

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If you as a Dutch teacher reprimand a boy from the Dutch Antilles then you will think ‘he is not being honest with you because he doesn’t look me in the eye.’ (...) Whereas in that culture it is actually really rude to look someone in the eye when you know you did something wrong, so admitting to guilt is looking down and ehm, accepting authority is looking down. Yeah and it’s those small subtle things that we totally don’t get, even, as totally Dutch people we don’t. And, can we force that, no we can’t force it, we can only talk about it (...) and hopefully one day we will find out after 20 years that we all can live together in this world and that we all religions, all cultures work side to side together.

Ellie, 27 years old white Dutch, Speakers’ Corner

In the account above, intergroup contact is similarly constructed as an ultimate pathway to positive intercultural relations. In this case, however, this is accomplished by acknowledging the possibility that cultural difference can be a source of conflict. In the first sentence, this conflict is illustrated with an example of a schoolteacher who is unaware of cultural codes of conduct of his Caribbean pupils. The resulting misunderstanding is presented as inevitable by presenting the cognitive mislabelling as automatic (‘if he does not look you in the eye, then ‘you will think he is not being honest’). In the next sentence, this misunderstanding is exposed by stating that the behaviour was actually intended as a form of politeness (‘in that culture, it is rude to look someone in the eye’). Intergroup contact is then presented as the ideal way to produce this recognition (‘we can only talk about it’) because of its subtle (‘small subtle things we Dutch don’t get [without help]’) and delicate nature (‘we can’t force that’). This account illustrates how intergroup contact could be constructed to result in recognition of difference through its potential to gently transfer ‘knowledge’ about cultural beliefs and practices between groups. By emphasizing the exchange of such (presumably objective) information, cultural difference was acknowledged but simultaneously constructed as harmless cultural practices and beliefs.

Apart from the construction of the intergroup contact as a process of the recognition of difference, participants also paradoxically argued for the opposite. In these situations, they argued that intergroup contact was crucial in order to produce the recognition of sameness.

My motivation is the most to let people to know each other. (...) It’s like this: (...) When people know one another, when people connect, make connections to one another, they see beyond colour. They see beyond, they see human. And I want people to see humans. At the end of the day we are humans, we are all going to be judged as humans. Not as where you are born, where you lived or whatever, you are going to be judged as human.

Edith, 55 year old Surinam woman, City Games
The quote above illustrates how constructing the intergroup encounter as a potential for the recognition of sameness amounted to the claim that contact under the optimal conditions of the projects of the ‘We Amsterdammers’ campaign would result in an increased awareness of the equality of people of different cultural backgrounds. In the account above, this is achieved by juxtaposing superficial difference (‘colour’, ‘where you are born’, ‘where you lived’) with deeper equality and sameness (‘at the end of the day we are humans’). Intergroup contact is presented as a tool to move from the superficial level to the deeper level by stressing its ability to enable people who previously were ignorant of each other to become familiar with each other ‘let them know one another’. When knowledge of the other becomes sufficiently intimate (i.e. when they ‘connect’), the deeper truth of their equality will see dawn upon them (they ‘see beyond colour’).

However, by juxtaposing superficial difference with deeper equality and sameness, these accounts can also be seen to exclude the possibility of any real or consequential differences between groups. More importantly, it also denies the possibility of any real conflicts of interests between different groups. In the context of mere superficial differences, it is only natural that strangers become friends once they get to know each other better in interpersonal encounters. Through interaction and dialogue, they inevitably develop an awareness of their deeper fundamental sameness in which conflicts of interest can no longer be conceived to exist. The construction of such encounters as ways to let people ‘see beyond colour’ therefore framed these social projects as intuitively plausible, uncontroversial interventions for social integration.

**Practices and attendance**

The municipality solicited, selected and funded mostly small scale grass roots projects to produce individual interpersonal encounters between social groups. The policy of the ‘We Amsterdammers’ campaign was such that projects were not funded if they only focused on members of a single social group (e.g. children or Muslims) and hence attempted to set up intergroup contact. Projects were set up as events that provided an opportunity for a voluntary encounter between members of different groups. The emphasis on the voluntary nature of the encounters corresponded to the ways in which the organizers assumed that intergroup contact was a natural process of recognition. It was assumed that this process would unfold wherever two groups would be brought into non-hostile contact. Any active intervention beyond providing the opportunity for such contact was therefore superfluous and understandably absent. Members of
different groups were consequently never explicitly asked to talk to each other and were left to their own devices to make contact.

Most projects were set up either as festivities and playful competitions or as occasions for dialogue and discussions. The projects typically focused on generating single, one-off meetings between individuals who had not previously met and were held in locations throughout the city. The projects of the ‘We Amsterdammers’ campaign differed widely in the number of participants they drew and the extent to which different ethnic communities participated in them. In the ‘City Games’, the largest of the projects examined, most diversity was found amongst the participants. The finale, held on the city’s main square, was visited by more than a thousand people from various ethnic communities. However, from participatory observations, it appeared that participants mostly stuck with members of their own community and made little contact with strangers. For example, the following scene in a tent where a music competition was being held was typical for the ways in which the spaces at the tournament ground were used.

Once the Antillean drum band has finished playing, all of its 150 or so Antillean supporters move out of the sticky tent and into the warm outdoor weather. Their places in the tent are then taken up by the friends and family of the white Dutch rock band that will play next. However, this second band has not brought as many friends and family and the tent therefore suddenly appears empty as only 40 white Dutch people stand and watch.

Field notes, FM

As the above observation illustrates, some organized events seemed to work against the kinds of cross-cultural interpersonal encounters official project discourse aimed for. To some extent, this appeared to be related to the competitive and ethnically coded nature of this particular project. Hip hoppers were black, drum bands were Hindustani and rock bands were white. In the competitive environment, each act brought supporters from their own community who mainly wanted to see their own group win. However, they also reflect more complex processes of self-segregation that have been noted elsewhere (Dixon & Reicher, 1997).

In projects where ethnicity and competition were not fore grounded, interpersonal encounters also often did not always materialize in the way they had been envisioned by the organizers. For example, in the ‘Speakers’ Corner’ project, attendance was often very small and strangers rarely engaged in one-on-one conversations with people they did not know. The
The following excerpt from ethnographic field notes taken during one of the meetings illustrates this point:

The participants are made up of a small group of about 6 white Dutch who show up every time for the whole session and about 5-15 passers-by that don’t seem to have come to the park to visit the speakers’ corner and hang around to check out what is going on. The latter stand around for a couple of minutes to watch the proceedings and then carry on with their walk through the park. Usually, the session is started by a speech by one of the regular visitors or an invited guest. Afterwards, the discussion is opened but in order to be allowed to speak officially people have to get onto the stone. The organizers demand that people speak only when they are on the stone and refuse others to speak more than short comments when they are not the stone. People’s eyes are all directed at the speaker who towers about 50 cm above their heads on the stone. There is little conversation or discussion going on between the people standing around the stone as they listen to the speaker.

Field notes, FM

Organizers were aware that intergroup encounters that would instil the recognition of either difference or sameness could not always be guaranteed by their projects. Moreover, some also lamented that many of the people that attended their projects were very similar in terms of social class, ethnicity and their norms and values and sometimes appeared to be drawn from a particular set of like minded civically engaged citizens. As a consequence, they carefully crafted accounts that constructed the meaning of intergroup contact at their projects at risk of being disputed by some of the harsh realities of organizing events, which depend on voluntary participation:

Yeah, the problem of course is, with all these projects, you just get at the well-willing ones. The people who don’t want contact, they don’t come to these meetings. They stay at home. So actually, the groups that you would want to do it for, they might not come (..) and of course the goals are reached in that sense, because at least you are offering the opportunity to the people who want it

Ien, 50+ year old white Dutch, Spicy Food

The quote above illustrates how organizers and volunteers exerted efforts to maintain the meaning of intergroup contact as something unequivocally positive and non-political. In this account, this is achieved by dividing the target population up into a group of people who do not need to be brought into contact with other groups (‘the well-willing ones’) and those that do (‘the
groups that you would want to do it for’). The groups that do need to be brought into contact with each other are constructed as people who actually do not want to be exposed to intergroup contact at all (‘those who don’t want contact (…) stay at home’). As a consequence, their absence at the projects cannot be read as a failure of the projects or its organizers because all they can do is provide the opportunities for contact under optimal conditions.

**Ideological effects**

In other projects, (eye) contact and conversation between individuals was inevitable as people came to the project to talk to strangers over dinner or a cooking lesson. Participants that experienced intergroup encounters at the projects of the ‘We Amsterdammers’ campaign recalled these as an opportunity to get to know unfamiliar social groups. In cases where white Dutch and members from ethnic minorities engaged in conversation, cultural difference was thus the central topic of interest, especially for the white Dutch.

[The dinner] was a bit of an eastern kitchen where the couscous and ehm.. you could also drink wine. And a little bit to my surprise my [Muslim] guest also drank wine. That is another prejudice of course that you can have, because she is still religious, she participates in Ramadan but she is quite modern. And then she does take a little glass of wine and ehm than is a bit, like, wow.. Like ehm, of course I knew that countries- I know more Muslims who drink, mind you, but it is still for a moment an eye-opener that not everyone sticks so closely to the rules.

*Ann, 56 year old white Dutch, visitor to the City Dinner*

In the quote above, Ann reconstructs her intergroup contact as an encounter in which she was able to experience the recognition of difference. She does so by presenting herself as a person who has prejudices (*that is of course a prejudice that you can have*) that are dispelled by simply observing others in intergroup contact. The account is careful to present these prejudices as common and rooted in benign ignorance. These prejudices are immediately dispelled once contradictory information presents itself (implied here by the word *eye-opener*). In so doing, she constructs her encounter with the member of another group as an opportunity to become more ‘adjusted’ to the benign aspects of multicultural society. The stereotypes about immigrants that she reluctantly entertained because of a lack of contact with ethnic minorities were debunked during her participation in the project.
The implicit structure of accounts such as the one above suggests that the practice of intergroup encounter in principle offers two complementary roles for participants. On the one hand, there is the person who holds prejudices that need to be eradicated. On the other hand, there is the person who holds the information that can be communicated through intergroup contact. In the discourse of the projects and the organizers, these positions were generally accorded to the white Dutch majority and the minorities (sometimes Muslims in particular) respectively.

You see that there are big stereotypes about “Moroccans”, particularly Moroccans, and, it’s not always true. I worked for Spicy Food with a colleague that was also Moroccan. He’s a good guy; there is nothing wrong with him. And there are lots of guys like him. (...) That was my motivation. To [make them] see that there is a great group of people who are not bad and they are good guys and they have to (pause), they do their thing and there are, well, it’s good that they are in Holland because they have a (pause), they give something back to Holland.

Sjaak, 50 year old white Dutch, Spicy Food

In the quote above, a distinction is made between a group that holds prejudices (‘the people’) and the group that these prejudices are about (Moroccans). Intergroup contact is constructed as a tool with which organizers can help the first group shed their stereotypes about the second group. The group denoted as ‘the people’ is subsequently implicitly constructed as the Dutch majority through the assertion that intergroup contact will produce the realization that ‘it is good that they are in Holland’ and ‘they give something back to Holland’.

In accounts such as these, the social projects for intergroup encounters were constructed as an opportunity for the white Dutch majority to shed its prejudice about ethnic minorities. Projects were expected to provide a context in which ethnic minorities could produce information about themselves that would facilitate the recognition of their fundamental sameness or of inconsequential difference by the prejudiced white majority. As such, this discourse on the meaning of intergroup encounters implicitly gave participating ethnic minorities a ‘burden of representation’ as they were expected to present themselves to the white majority as the ‘good guys’ that they really were. Although the organizers nowhere explicitly imposed limits on the kinds of interactions that intergroup contact should consist of, their discourse suggested that presenting yourself other than as a ‘good guy’ would be ineffective in reducing prejudice of the white Majority.
Paradoxically, this burden of representation was sometimes also constructed as a position of considerable agency. Since the discrimination of the Dutch majority was constructed as a result of the ignorance of the white Dutch, participants from minority groups could take it upon themselves to reduce prejudice by providing the appropriate information about their ethnic group:

You just let people come together and set up contact between people and ehm it is a sort of encounter. (…) At the last dinner, the participants get information about the history of Morocco. In other themes people also get information about other things, and the evening is filled with music, culture and food. (…) And ehm, yeah, you can teach a great deal.

Ali, 22 year old Moroccan, Ramadan Festival

In the account above, the same discourse about intergroup contact is deployed, but this time, it is used to take up the position of a teacher who can impart information to prejudiced people. Through imparting information about his ethnic background (‘history of Morocco’ as well as ‘music’, ‘culture’ and ‘food’) the speaker presents himself as a teacher for people ignorant of cultural difference (‘you can teach a great deal’). However, even though such social roles at first sight accorded participants with an ethnic minority background considerable agency, the kinds of information that they were expected to teach was limited. The dominant discourse of intergroup contact left no room for the articulation of real conflicts between groups from which prejudice and negative attitudes might also flow. Moreover, the white Dutch were never expected to demonstrate their cultural difference in any way. The position of the non-white participants in these encounters was therefore constrained through the dominant discourse on the possible meanings of intergroup contact.

Conclusion

The results presented above suggest the following answers to the questions raised earlier. The first question was related to ways in which the social projects for intergroup contact were situated within a particular local, political and historical context. Analysis showed that the particular practices, discourses and meanings attributed to interpersonal encounters at these projects were intimately linked to the social and political turmoil that characterised the aftermath of the murder of Theo van Gogh. Many volunteers sought out these projects out of dissatisfaction with the ways
in which other social and political actors were handling this crisis and their desire to provide an alternative mode of action.

The second question pertained to the meaning that people ascribed to interpersonal encounters. In general, interpersonal encounters between different cultural communities were constructed as a tool to fight prejudice by reducing the ignorance of the white majority regarding ethnic minorities. The latter were expected to present their cultural differences to the prejudiced members of the white Dutch majority. These differences were constructed as either superficial and inconsequential, or as the source of misunderstandings and the cause of discrimination.

Third, regarding the actual practices that took place in the projects of the ‘We Amsterdammers’ campaign, the meanings given to intergroup contact by organizers and volunteers limited the kinds of structures that could be imposed on the interactions or social practice at the social projects at first sight. Projects were assumed to provide ‘optimal conditions’ for intergroup contact whenever they constituted an event in which individuals participated voluntarily. They were therefore not assigned to particular conversational partners and, in most cases, were free to discuss any topic in any way they wished.

The fourth question concerned the ideological effects of these discourses and practices. Within the dominant discourse through which the meaning of contact was constructed, the roles participants could play in the negotiation of intercultural tolerance were limited. The unequal relationship constructed between the white Dutch and the ethnic minorities bore the imprint of the larger societal discourses and anxieties about cultural difference. As such, these arranged contacts were much more intimately linked with power and ideology than the official discourses of the projects and the individualized apolitical notion of ‘interpersonal contact’ would seem to suggest.

In conclusion, the variations in practices that were found at these projects illustrate the need to avoid conceptualising social projects for intergroup contact in generic, ahistoric terms. The central notion of an idealized, universal form of contact that occurs under ‘optimal conditions’ risks obscuring the different processes and negotiations that occur in real world intergroup contact. Moreover, it also obscures the ways in which the dominant discourse in the various projects led to remarkable similarities between them. On the one hand, intergroup contact was construct as a pathway to the recognition of equality (i.e. difference would be recognised as superficial and inconsequential). On the other hand, it constructed them as an intervention that produces the recognition of difference (i.e. difference is the source of misunderstandings). This finding is especially significant because the projects all intended to facilitate multicultural
integration. Hall and Held (1990) have argued in this respect that the main challenge for multicultural societies in the present age is exactly the dilemma between the needs for equality and the recognition of difference. As such, the appeal of social projects for intergroup contact among policymakers might to some extent be explained by their polysemic nature. However, the dualism between the recognition of sameness and difference also excludes more politicised meanings and recognitions. Most importantly, the focus on the reductions of prejudice through both forms of recognition suppresses the discussion or recognition of the structural causes for prejudice and discrimination and the possibility of real conflicts of interest. The veneer of uncontroversial and apolitical engagements with cultural difference may, in many cases, mask a distinct ideological orientation.

The stimulation of intergroup contact will clearly remain a central approach in anti-racism and multicultural integration for the years to come. It is important that these engagements are grounded in an awareness of their political and social implications. Care must be taken to look further than experimental studies on the effects of contact under ‘optimal conditions’. Further research is urgently needed on the kinds of practices that are engendered in other social and political contexts in the name of making ‘contact’.