

Contact theory and the multiethnic community of Riace, Italy: An ethnographic examination

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Abstract

This article uses the case of Riace, a small multiethnic community in Southern Italy, as a lens to evaluate key theoretical and methodological aspects of the influential Intergroup Contact Theory. The article draws upon 10 months of ethnographic fieldwork in Riace, Italy, a town that for more than 20 years has hosted and integrated refugees into the local community. We analyzed the ethnographic material in light of assumptions underlying intergroup contact theory. Findings demonstrate that friendly everyday interactions between inhabitants of different ethnic backgrounds serve as the critical “social glue” for the Riace community, but that there are social inequalities, as well as group stereotypes, group-based friendships, and spatial segregation. The different interpretations and nuanced outcomes of everyday social interactions demonstrate the importance of a contextualized understanding of the nature and implications of intergroup contact in real-world settings for future research and policies.

KEYWORDS

ethnography, intergroup contact theory, intergroup relations, multiethnic communities, refugees, socio-spatial segregation, stereotypes

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1 | INTRODUCTION

“There are many black people [‘neri’] now in Riace. They are good guys [‘bravi’], don’t bother anyone, always greeting you in a friendly manner. I understand very well they want to leave Africa (referring to his own displacement during the second World War). (...) There aren’t really friendships though, they stay amongst themselves [tra di loro], you see... (pointing at a group of refugees walking by).” (Leonardo, 92 years old, born & raised in Riace).

In 1998, 300 Kurdish refugees landed on the coast of Riace and received help from local inhabitants (Sasso, 2012). Ever since this small Southern Italian village has been home to migrants and refugees¹ who bring new life into this once-dying Calabrian “ghost town,” left behind by local emigrants looking for work elsewhere. Over time local NGO’s collaborated with the municipality to develop an extensive settlement program, the so-called “Riace model” (Driel & Verkuyten, 2019). The main aim of the Riace model is not only the reception of refugees but also the development and the revival of the local community. The program is intertwined with work projects that revitalize local ancient crafts, with solidarity tourism projects, and with programs for sustainable agriculture and restoration of the old town. These projects promote collaborations between inhabitants from different ethnic backgrounds and inspired the foundation of national systems that provides financial support for refugees’ local and integrated reception (e.g., RETESAI, 2021). Riace is known for its long history of “accoglienza” (hospitality) and many inhabitants perceive the reception of newcomers, especially those in need, as the natural thing to do (Driel & Verkuyten, 2019). Riace is considered a successful multiethnic community that has attracted the interest of national and European policymakers, journalists, and scholars from around the world (Barillà, 2017; Rinaldis, 2016; Sasso, 2012). Between 1998 and 2018, the story of Riace received national and international fame for the successful settlement and accommodation of refugees (e.g., Barillà, 2017; Giuffrida, 2018; Rinaldis, 2016). Riace has been widely presented and discussed as an example of an integrated multi-ethnic community in which inhabitants of different cultural backgrounds peacefully live and work together. A large body of literature on intergroup contact theory examines attitudes and relations between members of different groups and emphasizes the critical role of intergroup contact for strong communities and the reduction of prejudice and discrimination (Allport, 1954; Dovidio et al., 2016; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006; Pettigrew et al., 2011). The current article uses the case of Riace as a lens for evaluating some key theoretical and methodological aspects of contact theory (Dixon et al., 2016; Vincent, 2008). Our aim is to make a contribution to contact theory and to the understanding of group dynamics in diverse localities by examining intergroup relations within the Riace community. This is relevant because many (costly) interventions and policies that aim to create positive interethnic relations in multiethnic communities are based on contact theory (e.g., Beelmann & Heinemann, 2014; Paluck & Green, 2009; Tercan et al., 2021). We will first discuss intergroup contact theory and the implications of contacts between members of different groups for multiethnic communities. Subsequently, we briefly discuss the local context of Riace. Then we will demonstrate empirically that friendly everyday interactions and relations between inhabitants of different ethnicities serve as the critical “social glue” in the Riace community, but that some group boundaries and social inequalities continue to exist. In the concluding sections, we discuss the implications of our findings for contact research and interventions. Empirically, we draw upon our extensive ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Riace between 2015 and 2019.

1.1 | Contact theory

In his classic book “The Nature of Prejudice,” Allport (1954) argued that under certain conditions, intergroup contact reduces stereotyping, prejudice, and discrimination and therefore leads to positive intergroup relations. He distinguished four conditions for optimal intergroup contact: equal group status within the situation, common goals,

¹This article uses both the terms “refugees” and “migrants,” as some of Riace’s inhabitants did not obtain the legal status of refugee (yet).

intergroup cooperation, and authority support. Based on a meta-analysis of 515 studies, Pettigrew et al. (2011) concluded that Allport's conditions facilitate the positive effects of intergroup contact but are not necessary for these effects (see also Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). In general, intergroup contact tends to contribute to improved relations between groups by reducing intergroup prejudices. Subsequent research has tested and further developed intergroup contact theory by identifying conditions and processes that specify when and why contact is effective (e.g., Bishop & Bowman, 2019; Finseraas & Kotsadam, 2017; Kokkonen et al., 2015; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006; Pettigrew et al., 2011; Stathi et al., 2020). For example, research indicates that contact in the form of intergroup friendship is especially beneficial, as friendship has positive affective implications such as increased empathy, reduced unfamiliarity, and lower intergroup anxiety (Pettigrew et al., 2011). However, there is also work that critically reflects on some of the theoretical assumptions and research practices that are predominant in the field of contact research (Dixon et al., 2005; Dixon et al., 2016). We will discuss three critical points that are relevant for our own research in Riace. The first point relates to studying intergroup contact under controlled conditions rather than in the everyday context and fiber of the real world (Dixon et al., 2005). Mainstream contact research tests associations between self-reported quantity and quality of contact and prejudicial attitudes, or uses an experimental design that creates an artificial context for manipulating variables. In reality, however, intergroup contact takes place in the complexities of everyday life and therefore the question is always what self-reported answers on a questionnaire, or in an experiment, tell us about how people react outside a controlled setting in which numerous factors are relevant. For example, there are many opportunities for intergroup contact in modern urban areas but most of the contacts seem to be occasional and superficial rather than involving more long-term relations or "friendships" (McPherson et al., 2001; Sigelman et al., 1996). Yet, positive effects of intergroup contact for community life may exist without friendships. Furthermore, political, historical, and economic conditions might make optimal intergroup contact such as "equality of status" very difficult if not impossible to achieve in real life. Research on intergroup contact in countries such as Israel, Northern Ireland, South Africa, and the United States shows that even if situational conditions for optimal contact exist, these almost never stabilize due to constantly changing societal and local circumstances (Connolly, 2010). Therefore scholars have argued for the need to study intergroup contact within the complexities and ambivalences of everyday life, such as with ethnographic fieldwork (Dixon et al., 2005, 2016; Hughes et al., 2011). A second critique relates to the first one and concerns that contact research tends to neglect how people themselves understand and interpret intergroup interactions (Dixon et al., 2005). This tendency is reflected in, for example, the use of questionnaires with pre-defined rating scales to compute average contact scores. Such a method has many advantages but also ignores people's own understandings and experiences with intergroup contact within the community in which they live. Moreover, this study limits our understanding of why precisely contact fails or succeeds in having positive outcomes. For example, Connolly (2010), in his ethnographic work, studied a contact initiative in Northern Ireland - a disco dance - for bringing together Protestant and Catholic adolescents. Results showed that instead of reducing prejudice, contact reinforced sectarian beliefs and resulted in increased intergroup tensions. The adolescent boys and girls felt anxious about their sexual identities within the context of the disco and used sectarian prejudices to manage feelings of threat and insecurity and to uphold a positive self-image amongst their peers (Connolly, 2010). This indicates that it is important to pay close attention to the mundane particulars of everyday intergroup interactions and how people themselves understand these (Dixon et al., 2016; Saguy et al., 2009). The third point of critique relates to the focus on individual prejudice as the primary outcome of positive contact (Dixon et al., 2005, 2016). This focus can mean that contact research tends to overlook other important social and subjective outcomes of contact, such as changes in the perceived legitimacy of the social structure and social justice support (Dixon et al., 2005, 2016; Greenland et al., 2019). For example, Dixon et al. (2016) showed that White South Africans supported the general principles and goals of racial equality in employment, education, and land ownership but simultaneously evaluated concrete interventions and measures for achieving these goals much less positively. Furthermore, much contact research has the implicit assumption that a strong multi-ethnic community is characterized by the absence of "us-them" boundary thinking and the related ingroup preference and outgroup rejection. However, research on intergroup contact and group

boundary-making argue that inclusionary or exclusionary outcomes of social boundaries depend, for example, on institutional incentives, the distribution of status and power between individuals, and pre-existing social networks (e.g., Cederberg, 2012; Weber, 2019; Wimmer, 2013). Intergroup contact might reduce prejudicial attitudes but this does not have to mean that people do not draw other symbolic group boundaries and that group differences in status, power, and resources are reduced (Ridgeway, 2013; Wimmer, 2013), or that geographical segregation does not exist (e.g., Clayton, 2009; Glick Schiller & Caglar, 2010). Research demonstrates that multiethnic communities are often characterized by at least some degree of spatial segregation which, among other things, limits intergroup contact opportunities. Clark (1992), for example, showed that even people without a clear racial group preference mostly choose to live in same-race Los Angeles neighborhoods and thereby maintain patterns of social segregation. And Minard (1952), in his study amongst miners in the coalfields of West Virginia, found that integrated working relations between racial groups below ground went together with people living segregated lives above ground. In the following sections, we will evaluate these three points of critique on intergroup contact theory by using our ethnographic material from the integrated multi-ethnic community of Riace, which we will describe first.

1.2 | The research context

Ethnographic research examines social issues and problems through contextualization. It is therefore important to give a short description of the local situation and recent developments in Riace. Since the first arrival of refugees in 1998, around 6000 refugees have passed through Riace, and in 2021 about 100 of them are permanently living and working within the local community. The municipality, which also comprises Riace Marina, has 1869 inhabitants and in Riace itself there live around 500 people² (Tuttitalia, 2021). Between 1998 and 2018, the number of refugees residing in Riace was much higher and often reached about 400. Refugees lived throughout the town in houses abandoned by local emigrants who gave the NGO's permission to refurbish the houses and use them for the reception program. So, in terms of housing, there was a situation of social mixing which contributed to everyday intergroup contacts. Furthermore, because there is only one school in town, refugee children attended the same school as Italian children, which stimulated interethnic friendships amongst Riace's youth. Local workplaces, workshops, agricultural and sustainability projects that were part of the refugee program followed the principle that one refugee get hired for each Italian employee (whenever possible), which also stimulated local friendships (Driel, 2020). Some of the privatized workplaces, such as a local bar, also hired refugees as employees. Moreover, the local public spaces (listed in Table 2) were common gathering spaces for old and new locals, such as the various benches and terraces on the towns' squares. Although bureaucratic issues always caused delays in Riace's refugee program, significant challenges arose after June 2018. The appointment of the far-right minister of the interior, Salvini, resulted in more restrictive migration and integration policies in Italy. The government abolished the scholarship that allowed refugees and asylum seekers to work, under Decree Law 113/2018, and replaced the SPRAR-system that financially supported all asylum seekers with the SIPROIMI System that merely offers financial support to recognized refugees and unaccompanied minors (RETESAI, 2021). These changes resulted in a decrease in the number of refugees in Riace and marked a change in the settlement program that was run for 20 years. Additionally, local Italians working in the reception programs for refugees lost their jobs and (once again) had to emigrate out of their hometown to search for work elsewhere. As a result, the number of inhabitants in the municipality declined from 2313 in 2017 to 1869 in 2021 (Tuttitalia, 2021). Currently, the refugees living in Riace receive support from Città Futura which is an independent NGO that does not receive government funding (Riace Città Futura, 2021). Additionally, a legal process – that is, considered by many a political process – was

²This article is based on research in "Riace Superiore," the historic town that locals mainly refer to just as "Riace" (leaving out "Superiore"). The municipality of Riace also includes a second town named Riace Marina, built during the economic boom in the 60s and 70s and located seven kilometers away from Riace, at the seaside.

started against the pro-migration mayor Domenico Lucano who governed Riace between 2004 and 2018 (see Giuffrida, 2018; Procacci, 2021). On September 30, 2021 Lucano was sentenced to 13 years in prison for abetting illegal migration and irregularities in the management of asylum seekers funds (Refival, 2021; Tondo, 2021). The sentence was received with much upheaval as it was twice as long as requested by the prosecutors and because the supreme court of cassation, the highest court of appeal in Italy, previously dismissed the charges (see Malaspina, 2021; Refival, 2021; Tondo, 2021).

2 | METHODS

2.1 | Data collection

The analysis is based on data collected by the first author during five periods of ethnographic fieldwork in Riace from October 2015 until February 2016 (5 months), from August 2016 until September 2016 (2 months), and in August 2017, 2018, and 2019 (3 months). Ethnography is a broad qualitative method that focuses on studying a specific case, or a few cases, over longer periods of time to be able to develop a detailed and nuanced understanding of how people experience and shape their daily lives (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). It mainly involves the use of participant observation for arriving at a contextual and deeper understanding of particular processes and mechanisms (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2011). Close and detailed observations of various aspects of everyday life and participating in the local community allows for collecting real-world data and make it possible to develop an in-depth understanding and tacit knowledge of the local context (Desjarlais, 1992; DeWalt & DeWalt, 2011). The fieldwork study comprised several years, which is common in ethnographic research because it contributes to establishing trust relationships and understanding and contextualizing changes that occur in the field over time (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2011). For example, it allows to consider whether and how local and national developments (e.g., changing legislations) can, over time, have an impact on interethnic relationships in Riace (see below).

Ethnographic research is led by the actual community life and the voices of the people, and understandings emerge from the field rather than being imposed on the field. However, there often are also guiding theoretical problems or general interests about the social world that inform the researcher's observations and informal conversations (O'Reilly, 2012). The researcher can apply, transform and further develop theoretical propositions (i.e., intergroup contact theory) for generating specific explanations of local processes. Throughout the fieldwork period, the focus was on how locals themselves made sense of their everyday social interactions; how, when, and where they communicated with each other; how they interpreted and framed different forms of contact; where and when intergroup contact took place, and which spaces, situations, and contexts were ethnically mixed or relatively segregated.

In addition to observations and participating in various activities, the ethnographic fieldwork involved informal conversations that were held daily with various residents, refugees, and local workers.³ Participant observations at SPRAR-projects (former System for the Protection of Asylum Seekers and Refugees) in the surrounding villages of Gioiosa Ionica, Caulonia, and Stignano served comparative purposes. For example, to examine if informal talk and greetings on the streets between people from different backgrounds, which is the common normative practice in

³The multiple years of fieldwork focused on various social processes and topics in the context of Riace, and throughout the years, different research methods were used. In addition to participant observation, formal interviews were conducted. However, for the current article, we used the information from the participant observation of interactions as they naturally occurred in the field, instead of formal interviews. The interviews were useful for other research questions. Specifically, in-depth interviews using the topic list (see Appendix 1) were conducted with a variety of locals to develop a further understanding of everyday practices and behaviors. Interviews were held with twenty local residents, including ten refugees, with sixteen institutional representatives, and during each period of fieldwork research with ex-mayor and NGO leader Lucano. In addition, interviews with institutional representatives were held with focus groups with three to four employees to ensure that people could double-check the information provided by colleagues and because of the employees' busy working schedules.

Riace (see below), also occurs in other towns. A topic list (Appendix 1) guided the fieldwork in two ways. First, the topics served as “points of orientation” for field observations in providing focus in situations where many things occurred simultaneously. Second, they served as guidelines for the daily, casual conversations and informal interviews that were conducted with local residents. For the current paper, especially the section on interethnic relations of the first topic list and the second topic list as a whole were relevant.

Throughout the fieldwork the first author presented herself as a foreign researcher who wanted to learn about the “Riace model” with its extensive integrated reception programs and practices for refugees. This might have encouraged locals to present themselves as hospitable, open-minded, and unprejudiced. However, the five successive periods of ethnographic fieldwork in the small town where almost everybody knows each other made it possible to create close, trusting, and confidential relationships with various inhabitants. As a result, locals were not reluctant to express their personal feelings and opinions and to share gossips about other people, including people of different ethnic groups. Furthermore, in informal talks and interviews, the first author always made it clear that people could end a conversation at any time. She repeatedly checked whether locals⁴ felt comfortable when discussing more sensitive contact situations such as experiences with racism and ethnic exclusion, and highlighted that all information was treated confidentially and anonymously (e.g., by using pseudonyms). The effectiveness of “snowball sampling” depends on the researcher’s skills and the social networks of informants and can lead to selectivity (Silverman, 2017). However, because of Riace’s small size and traditional hospitality (Driel & Verkuyten, 2019), the first author could get acquainted with a large number of residents (approximately 150)⁵ with relative ease. Moreover, she visited and participated in many social activities, such as (handicraft) workplaces, local bars, and town squares, volunteered as an English teacher and cooperated with local solidarity tourism initiatives. Thus, informal talks took place in a variety of settings, ranging from the hospital to celebrations of religious holidays at people’s homes. Altogether, this made it possible to interact with a diverse sample of the local population in terms of ethnic background, age, gender, and occupation.

2.2 | Data analysis

The data analysis is based upon several rounds of in-depth examination and thematic categorization of field notes, interview transcripts, and observations. The first author divided field notes into observational and methodological notes, as well as reflections on the research process and the researchers’ position in the field, possible biases, and own experiences with interactions with locals (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2011). For example, being a female and white researcher might make some refugees more hesitant to express stereotypes and prejudices about white Italians. The first author analyzed the material following an inductive approach whereby she identified recurrent patterns and regularities in locals’ behavior with the interpretations and explanations that the people themselves gave (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2011, Hamilton, 1998). These first rounds of data analysis and data reduction resulted in the thematic categorization and structuring of the data, provided focus and direction for further data collection, and served triangulation purposes (Miles & Huberman, 1994). For example, the topic list was adjusted during the fieldwork period in accordance with the first findings (see Appendix 1), and in the analysis different themes, topics, and behavioral patterns were identified (Bernard & Ryan, 2009; DeWalt & DeWalt, 2011). Subsequently, both the first and the second authors examined the material in light of intergroup contact theory and provided feedback on

⁴In this article, we use the term “locals” to indicate both Riace’s “old locals,” the Italians, as well as Riace’s new locals, the refugees who live in town. As the local population is composed of both refugees and Italians who equally belong and contribute to the local community, we prefer to use this inclusive term and distinguish only between (local) Italians and refugees or people from different ethnicities when necessary for analytical purposes.

⁵This rough estimate is based on the amount of Facebook friends who come from Riace of the first author. However, the actual number of acquaintances could be higher: though the first author befriended some of Riace’s oldest generation through Facebook, some do not have a Facebook page. Moreover, some of the elderly participants died during the five years of fieldwork research, and a relatively large number of refugees (forcedly) moved out of the town, especially after 2018.

each other's theoretical interpretations. Specifically, the second author critically examined the thematic categorization and empirical analyses of the first author to discuss possible alternative interpretations, to control for accuracy, and to identify possible biases (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2011).

3 | RESULTS

3.1 | Everyday friendliness

The quote from Leonardo above the current article indicates that in Riace intimate interethnic friendships exist mostly within specific ethnic groups, but that there is a local atmosphere of friendliness. The small population size, the traditional hospitality, and the strong local participation and familiarity amongst inhabitants of all ethnicities (Driel & Verkuyten, 2019; Driel, 2020), implies a high degree of casual daily interactions, that is, characterized by "everyday friendliness." This friendliness includes encounters that are often relatively quick, such as greeting each other on the streets, exchanging a few friendly words, and asking about how one is doing (see Table 1). This happens, for example, when crossing each other in one of the small alleys on the way home from work or school. Short informal and friendly conversations also take place in the few local bars and shops, in front of the towns' "laboratori" (the traditional handicraft workplaces), at the local sports field, or on the benches of the town square and the bus stop. The frequency and normality of such friendly interactions between almost all residents, and between Italians and refugees, in particular, has resulted in a strong, inclusive community feeling. Everyday friendliness is expected from all and implies that the inhabitants feel recognized and accepted. Local Italians indicate to highly value the brief, informal and friendly encounters:

M: Another nice thing is that the children of the refugees are always greeting me, and each other in general. They do so even if you walk by 20 times per day; they will always say "ciao"! For the last 3 years that we've been here, we never saw a conflict with migrants.

N: Also last years, when my mom was ill, many refugees were always asking us here and there how she was doing. One moment I especially remember well is when they told they went praying for her. They were very nice, on the other hand my mother was also a very welcoming ["accogliente"] person. (M & N, elderly couple from Riace)

Refugees in turn emphasize that the everyday friendliness makes them feel at home in Riace:

"I do very much like living here, the Italians are always so friendly and kind!" (S., male, refugee from Eritrea)

The overall friendly interactions also stand out to tourists and visitors, as the next person for example points out:

"Everyone here says hallo to each other on the streets, creating a different atmosphere from what I've seen in other parts of Italy where no one just greets a refugee." (tourist who visited Riace several times)

Local Italians further appreciate the liveliness and the new opportunities for social interactions and cultural exchanges that these brief friendly encounters bring to the relatively small and previously abandoned town:

"Over the years I had many nice neighbors here [living in the abandoned houses]. First for three years Toni from Gambia, then a family with little children and now their brother. Unfortunately in the end they all had to move away and I really miss them* [...] I also liked how the kids just walked in when they were playing in the alley, as sometimes did their parents – just to have a small chat. Some even knew my name, because my daughter is a teacher at the local school." (R., Female inhabitant, 75 years old – *this conversation took place in 2019, after a new local administration strongly discouraged the reception of migrants)

"...like the mother of A & M from Pakistan, who sometimes brings food for me to thank me for the teaching. The other time she brought me Okra's, that I don't know how to prepare. She then prepared them at home and brought me a nice curry and home-made chapatti's at school a few days later." (V., teacher of the local after school program, from Riace)

TABLE 1 Typically occurring interethnic friendships in Riace

Type of interethnic rapport	Ethnicities included	Type of group boundaries	Facilitated by collaboration in NGO/work/school projects	Examples of expressions of friendship
Everyday friendliness	All	Almost none	No	Short greetings in streets/public spaces Brief and informal dialogs
Friendships between colleagues of the "laboratori" & other projects	All	Occupational	Yes	Celebrating important life events Dinner parties and drinks Gossiping
Friendships between people with shared cultural or religious background	Varies per group, e.g. West-African & Arab sub-scenes	Cultural	No	Religious celebrations Home visits and parties Gossiping Social support
Friendships between children	All	Almost none	Yes	School, leisure and sports activities Social media
Friendships between parents of school-aged children	All	Few – though especially strong when parents share culture	Indirectly	Children's birthdays Occasional home visits

And when telling about her daily, casual interaction with refugees on the streets, the next person says with a big smile:

"On my way here today [works in the old town] I greeted at least ten to twenty people!" (A., female inhabitant, born in Riace)

It is noteworthy that this high appreciation of brief encounters and the normative expectation of everyday friendliness by locals seems to be ignored by some NGO's and activists, many of whom came to work or live in Riace after hearing or reading in the media about this exceptional "villaggio globale" [global village]. Some of them do not seem to consider the informal friendly encounters to constitute "real community integration," as explained by one founder of an NGO that organizes creative activities to connect Italians and refugees:

"by organizing cultural activities such as theater, I intend to create real friendships instead of peaceful or friendly cohabitation, so that real integration can be achieved."

To summarize, "everyday friendliness" between Riace's inhabitants is normative and highly valued by locals (Table 1). It implies a positive local atmosphere and makes that people feel recognized and included. The brief social interactions familiarize people with each other and make them curious about fellow inhabitants from different backgrounds. More importantly, these daily interactions are characterized by a lack of ethnic boundary drawing. This is noteworthy, especially since locals, refugees, and tourists mention that the everyday friendliness between people from different ethnic backgrounds is exceptional and stands in sharp contrast with their experiences in other small towns and the region more broadly. Refugees, for example, mention that they have been a victim of everyday racism and ethnic profiling in the region outside of Riace when traveling by bus or train because they are the only ones who have to show their tickets upon entering and sometimes are refused from accessing the bus or train without any apparent reason (Driel, 2020).

3.2 | Local friendships

Unlike the omnipresence and normativity of everyday friendliness between people of all ethnic backgrounds, relationships that can be considered "friendships" exist predominantly within specific ethnic (sub)groups and particular social networks. Locals sometimes distinguish between friendliness/friends and "real friends" with the latter relationships involving people who frequently visit each other at home, celebrate together special occasions such as birthdays, and regularly update each other on important life events. However, the fact that these intimate relationships are often limited to groups of people who share a cultural or linguistic background does not imply a dislike of other groups or a lack of sense of community. Friendly daily encounters with inhabitants from other backgrounds continue to be highly appreciated, even though also in Riace "birds of a feather tend to flock together" when it comes to more intimate relationships. Additionally, cultural similarity and shared ethnic background are not the only distinctions that matter for friendships. Specifically, close friendships predominantly exist between people who (1) share the same language, religion or cultural background, (2) between colleagues who work together in the local businesses, agricultural and tourism projects or "laboratori," (3) between young children, schoolmates or classmates, and (4) between parents of school-aged children (see Table 1). Many parents and some of the local businesses' employees are "long-term refugees," as they have resided in Riace for periods from 1 year up to 20 years. First, Riace knows several informal "subscenes" of people who share a similar religious, cultural or linguistic background. There is, for example, a West African subscene that often organizes events such as dance parties to celebrate childbirths, birthdays, and religious festivals. Between 2015 and 2018, some of Riace's West African inhabitants also created an unofficial church in one of the abandoned houses to celebrate the Sunday mass and religious holidays together, filling the alleys with the sounds of hymns and chants. Many of their gatherings are centered around dancing or singing together. People from Ethiopia, Eritrea, and Somalia, constitute another informal community and often, for example, visit each other at home:

"I have some Italian friends in the village, but it's difficult to maintain real friendships with refugees from other countries than Ethiopia, Somalia, or Eritrea because of the language barrier, and because they have another culture and color. I regularly invite my friends at home for a coffee, or for example at my son's Birthday." (D., single mother, born in Ethiopia)

Individuals from different Arab-speaking countries, who often share the same language or religion, give similar accounts. People in these subscenes also help and support each other. For example, when a bus of refugees arrived from Lampedusa after an emergency in 2015, the researcher was at J's home (local refugee, Arab background) who explained:

"I have to leave because I got told by my friends [also living in Riace] that there is an Arab family amongst the newcomers, and I want to check how they are doing."

However, the composition of these subscenes is not fixed and they do overlap and can change over time. For example, some Somalian Muslims are part of the local "Arab subscene," but simultaneously have friends from Ethiopia and Eritrea with whom they share cultural features, and also have friendships with Italian colleagues. Second, friendships often exist between colleagues of different ethnic backgrounds, including Italians, who work together in local enterprises. This is demonstrated by the fact that they regularly visit each other's homes, celebrate important life events together, and gossip with each other. In conversations with the researcher, they often also inquire about their friends. Third, local children seem to be mostly "color blind" in their friendships. The youngest children of all ethnicities play together in the local playground or at the town squares, and when the evening falls, the teenagers gather to play table football or sports or just hang around or roam the streets. Many of them are schoolmates or classmates, as there is only one local primary school and only a few high schools in the nearby area. Also, informal socializing spaces such as playgrounds are limited, and nearby towns are hard to reach. Besides, adolescents have extensive contacts with each other through social media, including with peers who had to leave the town, for example, to obtain legal documents elsewhere. Locals refer to this generation as the towns' future because the normalization of the presence of others with different origins seems to have blurred ethnic group boundaries (Table 1), and friendships sometimes also exist between the parents of school-aged children from different ethnic backgrounds.

3.3 | Stereotypes

Everyday friendliness and friendships are important for supportive community life and for newcomers' accommodation and integration. However, these positive contacts do not prevent the use of stereotypical assumptions about "the other" and the continuation of subtle inequalities between groups. Some of the stereotypes seem to derive from the image of the "poor and powerless refugee" and reflect existing differences in economic positions. For example, after problems with government funding for the refugee projects started in 2018, refugees increasingly mentioned that they could not afford a bus ticket (Driel, 2020). As a result, they were often forced to walk or bike the long and steep mountain roads between Riace and other nearby villages, while Italian locals took the bus. The image of the refugee biking or walking up the mountain roads became a visual display of inequality that tourists and locals often explicitly mentioned (the painfulness of it) in informal conversations and interviews. Sometimes locals also gave "the poor refugees" a ride or felt sorry for them, and these reactions reaffirmed the stereotypes and inequalities and refugees' dependency (Ridgeway, 2013). Thus, the fact that refugees possessed fewer financial resources than Italian inhabitants, together with the related stereotypes, hampered the possibility to interact as (socioeconomic) equals. Negative stereotypes were sometimes also used by locals who had positive interethnic contacts, a welcoming attitude towards refugees, and positive feelings toward inhabitants from different cultural backgrounds. For example, locals who consistently voted for Lucano (the pro-migrant ex-mayor), collaborated with migrants on a daily base and explicitly defined themselves as being 'pro migrants', sometimes used stereotypes for explaining practices and behavior of newcomers. An example is a local (female, elderly, born in

Riace) who mentions a lack of cleanliness as being typical for migrants, even though migrants maintained and renovated the previously abandoned houses:

"I don't sublet my house to migrants, but I am not a racist! It is just because usually they make more of a mess [e.g. compared to tourists, to whom she does sublet her house]. I do not have anything against them and I believe that Lucano is a great mayor, he deserves a statue! I also think that our "accoglienza" (hospitality) is something beautiful. I am just afraid that dark-skinned people will make more of a mess in my house and I want to keep it nice and clean because the house holds much emotional value to me."

Stereotypical assumptions about people from different cultural backgrounds can shape how locals frame or understand a situation. A further example is women who become unintentionally pregnant which can be interpreted as something "typically Nigerian" and as being related to prostitution. One of the project's employees, a loyal supporter of Lucano, believed that one of the Nigerian women worked in prostitution because:

"You know, she was not married and then one day suddenly she was pregnant. I do not really understand why she did it [referring to prostitution] because she still had the right to receive financial support from the project [referring to the refugee settlement program]. But if you do it anyway [again referring to prostitution], than at least make sure that you use a condom. That is also why I told her about the use of condoms. I believe in Nigeria maybe it is difficult to learn about condoms, but here it is very easy."

This employee, who actually wanted to help the Nigerian mother and often mentioned that she is very happy to work with Riace's refugees with whom she has positive relationships, assumed that the woman got pregnant while working as a prostitute (and that she was involved in prostitution in the first place), and that she as a Nigerian did not know how to use a condom.

In these sorts of stereotypical interpretations, people tend to ignore the structural conditions that cause some refugees to be exploited or end up in prostitution. For instance, the fact that their chances of receiving a residence permit are relatively low and that there are no real repatriation options forces many of them to work illegally. Rather than considering these types of conditions, local inhabitants tended to use stereotypical beliefs about newcomers to explain unexpected situations and dissenting practices. And despite their frequent positive contacts with refugees, they mentioned differences in culture and mentality as the main reason for certain behaviors. Another example is a local Italian who "adopted" a 24 years old refugee into his house and paid for his education "because he feels like a son." This person relates the fact that Nigerian women sometimes work in prostitution to their culture by saying "They are just a bit more liberal, the Nigerians, I would say. Their culture really differs from ours." Further, some locals emphasized the similarities between their own values and beliefs and the "typical (North) European values" to draw a contrast with non-EU migrants, resulting in remarks such as, "Us Europeans just think in the same way, while they [referring to Riace's refugees] perceive things differently." (S, female inhabitant). The tendency to differentiate between European and non-European values, beliefs, and practices was especially evident in relation to gender norms. Yet, in Southern Italy and for the older generations, in particular, gender norms tend to overlap with those of many refugees, as both share relatively clear definitions of typical and desirable male and female behaviors:

"Women from Riace just do not frequent the bar by themselves, and they do not come to these kinds of dinners. "Funziona così" (that's how it works). If women go to the bar by themselves, without their husband, people start gossiping about them" (local bartender).

In our research, migrants did not use many stereotypes of Italians but stereotypes about locals from different backgrounds were more common. For example, some Muslim and Arab migrants describe the behavior of "Africans," by which they mean people from West and Central Africa, as being "unrestricted," licentious or even promiscuous. Simultaneously though, they, for example, often play football together and have positive contacts. In addition to stereotypes, there are assumptions about "the other" that can play a role in more subtle ways. For instance, one morning a young Nigerian woman knocked on the door of the house that the first author shared with an Italian student and good friend of this woman. The moment we opened the door, the two elderly neighboring

Italian women who spent much of their day socializing on the benches in the small alley in front of our houses, started chatting with all of us:

“Ahh now I understand it!! Yesterday I wanted to help P (Nigerian woman) because she was walking up and down our alley and told us that she was looking for her friends, so we wanted to help her out and tell her which bell she should ring, but we did not know which friend she was looking for... We thought she must had been looking for someone from Nigeria, or another black friend (“un amica della Nigeria o un'amica nera”). We did not understand that she was looking for a white friend, but now I understand she was looking for you girls all the time!” [pointing at the Italian student and the first author]

The two women who have regular positive contacts with Riace's refugees (e.g., with their neighbors), assumed that a “black girl” must have been looking for another black friend rather than an Italian friend, for example, from work. The comment by the two women illustrates the self-evident assumption that people will have friendships with others with whom they share a cultural background, and similar assumptions were evident in conversations with both Italians and refugees.

3.4 | Spatial segregation

Positive intergroup contact in one context, for instance at Riace's workplaces, does not prevent spatial segregation in other contexts, such as local bars (e.g., Minard, 1952). The positive and friendly relationships in Riace do not mean that there are no forms of spatial segregation in which certain spaces in town are predominantly “claimed” by specific ethnic groups (compare Dixon et al., 2016). However, in Riace patterns of ethnic segregation are quite subtle compared with the broader region. Locals, refugees, and tourists regularly mention that Riace's public spaces are very mixed compared to the “street scene” in the rest of Calabria where refugees often seem entirely absent from local public life. This difference is already visible when comparing Riace to the nearby Riace Marina. According to local NGO's, the urban layout of Riace Marina partly causes stronger ethnic segregation. Riace Marina is a widespread strip of houses divided by a busy regional road that does not facilitate community relationships, not even between Italians (e.g., Clayton, 2009; Glick Schiller & Caglar, 2010). In Riace, different forms of ethnic spatial segregation exist and gender and age also play important roles in socio-spatial boundaries, which, however, also change over time (Wimmer, 2013).⁶ Here, we discuss prevalent patterns of spatial segregation to show how these have consequences for the organization of local social life and community cohesion. Although public spaces in Riace are ethnically mixed, various forms of spatial segregation can be found. For example, certain benches, tables, and parts of the towns' squares are “reserved” for locals. Other places are “reserved” for specific (groups of) migrants or are occupied by different groups at different times of the day (see Table 2). At daytime, Riace's refugees often occupy the benches on the terrace in front of the town hall and in the adjacent square, to which locals refer as “il ponte” (“the bridge” – because of its shape, hovering above the mountains and sea). The refugees use these benches to chat with each other, listen to music, and to call family and friends in their home countries. Around sunset, many refugees leave and especially during the warmer months of the year, the older Italian men (seldom women) take over these benches to sit, relax and talk to each other. It rarely happens that the older Italian men and the younger migrant boys or girls are sitting or chatting together. Instead, when both want to enjoy the benches, which occasionally happens in the evening, they each pick their own bench and only talk among themselves. When younger Italian locals walk or pass by the benches, they frequently stop to chat with the older men. The fact that interaction does occur between younger and older Italian men but hardly between the Italian men and the local migrants indicates that ethnicity is also a marker of group boundaries in this spatial context, in addition to age.

⁶Patterns of (ethnic) spatial segregation change over time. For example, after government funding for migrants was blocked in late 2018, refugees often lacked the financial means to enter certain spaces. In 2020 socio-spatial relationships changed again as only about 100 refugees remained, most of them working in Riace, whereas in previous years around 400 refugees and asylum applicants had lived in town – creating different social dynamics.

TABLE 2 Spatial segregation in Riace: Main locations and groups

Location and/or activity	Ethnicities involved	Segregation in terms of ethnicity	Segregation in terms of gender
<i>Benches on the terrace in front of the town hall</i>	Migrants, often gathered in groups who share cultural background	Yes	No
<i>Benches "sul ponte" [one of the town squares]</i>	All, though strict divisions between when + which benches are destined to which groups	Yes	Italians: yes - men only Refugees: more often men than women
<i>Terrace "sul ponte" [=property of bar]</i>	All. Terrace = mixed, but some tables are reserved to Italians or migrants	Partially	No
<i>Taverna Dona Rosa</i>	Mostly migrants. Events often organized by specific groups, such as West-Africans	Yes	No
<i>Stairs and square in front of Dona Rosa</i>	Mostly migrants, often accompanied by (ex-) mayor Lucano, of whom stairs are main hang out spot.	Yes	No
<i>Inside the bars</i>	Hanging around & chatting = mainly Italian men; but women and migrants do walk in to buy things	Yes	Yes: men only
<i>Local nightlife and nightclubs out of town [frequently visited by Riace's youth]</i>	Italian adolescents	Yes	No

However, people do not find this lack of contact problematic but simply share different parts of the town square in a peaceful manner. The local bars (Table 2) are also primarily frequented by Italian men, who use them to hang around, chat with each other or play card games. Local women, refugees, and children walk in from time to time to buy something but rarely stay inside or sit down. The terrace of the towns' largest bar (Table 2) is an exception and is usually more mixed in terms of ethnicity than the other bars, and migrants and locals often sit together at one of the tables. Mostly though, refugees share a table with others from a similar cultural background, and the same holds for local Italians. Lucano (the ex-mayor) always used to share his table with both his Italian and refugee friends, making him a clearly visible exception to "the rule." He is also often sitting on the stairs or little walls in front of Taverna Dona Rosa, a "solidarity restaurant" where Italian cuisine and traditional dishes of different African countries are prepared by locals and refugees together. Lucano exemplifies Riace's multiethnic community by sharing the stairs of this regular hang out spot with many of Riace's refugees, who often sit and chat there together. At night, especially in the summer, Riace's youth often frequent the nightclubs in the broader area while their migrant peers stay in town (Table 2). This difference is not simply because some migrants cannot afford the nightclubs' prices but, as they themselves explain, that they are too "shy" to just mix or dance with the locals on a "white terrace" and don't want to force their presence. In general, both Italians and migrants seem to be sensitive to which activities and places are meant for whom. There are "unwritten rules" regarding the use of places and these become manifest in disapproval and gossip when people ignore them. Only at "Riace in Festival" (local music and theater festival around topics of migration and anti-mafia) spatial boundaries sometimes are ignored, as refugees and Italian youngsters occasionally dance and make music together on the town's square. Still, inhabitants, in general, try to avoid acting out of place. Importantly, some places such as the bars are not only characterized by (some degree of) ethnic spatial segregation but also by gender segregation. Traditionally gender is an important

categorical distinction that structures local relations and defines social boundaries (Table 2). Especially for the older Italian men and women, it is evident which places belong to women and which to men:

“The elderly Italians do not maintain any friendships between men and women. The women visit their friends at home, the men go to the bar. Perhaps you will at most notice colleagues taking a coffee together. This is a very old-fashioned mentality of “the South” [referring to Southern Italy], which you won't find in the North.” (W., female inhabitant)

In such cases, spatial segregation is not merely an expression of the homophily principle (“birds of a feather flock together”) but also reflect gender role expectations with men who go out and women who stay at home.

4 | DISCUSSION

Our analysis provides empirical support for several critical points that researchers have raised in relation to intergroup contact theory (Connolly, 2010; Dixon et al., 2005, 2016). First, the findings highlight the importance of using research methods that aim to understand the subjective and diverse interpretations of contact, rather than only relying on methods that, for example, use predefined rating scales to compute intergroup contact and friendship scores (Dixon et al., 2005, 2016). Specifically, our results nuance the claim that intergroup contact in the form of friendships is a critical ingredient for developing a strong multiethnic community (Finseraas & Kotsadam, 2017; Pettigrew, 1998). Rather, Riace's inhabitants indicated that friendliness in the form of simple gestures like greeting each other on the streets are normatively expected and central in making people feel recognized, included, and at home, and thus for maintaining a cohesive and supportive local community. This shows that contact experiences that tend to be ignored in mainstream contact research and which might seem superficial from an outsider's perspective can be considered very valuable by the people themselves for developing and maintaining community life within a highly diverse setting. In an attempt to stimulate “real integration” some of Riace's volunteers and social workers are guided by notions of what constitutes “optimal contact” (Pettigrew, 1998) rather than being sensitive to people's own interpretations of everyday friendliness as a critical form of contact and a key aspect of community life. This is unfortunate because precisely those types of relations that people themselves appreciate and value can serve to establish strong, diverse communities. Thus, ethnographic fieldwork can make an important contribution to intergroup contact research and local interventions because it enables researchers and social workers to understand people's own interpretations and evaluations of everyday contacts and how these play out in their local lives. Second, the case of Riace shows the ambivalent ways in which intergroup contact takes shape in daily contexts, and that it is difficult to create conditions for optimal contact in complex real-world settings (Dixon et al., 2016). Allport's (1954) favorable conditions of “intergroup cooperation,” “common goals,” “equal group status” and “authority support” are more like ideal-types that are not easy to establish and maintain in social reality, not even in Riace. This is not only because of local group dynamics but also because of the broader societal and political context. For example, national authorities, like Salvini of the far-right Lega party, have publicly disapproved of and increasingly tried to obstruct the refugee's programs and the related funding (ASGI, 2019; Reynolds, 2019). The blocking of these funds creates a local dependency relationship for Riace's refugees who partly rely on such governmental financial support. For example, they increasingly come to depend on local Italians' help and charity to access services such as public transport. Thus, whilst Riace's local context promotes intergroup acceptance and equality, for example, through collaborative work projects, the broader political context can simultaneously create an unequal intergroup context that hampers the establishment of positive community relationships (Ridgeway, 2013). This indicates that whether or not conditions for optimal contact are present depends not only on the local context but also on the broader society, and that societal conditions can impact local group boundaries in various ways (Wimmer, 2013). Our findings further support the call to investigate different subjective and social outcomes of intergroup contact, beyond individual prejudice which is the main focus of much of the existing contact research (Dixon et al., 2005, 2016; Greenland et al., 2019; Vincent, 2008). In addition to a relative absence of explicit negativity and discriminatory practices, the many friendly encounters did not abolish the use of group stereotypes, for example about Nigerian women. Positive intergroup relations also did not mean that there were no forms of ethnic

spatial segregation. Even though spatial group boundaries are situational, change over time, and can temporarily disappear such as during the yearly "Riace in Festival," certain parts of town were predominantly "reserved" for specific groups (Bourdieu & Rafalko, 2000; Minard, 1952; Wimmer, 2013). However, spatial group boundaries are not necessarily perceived as being problematic but rather as normal ways of socializing with those one feels most familiar and comfortable with, such as at the town square where different ethnic groups claim different benches. Furthermore, the friendships that inhabitants predominantly have within their cultural group do not seem to have a negative impact on the shared sense of community in Riace (Weisel & Böhm, 2015). This indicates that the absence of group boundaries is not required for creating strong multiethnic communities. What seems to matter is whether group boundaries go together with everyday friendliness, and not with (institutionalized) inequalities and power differences (Bourdieu & Rafalko, 2000; Weber, 2019; Wimmer, 2013). Economic inequalities can translate into forms of spatial segregation and group boundaries can be based on stereotypical assumptions that harm the reputation of specific groups (Ridgeway, 2013). Furthermore, the case of Riace Marina demonstrates that a town's urban layout matters for the opportunities to create strong multiethnic communities (Clayton, 2009; Glick Schiller & Caglar, 2010). Our findings have implications for local interventions in other shrinking rural regions that deal with refugee settlement, especially for the so-called "welcoming spaces" initiatives (Interreg Central Europe, 2021; Welcoming spaces, 2020; Whole-COMM, 2021). In these "spaces," local communities are experimenting with the reception of refugees and non-EU migrants to see if this can lead to socioeconomic revitalization, and also with local interventions for trying to create positive interethnic relationships (Welcoming spaces, 2020; Whole-COMM, 2021). The social composition of these shrinking communities is often quite similar to Riace with a similar high familiarity between the inhabitants (Welcoming spaces, 2020; Whole-COMM, 2021). Thus, some aspects of the 'Riace model' might be relevant for these communities, like the fact that refugees' houses are spread across town which stimulates opportunities for short and friendly informal encounters. Moreover, research in Welcoming Spaces in, for example, Germany and Turkey, shows that structural conditions that promote inequality are present in almost each (national) context, such as legislation that limits the opportunities for newcomers to participate in the job market or receive social welfare payments (Thoennessen et al., 2021). The case of Riace shows that such structural inequalities can form the basis for stereotyping. Therefore local initiatives could profit from follow-up research on the structural and legislative conditions that hamper possibilities for interethnic relations based on equality between all parties (Allport, 1954; Ridgeway, 2013). Additionally, these initiatives can profit from research using an ethnographic approach for identifying local meanings and understandings instead of starting with pre-established theoretical notions about intergroup contact (Dixon et al., 2005, 2016). We have tried to show that ethnographic research can make an important contribution to develop an understanding of social relations in a multi-ethnic community. Furthermore, this type of research does not only allow to the application of theory-based propositions but also to critically examine, adapt and further develop these propositions. However, as with any other research method, there are also familiar limitations. These have to do with the time-consuming nature of this type of research and the fact that being both a participant and researcher demands effort, commitment, and sincerity from the analyst. Furthermore, there is always the possibility that people perceive the researcher in a particular way. For example, during the fieldwork, we did not encounter (explicit) stereotypes about Italians which might be due to the fact that the researcher was seen as European and connected to Italy, which may have prevented migrants from expressing their stereotypes about Italians. Future ethnographic research in multiethnic communities might benefit from investigator triangulation, specifically from having diverse research teams during the phases of data collection and analysis (Abu-Lughod, 1988; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Studies show, for example, that race, gender, and social class similarities between researchers and locals can contribute to developing trust relationships and having equal access to different subgroups (Abu-Lughod, 1988; Duneier & Carter, 1999). Moreover, diverse teams can work against (subconscious) biases that may affect observations, field notes, and analyses (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2011; Duneier & Carter, 1999; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Finally, ethnographic research is able to provide a detailed and contextualized understanding of specific situations, but this can raise questions about generalizability and representativeness (Gray, 2003). It would therefore be useful to investigate other integrated multi-ethnic communities and to evaluate intergroup contact theory in relation to processes and developments in different local settings (e.g., Connolly, 2010).

5 | CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the diverse and nuanced outcomes of intergroup contact in Riace highlight the importance of a contextualized understanding of the role of contact for intergroup relations in local communities. The findings show that it is important for contact research to pay close attention to people's own interpretations of mundane contact experiences (Dixon et al., 2005), such as the pivotal role of everyday friendliness that serves as the normative framework and critical social glue in the Riace community. Furthermore, the findings question the notion that a strong community requires people to ignore ethnic group differences and to demonstrate no group preferences in particular settings. A strong community does not have to mean that people equally like all others, but rather that they are on friendly terms with each other and that stereotypical expectations and intergroup inequalities are addressed. Especially the impact of intergroup contact on social boundaries that sustain inequalities deserves attention and should be taken into account in trying to develop successful contact policies and interventions.

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CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

We confirm that this study is original and has not been published elsewhere, nor is it currently under consideration for publication elsewhere. We also have no conflicts of interest to disclose. The first 6 months of data collection were sponsored by a PhD Research Scholarship of Collegio dei Fiamminghi. For details on eligibility for author listing, please see the journal's authorship policy, the Editorial Policies, and Ethical Considerations section.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Ethnographic fieldwork data such as field notes are stored at Utrecht University's safe storage and can be viewed upon reasonable request.

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