



March 27, 2017

**Review of Anna Stefaniak's doctoral dissertation**

I would like to thank the Scientific Council of the Faculty of Psychology, University of Warsaw, for the invitation to evaluate the doctoral thesis of Ms. Anna Stefaniak, written under supervision of Dr. Michał Bilewicz and co-supervision of Dr. Mikołaj Winiewski, and titled "The influence of contact with a multicultural past on intergroup attitudes and civic engagement."

It was a pleasure to read about this very interesting and impressive line of research that was written up in a very detailed, thorough, and thoughtful way. The text is also impressively well written, especially given that the author is outside of an English-speaking context. I found this research unique, innovative and ambitious and it went beyond my expectations of what a doctoral dissertation might entail. I therefore recommend to pass this dissertation with distinction. I elaborate on my reasons for this recommendation in the following. I also provide several suggestions for how this line of research might be further developed in the future and what might be taken into account when it is written up for publication. I organize my comments below based on the four questions that were posed in the review request letter sent to me by Warsaw University.

**1. Uniqueness and innovation of the research problem.**

The research question addressed in this dissertation is clearly unique and innovative. I am not aware of any research or theorizing that conceptualizes experiential learning about the multicultural past of one's town as a form of intergroup contact that may improve intergroup attitudes and civic engagement. The dissertation research then goes beyond this initial question to also test the underlying psychological mechanisms. Thus, this dissertation introduces a novel construct and reports an innovative line of studies with both theoretical and practical implications. Another unique and innovative aspect of this dissertation is its combination of an impressive range of methods. Intervention research and field experiments in general are very rare in social psychology, yet much needed, as the author also argues convincingly (see also Bar-Tal, 2004; Paluck & Green, 2009). The use and combination of qualitative methods is rare yet important for our advancement of theory and to address shortcomings of quantitative studies. And finally, the juxtaposition of findings from experimental research with brief manipulations and long-term interventions to examine if the findings replicate with these different methodological approaches is extremely rare as well—yet so important given the field's overreliance on experiments. In other words, each one of these aspects already makes the dissertation unique and innovative, but Anna Stefaniak went beyond my expectations for what would already contribute a worthy contribution to the field to be awarded a doctoral degree by combining multiple novel and unique aspects. This is why I recommend that she be awarded the doctoral degree with distinction.

**2. Originality of the doctoral thesis.**

As noted in the previous section, this dissertation presents original research. There is no research on this topic that I am aware of. The dissertation introduces a novel construct of contact with a

multicultural past (which contributes to various literatures, including that on intergroup contact theory and on place attachment), and tests its implications for intergroup relations and civic engagement using multiple methods and testing underlying mechanisms. The idea to first test the effects of an intervention and then bring it back to the lab for experimental follow-up studies is also original and creative – usually social psychologists do this the other way around, if at all. And in general there is too little research that examines the effectiveness of real-world interventions, rather than short-term manipulations of artificial situations in the lab. In addition to combining different research traditions and paradigms, this dissertation is also original in its integration of different literatures from different fields and subdisciplines – social and political psychology, ecological psychology, sociology, history, education, . . . The literature review is excellent and detailed, and this interdisciplinary scope is again rare in our field. Moreover, the author provides a very good background of the historical and sociopolitical background of her research. In other words, she contextualizes the research questions which is rare in our field that likes to pretend that our findings are universal.

Finally, the focus on social capital in this dissertation is interesting and understudied in Social Psychology, but makes this dissertation more relevant to other disciplines that have studied social capital (such as political science and economics). In other words, this dissertation fosters interdisciplinary exchange with several fields (including, obviously, education).

### **3. Ingenuity and originality of the design of methods, applied research procedures and statistics:**

As noted above, the multi-method approach in this dissertation is ingenious and very appealing. It provides an excellent triangulation of findings and allows to test the research questions in more depth and from multiple perspectives, also testing the generalizability of the intervention to other, brief formats (showing that these shorter and more artificial manipulations do not work and it is indeed the sustained participation in experiential learning that matters).

This multi-methodological approach is also very ambitious – normally a dissertation relying on three longitudinal assessments of interventions, or a series of three experiments in itself would have provided sufficient material for a dissertation. Anna Stefaniak went above and beyond what I would have expected in a dissertation by combining three longitudinal studies and three experiments, each of which tested outcomes as well as underlying mechanisms, and adding a sophisticated qualitative analysis of a huge number of participants' letters to imagined descendants of former Jewish inhabitants of their town, which in itself is a very creative and novel method. Another ambitious feature of her dissertation is the choice to work with school samples and community samples. Most social psychological studies rely on Psychology or other university/college student samples, which is obviously very limited in its generalizability, yet is accepted in our field due to the convenience of obtaining these samples. Any dissertation in our field limiting itself to these samples would have passed and not been questioned by social psychologists. Therefore, I applaud Anna Stefaniak that she took the much more effortful path of conducting field research with multiple student samples, in addition to online research among panels of community samples from across Poland. This makes the findings much more generalizable and is a very strong feature of this dissertation. Additionally, the sample sizes were more than adequate and none of the studies are underpowered as we often see in the field and in particular with this kind of intervention research. The rationale for the methodologies the author

used and the choice of the samples was very well written and convincing. The rationale for the statistical procedures she used was also explained well, and the analytic procedures she employed (e.g., macros for testing mediation in longitudinal designs) were appropriate and sophisticated.

In the longitudinal assessment of the interventions, the addition of a control group was a very positive and strong feature of the studies that further strengthen the findings. The fact that the control group and intervention group differed systematically on some measures at Time 1 is not uncommon, but it is also a methodological problem that should be addressed a bit more in the discussion. Additionally, a bit more information about the control group might be helpful for the readers, for example whether they matched the treatment groups in terms of their grade/cohort, SES and some other factors (that could then also be used in propensity score matching), or why they did not participate in the intervention (i.e., in which way they may systematically differ). Additionally, the dissertation could have discussed a bit more what an ideal control group may have looked like to rule out confounds – for example, the control group might have been one that also participated in activities in their town that are not linked to a multigenerational past or history in general. Perhaps some of the effects (e.g. on civic engagement) are due to this collective activity; and this element should be teased apart from the specific focus on the multicultural past. Alternatively, a wait-list control group approach could be used like in clinical research, to ensure that participants share the same level of interest and motivation in both the treatment and the intervention group. Interventions often do not have ideal control groups for practical reasons, but this is important to discuss nevertheless for future research that might have resources to further improve the control group.

It is positive that the author reported effect sizes and explained variance. This is particularly important in applied research. Given the importance of knowing whether the intervention is creating sufficient change to warrant future funding of programs, I would recommend discussing the (sometimes small) effect sizes in a bit more detail.

The addition of a qualitative study is very good and the specific method chosen (asking participants to write letters to imagined descendants of local Jews) is very creative. One additional issue the discussion might address is whether or not this in itself isn't a bit like a perspective-taking intervention that could change participants' thoughts and direct them in a certain way. This is particularly the case because of the note in the letter prompt that the hope is the letters will "help to build new relations between Jews and Poles", which is rather directive and might also give rise to socially desirable responses in line with the researchers' expectations. In other words, a different kind of assessment may have yielded different results. Apart from that, the qualitative methodology that is described is good and in line with what is common for thematic analysis. The quantitative content coding though would ideally be performed on more than just 10% of the sample, especially given that the interrater reliability was not very high (it was good, but not excellent). As a side note, it seems unlikely that the thematic analysis was merely inductive (p. 101); a mixed inductive and deductive approach seems more likely especially given that this study followed a series of quantitative studies testing particular hypotheses with specific constructs of theoretical interest that are likely to have informed which themes were identified (which is fine, it just needs to be acknowledged).

The findings from the thematic analysis are detailed and the quotes support the themes well. A few of the quotes suggested the potential presence of subthemes that could be fleshed out further (for example if this study is written up for publication). Of course it may also simply be individual quotes that are not supported by further examples and therefore should be a subtheme, but here are a few such instances that I noticed: empathy (p. 105, second half of the page); a sense of expertise or mastery, ability to educate others (p. 107, top), inclusion of other in the self (quote at the end of the first paragraph on p. 109); one might also distinguish between tolerance or positive attitudes toward Jews and general tolerance. The discussion of the qualitative study should also identify more clearly what was learned that was new (usually the aim of qualitative studies) and which themes mapped onto the variables that the quantitative studies investigated, as well as the content of the intervention (this is discussed to some extent but could be streamlined and in more depth).

The experimental studies are well designed and it was a good idea to test each element of the hypothesized mechanisms and the construct (contact with a multicultural past) separately, in isolation. (As a side note: The definition and elements are explained very clearly here on p. 121 (second paragraph) and in the first few sentences of the section on Study 5. It would help the reader if this was explained as clearly and concisely as this earlier on in the theoretical introduction). As noted earlier, it is also positive that the studies were conducted among community samples and among paid panels rather than among convenience samples, which all increases the study's generalizability and is a rare feature in social psychological research. The designs of the experiments are standard (e.g., 2 x 2 design). The rationale for the design and levels of the independent variables could be explained more, for example why there is a comparison between a Catholic building and Jewish building and an existing versus a destroyed one – I can guess the rationale based on the theoretical introduction, but it would be informative also to know which main effects and interaction effects (if any) are expected from this design. This would also help the reader understand the interpretation of the findings for example on p. 137, which seems to be discussing a comparison of specific cells (i.e., planned contrasts) rather than main effects, and the interaction is also not reported. That aside, the analysis of the data from the experimental studies is once again adequate and sophisticated.

The mini-meta analysis of the effects across all studies is a nice and informative addition that again goes above and beyond what I would have expected from a dissertation.

**4. Significance of obtained results for theoretical knowledge and/or psychological practice:** To start with, I will note that most research in social psychology addresses one of these questions and provides either a contribution to our theoretical knowledge or to psychological practice. This is because many of the studies that are conducted with the aim of contributing to theoretical knowledge, even when they have potential practical implications, use methods and samples that have very limited external and ecological validity. Conversely, many of the studies that have a more applied focus are not theoretically driven. Anna Stefaniak's dissertation offers both – it provides a theoretical contribution as well as important practical implications.

The theoretical contribution of this dissertation consists, above all, in introducing the notion of “contact with a multicultural past” as a novel form of extended contact. This is a very interesting

idea and extends the literature on intergroup contact theory and intergroup relations in the aftermath of genocide and mass political violence more generally. My only suggestions here would be to discuss the relation between contact with a multicultural past (as it is defined on p. 57 as “discovering and actively engaging with local multicultural history”) and experiential learning more, given that this is central to the definition and its operationalization in the interventions. Presumably there is a large literature in education on the role of experiential versus other forms of learning that would be worthwhile drawing on in future publication of this work. Additionally, the differences and similarities between this and other forms of indirect contact as well as other forms of contact should be discussed in more detail. For example, the experiential component that is proposed as a central element to contact with a multicultural past may bring it closer to actual contact than some other forms of indirect contact such as imagined contact; the proposed form of “contact” involves learning about the history of one’s town that is a bit more abstract and also involves a focus on events, buildings, etc. – not necessarily specific people, which makes it somewhat distinct from all other forms of contact examined so far. All of this could be spelled out a bit more systematically or more explicitly in order to further increase the theoretical contribution of the dissertation.

As noted earlier, the focus on social capital that has not been studied as much within social psychology, at least not using this terminology, is also an important theoretical contribution. However, I would suggest distinguishing the two different elements of social capital that are examined more in the theoretical discussion. Trust and civic engagement (which can also be differentiated into volunteering and collective action) have been examined in two distinct bodies of social psychological research. In other words, it may yield different theoretical predictions when these are taken into account and separated in terms of measurement. The predictors and mechanisms of each might look slightly different, even if they have both been discussed as part of the broader umbrella term “social capital”. This distinction is something social psychology can offer to the broader interdisciplinary literature on social capital, and it could further increase the theoretical contribution of this dissertation.

The significance of the obtained results for psychological practice is particularly strong, given the inclusion of three intervention studies with replication and extension. The intervention was mostly effective; and I found it particularly impressive and noteworthy in the study with the control group the control group actually developed more negative attitudes towards Jews over time whereas attitudes in the intervention group improve.

Additionally, showing that the results from the intervention do not generalize to experiments and short-term interventions is also an extremely important practical contribution, especially for our field of social psychology that tends to overuse experimental research in artificial lab settings even when the aim of the research program is practical in nature, such as oriented toward social change and prejudice reduction. The combination of the interventions with the short-term experiments in this dissertation illustrates how problematic it is that the field of social psychology focuses almost entirely on such experiments. It also shows the limitation of working with just one methodology, and the benefits of using multiple methods to triangulate findings and test different aspects of the research question. Furthermore, it illustrates the very limited use of short-term experiments in artificial settings for psychological practice. These kinds of contributions are much too rare in our field and therefore this dissertation is a wonderful example

of how things should be done in social psychological research on intergroup relations and social change. I applaud Anna Stefaniak for having had the courage to pursue this important and creative line of research in this way.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "J. R. Vollhardt".

(Johanna Ray Vollhardt, Ph.D.  
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