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Selves in contact: how integrating perspectives on sociocultural selves and intergroup contact can inform theory and application on reducing inequality

Tiffany N. Brannon[1] | **Valerie Jones Taylor**[2] | **Gerald D. Higginbotham**[1] | **Kyshia Henderson**[1]

[1] University of California, Los Angeles

[2] Spelman College

Correspondence
Tiffany N. Brannon, UCLA Department of Psychology, 502 Portola Plaza, Franz Hall 4528D, Los Angeles, CA, 90095-1563, USA.
Email: tbrannon@psych.ucla.edu

Valerie Jones Taylor, Spelman College, Department of Psychology, 350 Spelman Ln SW, Atlanta, GA 30314-3643, USA.
Email: vtaylor5@spelman.edu

Abstract

Research within cultural psychology and intergroup relations represent two, often separate and distinct, approaches to examining social groups—including outcomes and experiences that define and distinguish group membership and its consequences. Often, social group membership (e.g., race/ethnicity, gender, and social class) is tied to persistent and pervasive divides—separations that mark the difference in who attends college, stays in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) fields, and even views personal and societal events (e.g., microaggressions, police-involved shootings) as involving bias. Addressing such complex and often divisive issues, psychological science has contributed theoretical and applied insights to mitigate social differences and inequalities experienced by historically disadvantaged social groups. The present paper integrates research on cultural psychology and intergroup relations by (a) reviewing empirical findings on *sociocultural selves* and *intergroup contact* and (b) considering how merging approaches from these literatures, using a *selves in contact* framework, can inform and elaborate theoretical perspectives and applications aimed at reducing inequality.

KEYWORDS

sociocultural selves, intergroup contact, inequality, low-status or minority groups

Brannon and Taylor both contributed as first authors.

1 | INTRODUCTION

> *America's racial divide is older than the republic itself, a central fault line that has shaped the nation's history… Across a broad range of economic and demographic indicators, the data paint a largely depressing picture. Five decades past the era of legal segregation, a chasm remains between black and white Americans—and in some important respects it's as wide as ever (Irwin, Miller, & Sanger-Katz, 2015).*

As illustrated in the opening excerpt from the *New York Times*, contemporary inequalities tied to social groups (e.g., race/ethnicity) are often deeply divisive and strongly rooted in historical practices. Despite long-standing policy interventions, legislation, and even court mandates, these inequalities can prove persistent and seemingly impervious to improvement. Solving social inequality is a challenging problem, one that research within psychological science has made important theoretical and applied strides toward addressing, but important gaps in theory and application remain (Pettigrew, 2008; Richeson & Sommers, 2016). This paper integrates empirical findings related to two often separate and distinct psychological science literatures: (a) cultural psychology and (b) intergroup relations. It highlights the overlap in both literatures' attention to social groups (i.e., race/ethnicity, gender, and social class) and contribution to theory-based insights related to reducing inequalities experienced by members of historically disadvantaged social groups. And commensurate with the notion that social inequality is a challenging problem, it proposes that integrating insights from these literatures can be powerfully leveraged to inform and elaborate theoretical perspectives and solutions aimed at addressing inequality.

Cultural psychology and intergroup relations constitute two distinct literatures that contribute meaningful, yet distinguishable, insights about social groups. For instance, one important insight contributed by cultural psychology is that historically derived yet dynamic ideas, institutions, and everyday practices shape and have consequences for the *psychological self*, including one's self-construal, motivation, affect, and behavior (see Adams, 2012; Markus & Conner, 2013; Markus & Kitayama, 1991, 2010). Accordingly, research within cultural psychology has sought to examine individuals within their social and historical contexts or as *sociocultural selves*—fundamentally connected to, rather than separate from, ideas and practices associated with their social group memberships (e.g., race/ethnicity, gender, and social class background). Thus, as depicted in Figure 1, a key implication of this perspective is that, although associated with stigma and/or disadvantage, membership in a negatively stereotyped and/or low-status[1] social group can constitute a valued source of self, meaning, and connection to other in-group members (Markus, 2008; see also Brannon & Markus, 2013). This implication has been used to mitigate educational inequality (e.g., who attends and achieves in college).

For instance, understandings of sociocultural selves connected to first-generation college students and racial/ethnic minorities (e.g., African-Americans) have contributed theory-based insights related to improving postsecondary access, achievement, and attainment. That is, such research has demonstrated that although being a racial/ethnic minority and/or first-generation college student is associated with stigma and/or disadvantage, it is also associated with meaningful and positive, culturally shaped lived experiences. It can involve engagement with historically derived and valued ideas and practices that shape understandings of the self. In particular, engagement with daily practices and institutions associated with being from a working class or racial/ethnic minority background can cultivate an interdependent self-schema or way of thinking about the self that emphasizes connections to others. Past research has shown that when academic settings and tasks, which are often set up to foster and reward an independent self-schema, are structured to be inclusive of an interdependent self-schema, first-generation and racial–ethnic minority college students persist longer and perform better on a variety of academic outcomes (e.g., Brannon, Markus, & Taylor, 2015; Stephens, Brannon, Markus, & Nelson, 2015; Stephens, Fryberg, Markus, Johnson, & Covarrubias, 2012). Specifically, this research reveals that explicitly acknowledging and affording interdependent motivations and behaviors that highlight an appreciation of community, giving back, and helping others facilitates such positive academic outcomes. Thus, research within cultural psychology has contributed insights about how educational settings can leverage understandings of sociocultural selves tied to social groups that have long been associated with disadvantaged outcomes to facilitate advantaged academic outcomes.

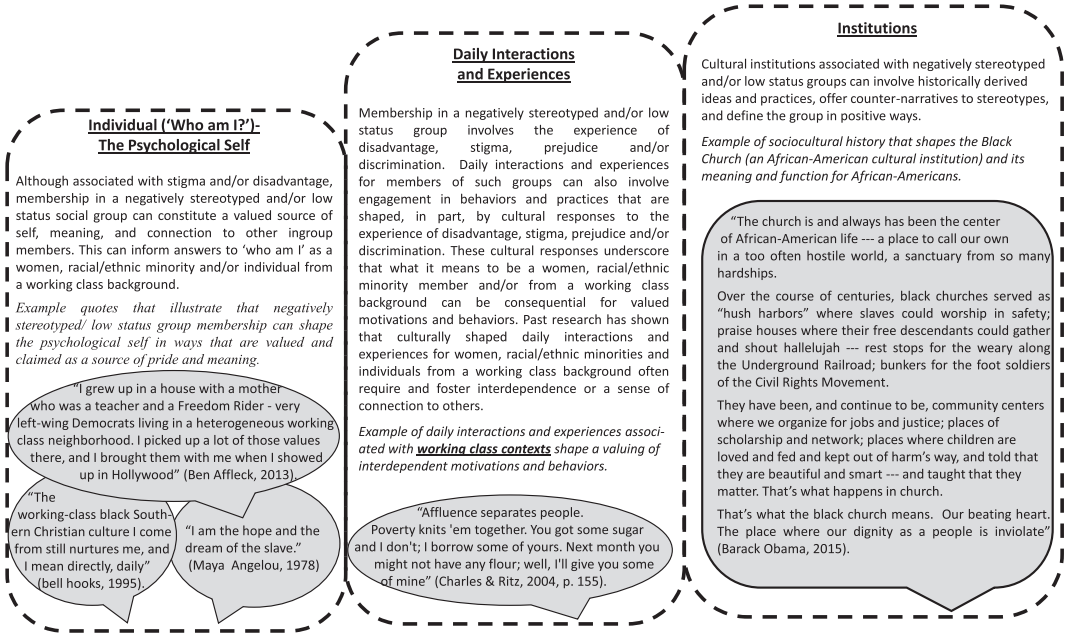

FIGURE 1 Sociocultural selves tied to negatively stereotyped social groups: individuals, daily interactions, and institutions

Whereas cultural psychology has enriched understandings of sociocultural selves tied to negatively stereotyped groups, research within intergroup relations has contributed significantly to understandings of the benefits (and limitations) of the optimal conditions for contact between social groups. In particular, research on *intergroup contact* has shown that while mere contact is not sufficient, contact under optimum conditions (e.g., equal status, cooperation, and common goals), even brief, minimal, or imagined, can facilitate reductions in bias and prejudices toward negatively stereotyped groups (see Harwood, Hewstone, Amichai-Hamburger, & Tausch, 2013; Pettigrew, 1998; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006, 2013; Stathi, Crisp, & Hogg, 2011; Toosi, Babbitt, Ambady, & Sommers, 2012; see also, Christ et al., 2014; Turner, Hewstone, Voci, & Vonofakou, 2008). Broadly, research within intergroup relations has sought to examine the role that psychological processes connected to emotions, stereotypes, similarity, power or hierarchy, perspective taking, and motivations play in shaping intergroup interactions (e.g., Pettigrew & Tropp, 2008; Todd & Galinsky, 2014). This literature has examined contact between individuals who differ in social group membership along various dimensions, including but not limited to race–ethnicity, gender, and social class background (see also Broockman & Kalla, 2016). Thus, a key implication of insights drawn from empirical findings related to intergroup contact is that intergroup attitudes, expectations, and behaviors, both verbal and nonverbal, are malleable.

Given that bias, prejudices, and stereotypes contribute to disparities across an array of important life domains (e.g., education and health), the malleability of attitudes, expectations, interests, motivations, and behaviors is a crucial lever to pull in reducing inequality. Past research has leveraged insights from this literature to address inequality directly and indirectly. For instance, intergroup contact has been shown to directly mitigate social and health-related inequality by impacting dominant or non-negatively stereotyped group members' intergroup attitudes (e.g., prejudice reduction and endorsement of multicultural ideologies). And changes in intergroup attitudes have been shown to indirectly impact inequality in academic domains, as more positive intergroup attitudes have implications for women and racial/ethnic minorities' performance, engagement, and access to key gateway institutions (see Adams, Garcia, Purdie-Vaughns, & Steele, 2006; Logel et al., 2009; Plaut, Thomas, & Goren, 2009).

Although distinct, literatures on sociocultural selves and intergroup contact intersect in illuminating related but separate theoretical and applied interventions that target improving disadvantage. However, fundamental insights and theorizing tied to these literatures often do not converge. For example, research on sociocultural selves often ignores power relations between social groups, and research on intergroup contact often does not treat social groups as inhabiting different cultural contexts. Yet, power relations not only exist between social groups but also can play a critical role in shaping the sociocultural context that informs a social group's history, institutions, and daily lived experiences. Similarly, social groups not only inhabit cultural contexts but are also, in fact, never separate from sets of historically derived and dynamic ideas and practices. Given these overlapping and interconnected qualities of sociocultural selves and intergroup contact, merging perspectives from these literatures might be particularly beneficial for theory and application. That is, it might afford more vivid and holistic theorizing that more fully captures the psychological experiences of people from different social groups and, in doing so, enhance psychological understandings of sociocultural selves and intergroup contact. Indeed, merging these perspectives, considering *sociocultural selves in intergroup contact* or *selves in contact*, might help identify new and long-lasting solutions to resolve intergroup conflict and other social disparities and also might maximize positive outcomes across group lines (e.g., reduce the perceived zero-sum nature of conflicts and disagreements in which social and/or material gains to one group is perceived to involve a loss to another group). This *selves in contact* framework complements, extends, and integrates calls for research on cultural psychology to include perspectives and theorizing related to racial prejudice (see Markus, 2008) and for research on intergroup contact to include more elaborated, real-world contexts (see Paluck, 2016).

Notably, a compelling illustration of integrating perspectives from these two literatures is referenced by Gordon Allport in *The Nature of Prejudice* (1954), a classic text on intergroup contact. Specifically, Allport (1954, p. 266) provides a detailed reference to a study by F. Tredwell Smith (1943) including the methods and findings:

> *Forty-six graduate students in education accepted an invitation to spend two consecutive week-ends in Harlem. In the course of their experience they learned a great deal about life in Harlem and about the people they met there... Attitudes toward Negroes were measured in [experimental and control] groups by means of several scales before and after the week-ends. Marked gains were evident in the experimental group, but not in the control group. Even after a year had elapsed only 8 of the 46 participants failed to show more favorable attitudes than they had before the experiment. The effect of this knowledge-giving contact was positive and apparently lasting.*

As highlighted in the excerpt, the study facilitated (a) physical contact between European-Americans and African-Americans[2] as well as (b) an experience of knowledge-giving contact that directly involved engagement with an African-American cultural context—Harlem. Historically associated with a large representation of African-American residents, Harlem is an area in New York City that is home to landmark and influential African-American institutions and even the Harlem Renaissance—a widely noted creative and artistic explosion of African-American art, music, writing, and activism (see Hutchinson, 1995). Though Smith's (1943) study confounds the opportunity for engagement with African-American cultural ideas and practices with exposure to high-status African-Americans, it does suggest the potential for contact that explicitly involves engaging with another social group's cultural background—taking part in activities that are valued, defining, and perhaps a source of pride—to benefit intergroup outcomes, both immediately and over time.

But why might contact that involves opportunities to engage with cultural ideas and practices associated with social groups, especially groups that have been historically negatively stereotyped, afford improved intergroup outcomes? How might contact across social group lines affect understandings of sociocultural selves including self-construal, motivation, and behavior, especially given different power dynamics that often exist between groups? To explore these questions, in the following sections, we review empirical findings on sociocultural selves associated with race/ethnicity, gender, and social class background. We also highlight how insights from research on sociocultural selves relate to addressing social inequalities. Then, in subsequent sections, we review empirical findings on how intergroup contact informs efforts to reduce inequality. Finally, we highlight the potential benefits for theory and application of integrating these literatures and thus considering *selves in contact*.

2 | SOCIOCULTURAL SELVES: SOCIAL GROUPS AS IDENTITIES IN CONTEXT

Research theorizes and finds that culture and selves are mutually constituted or that culture—which encompasses ever changing yet historically grounded ideas, institutions, daily interactions, and practices—shapes selves and that selves also play a role in shaping culture (see Markus & Conner, 2013; Markus & Kitayama, 2010; Shweder, 1991). Across a variety of important life domains, from education access and achievement to health and well-being, membership in a negatively stereotyped social group is associated with prevalent, persistent, and pervasive risk for adverse social outcomes (e.g., Steele, 2010; Stephens, Markus, & Fryberg, 2012). Although belonging to such social groups is linked to risk and related negative outcomes, research on sociocultural selves illuminates that racial/ethnic, social class, and gender group membership can serve as an important source of pride, meaning, and even motivation. Cultural psychology has robustly documented variation in sociocultural selves among European-Americans and individuals from East-Asian backgrounds (Heine, 2001; Nisbett, Peng, Choi, & Norenzayan, 2001). More recently, theorizing and studies within this literature have contributed to understandings of how psychological science can be leveraged to reduce the prevalent, persistent, and pervasive adverse outcomes experienced by members of negatively stereotyped groups. The following sections provide a selective review of research on sociocultural selves related to racial/ethnic, gender, and social class background. It includes a discussion of how empirical findings in this literature, which conceptualize and examine selves as fundamentally tied to context, provide insights related to addressing inequality.

2.1 | Sociocultural selves: social group membership shapes answers to "Who am I?"

How individuals answer the important existential question—"who am I"—has consequences for motivation (e.g., "what do I value") and behavior (e.g., "what should I be doing"). Social group memberships often shape how individuals answer "who am I." Yet, membership in a negatively stereotyped group inherently involves the experience and awareness of answers to this important existential question that are imposed by others (e.g., dominant group members and society). Such imposed answers to "who am I" often reflect and reinforce undesirable and stereotypic content (Madon et al., 2001; Steele, 2010), which can have consequences for motivation and behavior—contributing to a myriad of social disparities along race/ethnicity, social class, and gender lines (e.g., who enters and stays in college and science, technology, engineering, and mathematics [STEM] fields). For instance, everyday experiences within educational settings (e.g., entering a classroom and taking a test) can trigger concerns about being negatively stereotyped and, in turn, make salient answers to "who am I" that suggest women and/or racial/ethnic minorities do not belong (e.g., Cohen & Garcia, 2008; Steele, 2010). Such answers can undermine a variety of academic outcomes including domain identification (e.g., Walton & Cohen, 2007) and increase broader concerns about marginalization and institutional fairness and trust among negatively stereotyped group members (Murphy & Taylor, 2012; Purdie-Vaughns, Steele, Davies, Ditlmann, & Crosby, 2008).

Given that answers to "who am I" for members of negatively stereotyped groups can reflect imposed, undesirable, and stereotypic content, research on sociocultural selves illuminates an important complementary set of answers to "who am I." Specifically, this research highlights answers that are self-defined, claimed, and valued by a social group and often a response to imposed stereotypic content about the group. Moreover, such answers can assign positive meaning to group membership and reflect a social group's history, and engagement with institutions and daily practices (Brannon et al., 2015; see Figure 1). Thus, these complementary answers allow research on sociocultural selves to enhance and elaborate understandings of social groups that are marginalized and often narrowly defined (e.g., seen through the lens of stereotypes). Such elaborated understandings of race/ethnicity, social class, and gender as social groups contribute to understandings of how and when membership in a negatively stereotyped group can be related to motivations and behaviors that reduce, rather than reinforce, social disparities, which we discuss next.

Research on sociocultural selves among negatively stereotyped groups has shown that the sociocultural context, such as a social group's history, cultural institutions, interactions, and daily practices, can shape the content, meaning, and values that provide answers to "who am I." For example, African-Americans, Latino/a-Americans, American-Indians,

and Arab-Palestine Israelis have been shown to ascribe answers to "who am I" that reflect a dual identity (Oyserman, 2008; Oyserman, Brickman, & Rhodes, 2007). That is, reflecting the lived experiences of many racial/ethnic minority groups, which involves navigating what it means to belong to one's racial/ethnic in-group and to a broader society, some racial/ethnic minority members can develop dual-identity self-schemas[3] that reflect the duality of being a member of one's racial/ethnic group and the larger society (Oyserman, Kemmelmeier, Fryberg, Brosh, & Hart-Johnson, 2003). In relation, African-Americans have been shown to develop and have access to self-schemas associated with the mainstream of society (e.g., mainstream American culture) and of their racial/ethnic group (e.g., African-American culture). This research has found that African-Americans can engage in cultural frame switching (Hong, Morris, Chiu, & Benet-Martínez, 2000) between a more independent self-schema associated with mainstream American culture and a more interdependent self-schema (e.g., more relational and social self-construal, cooperative behavior, and working with others) associated with African-American culture (Brannon et al., 2015).

Research on sociocultural selves and gender also suggests that the lived experience of many women in countries like the United States in navigating one's gender group membership and the broader society shapes answers to "who am I." Consistent with this dual lived experience, men and women in the United States can describe the self in ways consistent with mainstream American cultural values (independent self-schema, Gabriel & Gardner, 1999; Gardner, Gabriel, & Dean, 2004). However, U.S. women (relative to men) have been found to also describe themselves in terms of their relationships to close others and often score higher on measures of relational self-construal (Cross, Bacon, & Morris, 2000; Cross, Hardin, & Gercek-Swing, 2011; Cross & Madson, 1997; Gabriel & Gardner, 1999). Gendered cultural contexts including socialization practices and advertisements that expose women and girls to ideas about emotional expressivity and the importance of caring for others may promote and foster more relational cognitions, affect, and behavior among U.S. women.

Consistent with empirical findings and theorizing on sociocultural selves among racial/ethnic minorities and women, research on sociocultural selves among individuals from working-class backgrounds also finds that lived experience informs answers to "who am I." The lived experience of individuals from working-class backgrounds[4] often involves constrained financial resources and limited geographical mobility (Pattillo-McCoy, 1999; see also Fiske & Markus, 2012). Such constraints in objective and material resources shape the daily lives of individuals from working-class backgrounds (see Figure 1). Aligned with empirical findings documenting the interconnectedness and interdependence tied to the experience of limited resources, research and theorizing on sociocultural selves among individuals from working-class backgrounds find that concern for, awareness of, and responsiveness toward others shape understandings of the self as well as self-relevant motivations and behaviors (Kraus, Piff, & Keltner, 2011; Stephens, Hamedani, Markus, Bergsieker, & Eloul, 2009; Stephens, Markus, & Townsend, 2007).

Together, research on sociocultural selves among racial–ethnic minorities, women, and individuals from working-class backgrounds demonstrates that answers to "who am I" are meaningfully shaped by context. Notably, research in this literature has explored the potential for these contextual, sociocultural understandings of identity among groups that have historically experienced disadvantage to inform theory-based efforts to reduce inequality. In so doing, research in this literature has informed answers to various social disparities, including "who achieves in college" and "who persists in STEM fields." The following section reviews empirical findings that suggest and demonstrate how and when identity—answers to "who am I" that incorporate sociocultural context—can reduce social inequalities.

2.2 | Leveraging sociocultural selves to address social disparities

Members of negatively stereotyped groups are at risk for an array of negative academic outcomes (Steele, 2010). Research on sociocultural selves has elaborated understandings of when identity in such groups can serve as a resource that can be associated with positive academic consequences. For example, correlational, longitudinal, and experimental research finds that dual racial/ethnic self-schemas, a sense of the self as a racial in-group member and the broader society, are associated with higher academic achievement (e.g., grades) and task persistence (Oyserman et al., 2003; see also Altschul, Oyserman, & Bybee, 2006). In relation, Brannon et al. (2015) have shown that

educational settings (e.g., colleges) that are inclusive of African-American cultural ideas and practices (e.g., African-American literature in the curriculum) can allow African-American students to draw on dual self-schemas,[5] which predict enhanced achievement (e.g., task performance and grades) and academic persistence (e.g., pursuing an advanced degree) in both experimental and longitudinal studies.

Past research that harnesses understandings of sociocultural selves tied to gender highlights how institutions (e.g., colleges) can foster positive academic outcomes among women in STEM fields. Building on research related to relational interdependence among women, STEM environments (i.e., engineering) that support a more interdependent understanding of the self (e.g., providing social support and opportunities to cultivate close relationships) are associated with domain persistence for women (Cross & Vick, 2001; see also Smith, Cech, Metz, Huntoon, & Moyer, 2014, for a discussion of interdependence and positive academic outcomes among racial/ethnic minorities). Accordingly, institutional support of a more interdependent self-construal may combat and mitigate early gender differences in perceived engineering expertise and persistence (e.g., confidence in skills, ability to advance in engineering after 1 year of domain-specific coursework; Cech, Rubineau, Silbey, & Seron, 2011). Moreover, inclusive practices in educational settings that recognize, value, and support a more interdependent understanding of the self have been shown to improve a multitude of academic, and even health, outcomes among first-generation college students (e.g., Stephens, Fryberg, et al., 2012; Stephens, Markus, & Fryberg, 2012; Stephens, Townsend, Markus, & Phillips, 2012). As with women in STEM, addressing social disparities by leveraging sociocultural selves in intergroup environments, more generally, provides opportunities for more elaborated and unique avenues for theory and research.

3 | INTERGROUP CONTACT: INTEGRATING A *SELVES IN CONTACT* APPROACH

Research in intergroup relations suggests how problems not fully solved by intergroup contact (e.g., residual intergroup prejudice, anger and disgust, and concerns about the loss of power; McKeown & Dixon, 2017) could benefit from a *selves in contact* approach. For example, when individuals from different social groups interact, they often lack knowledge about the unique sociocultural contexts, including specific histories, that likely shape their divergent experiences, attitudes, and preferences. In the absence of such knowledge, individuals generally rely on stereotypes of out-group members to guide their intergroup perceptions and expectations (Gudykunst, 1989). Accordingly, a lack of historical knowledge about African-Americans affords the denial of racism among European-Americans (Bonam, Das, Coleman, & Salter, 2017; Nelson, Adams, & Salter, 2013), which is likely one explanation for misconceptions and negative expectations across racial/ethnic lines. That is, it might explain European-Americans' misperception of how they will be viewed during interactions with African-Americans (e.g., Shelton, Richeson, Salvatore, & Trawalter, 2005). And it potentially explains why African-Americans might expect prejudicial treatment from European-Americans during such interactions (e.g., Shelton, Richeson, & Salvatore, 2005). Thus, intergroup interactions can be difficult and anxiety provoking, as concerns about how favorable one might be perceived and how positive the interaction will be often dominate the tenor of the contact situations (Shelton, 2003; Stephan & Stephan, 1985).

Because a failure to appreciate an individual's sociocultural context likely contributes to negative experiences in intergroup contact situations, a *selves in contact* approach may be particularly beneficial for addressing barriers to effective contact between social groups. Indeed, the frequency of intergroup interactions can be limited, particularly for dominant or majority group members (Blascovich, Mendes, Hunter, Lickel, & Kowai-Bell, 2001; Tropp & Pettigrew, 2005), and regardless of group status, unfamiliarity breeds misunderstanding and pluralistic ignorance (Shelton & Richeson, 2005). Likewise, intergroup interactions often are adversely affected by negative expectations, assumptions of dissimilarity between groups (e.g., Mallett, Wilson, & Gilbert, 2008), and a lack in perspective taking (e.g., Batson et al., 1997), which can be heightened during intergroup interactions that involve stereotypic in-group members (Taylor, Garcia, Shelton, & Yantis, 2017). To this end, across societies, history is replete with examples of how anxiety, stereotyping, and an inability to empathize (or lack of perspective taking) with out-group members can contribute to

intergroup prejudice and conflict (cf. Al Ramiah & Hewstone, 2013). Thus, a traditional intergroup contact approach to improving intergroup relations that leverages decreasing anxiety and stereotyping, and increasing perspective taking may fail to reap all the potential benefits of the rich and culturally meaningful sociocultural context that individuals bring to the intergroup environment (cf. McKeown & Dixon, 2017; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2005, 2008). By extension, applying a *selves in contact* approach to improving intergroup relations may prove to be fruitful in understanding which psychological processes should be targeted by interventions (see Figures 2 and 3 for elaborated examples and research implications).

4 | *SELVES IN CONTACT* ADDRESSES SOCIAL INEQUITY: ATTITUDES, ACCESS, AND ACHIEVEMENT

Intergroup contact, which can foster positive intergroup outcomes among dominant or majority group members, has also been shown to promote advantageous, inequality-mitigating, outcomes among racial/ethnic minorities, women, and first-generation college students. That is, intergroup contact can bidirectionally address social disparities in access and achievement by improving intergroup attitudes and promoting factors (e.g., increased belonging and knowledge of institutional practices) that afford access and achievement within key gateway institutions (e.g., colleges). For example, longitudinal and experimental evidence supports that intergroup contact in college settings (e.g., roommates) can positively affect dominant or majority group members' attitudes (Shook & Fazio, 2008). And for racial/ethnic minorities (i.e., Latinos/as and African-Americans), contact with dominant or majority group members (e.g., friendships)

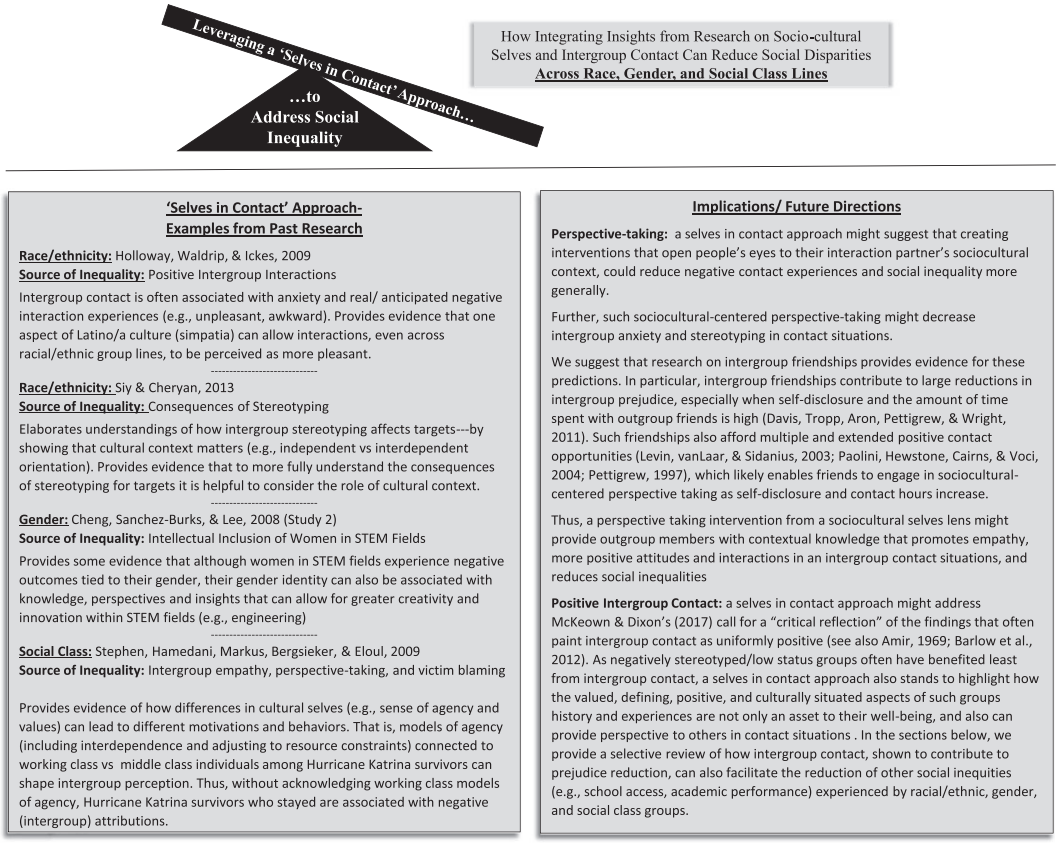

FIGURE 2 Selves in contact approach: examples from past research, implications for future research

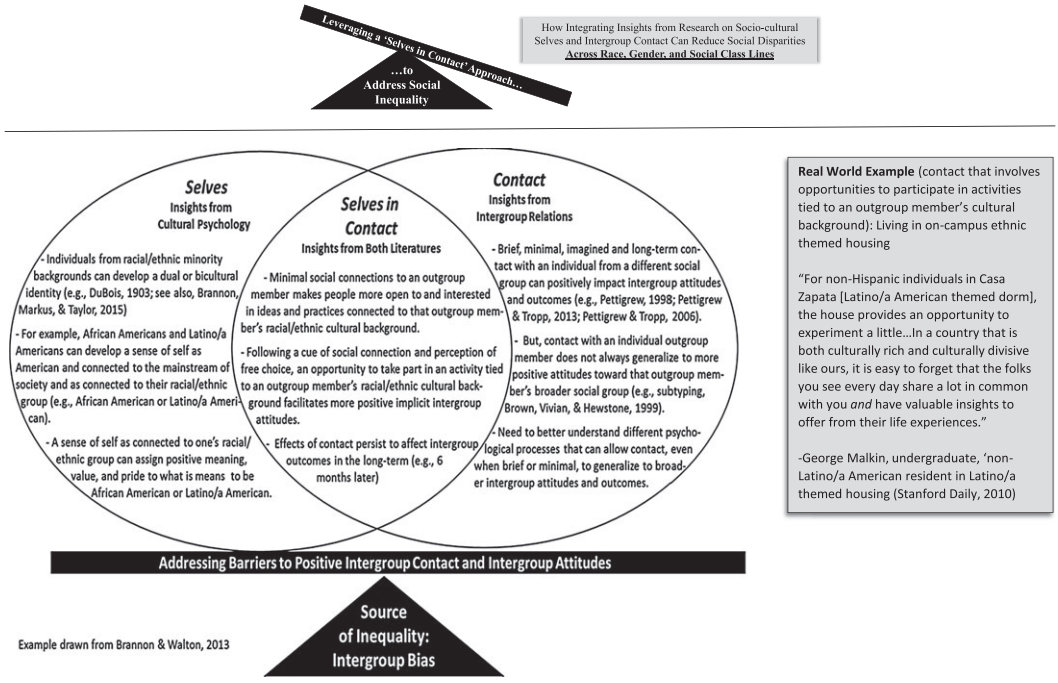

FIGURE 3 Selves in contact approach: extended example from past research

can positively affect academic belonging and satisfaction (Mendoza-Denton & Page-Gould, 2008). Similar positive effects of intergroup contact are seen when linked to academic access and achievement. For example, women's math performance was found to increase when anticipating an interaction or actually engaging in an interaction with a non-sexist man, compared to a sexist man (Adams et al., 2006; Logel et al., 2009; see also Park, Young, Eastwick, Troisi, & Streamer, 2016). Even across social class lines, intergroup interactions can negatively affect cognitive resources among first-generation college students at elite institutions, yet contact situations that reduce concerns about competency can alleviate cognitive depletion (Johnson, Richeson, & Finkel, 2011).

5 | SELVES IN CONTACT: IMPLICATIONS FOR REDUCING INEQUALITY

Intergroup contact has been shown to be especially effective at reducing social disparities, affecting critical outcomes among majority group members and across racial/ethnic, gender, and social class lines. Yet, theoretical and applied gaps remain; integrating research on sociocultural selves may be particularly poised to address these gaps (see also Figures 2 and 3). For instance, research on sociocultural selves has shown that individuals from Latino/a cultural backgrounds tend to develop and possess an elaborated *simpatía* self-schema, an understanding of the self that emphasizes relationships and social harmony (Triandis, Marin, Lisansky, & Betancourt, 1984). In contact situations in which interactions across racial/ethnic lines can provoke anxiety and self-perception concerns, this *simpatía* self-schema among Latinos/as is associated with a variety of positive intergroup outcomes (Holloway, Waldrip, & Ickes, 2009). That is, the presence of a Latino/a interaction partner is related to enacting more positive social behaviors. It is also associated with a more positive perceived subjective experience of the interaction. Thus, by integrating insights related to optimal conditions for contact with insights related to sociocultural selves among Latinos/as, these findings by Holloway and colleagues further understanding of factors that allow intergroup interactions to go well and to be associated with satisfaction. Suggesting the benefit of studying *selves in contact* to facilitate theory-based solutions to inequality that affect

both majority group members and negatively stereotyped group members, the observed positive intergroup outcomes were found among Latinos/as and their non-Latino/a interaction partners.

Further, studying *selves in contact* has the potential to elaborate understandings of when contact can positively affect intergroup outcomes, both immediately and in the long term. For example, Brannon and Walton (2013; see also Figure 3) examined the effect of contact and opportunities to take part in activities associated with an out-group member's cultural background on intergroup attitudes (e.g., implicit bias, cultural interest, and policy support). They found that a minimal social connection to a Latina out-group member and an opportunity to take in an activity associated with Latinos/as cultural ideas and practices facilitated more positive intergroup attitudes and outcomes, both immediately and almost six months later. Likewise, addressing health inequities, research finds that integrating more interdependent cultural norms in the university culture can improve biological functioning and emotional outcomes among first-year college students—and suggests that an elaboration of such norms would be beneficial for all students (Stephens, Townsend, Hamedani, Destin, & Manzo, 2015; see also Stephens, Markus, & Fryberg, 2012). More broadly, a *selves in contact* approach might suggest novel solutions to addressing social disparities across gender, social class lines, and other social groups as well (see Figures 2 and 3) and in so doing facilitate bidirectional benefits (see Stephens, Hamedani, & Destin, 2014, for an example of an intervention that leverages sociocultural selves tied to working-class backgrounds and demonstrates academic benefits across social class lines).

6 | CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Solving social inequality across a myriad of important life domains (e.g., academic access and achievement and health) is a challenging problem. This paper highlights the potential for integrating psychological science insights from two literatures—cultural psychology and intergroup relations—to further and elaborate theoretical and applied studies toward addressing this challenging problem. In one of the most classic and foundational texts on intergroup contact, Allport (1954) references a study by Smith (1943) that provides a historic and illustrative example of studying *selves in contact*, during a time when U.S. race relations were explicitly rife with conflict. This important work highlights how physical contact between members of negatively stereotyped groups and majority or dominant groups and a direct engagement within another groups' sociocultural context can afford improved intergroup outcomes both in the short term and over time. With these insights, recent empirical findings and theorizing demonstrate that, despite different power dynamics that often exist between groups, positive contact across social group lines provides the possibility for active and open engagement with, and an appreciation and understanding of, out-group members' self-construal, motivation, and behavior. Thus, this paper advocates for considering *selves in contact*—which might afford more holistic theorizing about sociocultural selves and intergroup contact. A *selves in contact* approach stands to generate potentially novel, more elaborate, and long-lasting interventions and solutions to reduce and resolve intergroup prejudice, intergroup conflict, and other social disparities. Such interventions and solutions may prove increasingly meaningful as social group differences in reactions to personal and societal events, such as police-involved shootings, microaggressions, social movements (e.g., gay and transgender rights), and political happenings (e.g., election of Trump and Brexit), underscore the salience and complexities of improving intergroup relations and outcomes.

NOTES

[1] Although distinct in some characteristics, negatively stereotyped and low-status social groups share important similarities related to the experience of discrimination and disadvantage. Throughout the paper, we will use the label *negatively stereotyped* to be inclusive of low-status groups.

[2] Self-schemas are cognitive affective ways of thinking about the self that have consequences for motivation and behavior.

[3] The social group labels African American, Black, and Black-American are being used interchangeably, as are European-American, White, and White-American.

[4] The social group labels working-class background and first-generation college student are being used interchangeably.

[5] One self-schema associated with mainstream American and one associated with African American culture.

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Tiffany N. Brannon's research examines sociocultural identities in negatively stereotyped groups such as African-Americans and Latino-Americans; and she investigates the potential for these identities to serve as a psychological resource—one that can facilitate a variety of individual and intergroup benefits. Her research integrates basic psychological theories related to the self, multicultural experiences, and consistency theories to understand the conditions that allow culturally shaped identities in negatively stereotyped groups to function as powerful agents of social change. This research has demonstrated that culturally shaped identities when affirmed within mainstream educational settings can increase academic motivation and performance among members of negatively stereotyped groups and can improve the intergroup attitudes of majority group members. Brannon is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Psychology at the University of California, Los Angeles. Prior to joining the faculty at UCLA, she was a postdoctoral fellow and visiting assistant professor at the Kellogg School of Management, Northwestern University. She received her Ph.D. and M.A. in Social Psychology from Stanford University and her B.A. in Psychology from Florida International University.

Valerie Jones Taylor's research examines how stereotyping and prejudice affect the academic performance and interracial interactions of underrepresented groups (i.e., racial–ethnic minorities and women in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) and how stereotyping processes affect perceivers' perceptions and treatment of racial minorities and racialized physical spaces. Integrating key theoretical perspectives, such as stereotype and social identity threat, intergroup relations, intersectionality, and sociocultural selves, Taylor's work seeks to understand how and when stereotyping processes are advantageous or detrimental to people's cognitive and behavioral outcomes. Taylor has been awarded grants and fellowships from the National Science Foundation and the Ford Foundation. Prior to her current position as Assistant Professor in the Department of Psychology at Spelman College, Taylor completed a NSF postdoctoral fellowship at Princeton University. She received her Ph.D. in Social Psychology from Stanford University, and earned a B.A. in both Psychology and Ethnic Studies from the University of Texas at Austin.

Gerald D. Higginbotham's primary research focuses on how cultural values and stereotypes linked to intersectional identities can differentially promote or impede a sense of belonging and identification in various educational contexts. In particular, he is interested in how identities that are valued and claimed by underrepresented racial, ethnic, and gender minorities can be used to foster a greater sense of belonging and identification in academic spaces, in an effort to address disparities in educational achievement. Higginbotham's work incorporates theory on sociocultural selves, multiculturalism, social identity, and intergroup relations. Gerald D. Higginbotham is a doctoral student in Social Psychology at the University of California, Los Angeles. He received his B.A. with honors and distinction from Stanford University in Psychology with a minor in African and African-American studies.

Kyshia Henderson is a Lab Manager at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA). She completed her undergraduate studies at UCLA with a degree in Psychology. Her research interests are in intergroup relations and diversity.

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