

How to overcome prejudice

A brief conversation can have a lasting effect on prejudice

By Elizabeth Levy Paluck

What do social scientists know about reducing prejudice in the world? In short, very little. Of the hundreds of studies on prejudice reduction conducted in recent decades, only ~11% test the causal effect of interventions conducted in the real world (1). Far fewer address prejudice among adults or measure the long-term effects of those interventions (see the figure). The results reported by Broockman and Kalla on page 220 of this issue are therefore particularly important (2). The authors show that a 10-min conversation with voters in South Florida reduced prejudice against transgender people and increased support for transgender rights for at least 3 months.

As the authors acknowledge, these strong results in the wake of a brief intervention might seem surprising. But readers may find it even more surprising that so few previous field studies have tested the causal effect of any type of intervention, aimed at any type of prejudice. Experimental tests of interventions to reduce prejudice have usually been confined to the laboratory. Field studies have mostly measured individuals' levels of prejudice with ever more sophisticated surveys.

Broockman and Kalla's results thus do not represent a new challenge to an established field: They stand alone as a rigorous test of this type of prejudice reduction intervention. The authors combine a rigorous field experiment with long-term, high-quality measurement of its outcomes. Their exciting methodological template is now available to other investigators, allowing them to test how canvassing interventions affect prejudices and political attitudes (3).

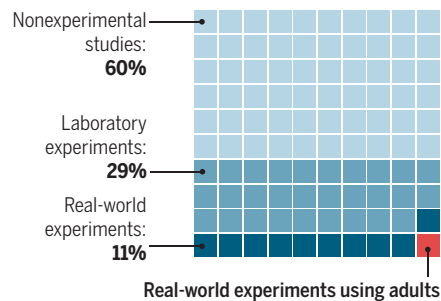
The results of the study align with psychological theories and empirical demonstrations that prejudice is subject to peer influence (4), fluctuations in perceived social or personal threats (5), and the structure of educational group tasks (6). They stand in contrast to those who have argued that individual prejudice is resistant to change (7).

How should we understand the nature of prejudice, particularly its relationship to political attitudes and behaviors? One of the best

ways to approach this question is by studying the successes and failures to change prejudice among various populations in the world. Broockman and Kalla's study represents an important advance for this approach. They randomize whether voters are visited by a canvasser to discuss transgender rights or recycling (control), and further, whether that canvasser is transgender or nontransgender. Their results show that the carefully-scripted discussions led by both transgender and nontransgender canvassers led to the observed changes, even when study participants watch political attack ads.

It remains to be shown whether the scripted discussions were successful because

Prejudice reduction literature



Prejudice reduction. The finding that canvassing can reduce prejudice toward transgender people (2) adds to a small literature testing the causal effects of real-world prejudice reduction interventions. As of 2009 (1), 11% of published and unpublished studies experimentally tested the effect of interventions conducted in the real world.

they asked voters to recall a time when they were judged negatively to understand a transgender person's perspective ("analogic perspective-taking"). Rather than investigating the psychological processes responsible for the effect, Broockman and Kalla focus on whether the canvassing intervention produced substantive and durable changes that are detectable in a nonlaboratory environment. This is a welcome development: Social scientists have spent enough time in the lab learning about the mechanisms of interventions with no known real-world effects (1).

Analogic perspective taking is not the most prominent method in the prejudice reduction literature. Activists at the LA LGBT Center developed the intervention by testing different persuasion techniques over more than 13,000 canvassing conversations (8). The cur-

rent study's success speaks to the promise of a social science that takes the hypotheses of experienced practitioners seriously.

Broockman and Kalla also tested the contact hypothesis, according to which contact with a member of a stigmatized group reduces prejudice toward that group. Psychologists have studied this idea in hundreds of correlational studies and laboratory experiments (9). However, Broockman and Kalla did not find a statistically significant difference between the effect of transgender and nontransgender canvassers. This null finding contradicts the most optimistic predictions of the contact hypothesis. If in fact there is no difference, this is good news for stigmatized groups that are a demographic minority and require outsiders to help campaign on behalf of the group. This is an exciting question to address in future field experiments.

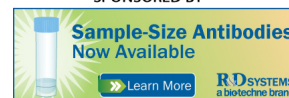
Even when it is driven by a respected theory, an intervention lasting just 10 min may seem too minor to produce substantial effects. Findings of large effects caused by small, theory-based interventions have attracted discussion in recent years (10). However, in the case of Broockman and Kalla's study, we might question whether the intervention is in fact unusually minor. The 10 min consisted of a conversation with a stranger about a memory of personal vulnerability and its relevance to a social issue. A conversation like this seems to be one that people seek out: Individuals report confiding in and discussing important matters with relative strangers, especially if the person is considered knowledgeable on the topic (11).

Furthermore, a face-to-face conversation is not minor when compared with other interventions used to influence political or social attitudes, like 1- to 2-min mass media advertisements (12). Considering both the absolute and relative importance of such a conversation, it seems plausible that a meaningful interaction could take place in a short period of time. Social scientists would do well to continue collaborating with practitioners on the design and study of these brief but meaningful interactions. ■

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