

Overcoming Resistance to Change: Using Narratives to Create More Positive Intergroup Attitudes

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Sohad Murrar and Markus Brauer 

Department of Psychology, University of Wisconsin–Madison

Abstract

Researchers and practitioners have proposed numerous methods to reduce prejudice and create more positive attitudes toward members of other groups. However, empirical support for the effectiveness of these methods is mixed at best. Here, we propose that intergroup attitudes tend to be highly resistant to change, and thus, any method aiming to change these attitudes will be effective only if it successfully overcomes this resistance. First, we argue that traditional methods used to promote positive intergroup attitudes are inadequate in this regard. Next, we suggest that narratives are a unique way of overcoming resistance because they create less reactance, transport individuals into a story world, and provide them with social models. We then describe empirical evidence suggesting that narratives are likely to be particularly useful for creating more positive attitudes toward members of other social groups. Finally, we propose a number of empirical and theoretical questions that present challenges for research on narratives and intergroup attitudes.

Keywords

intergroup attitudes, resistance, narratives, prejudice, discrimination

Members of many groups face a lack of inclusion or, even worse, discrimination: Ethnic minorities; members of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) community; religious minorities; women in technological fields; and people with disabilities are just a few examples. Reducing prejudice and promoting positive attitudes toward these groups is not only an ethical imperative but also crucial for the future of our society. When individuals are the target of prejudice, they drop out at higher rates from educational institutions, are less productive, and suffer from poorer mental and physical health than their included peers. Companies that fail to create an inclusive work climate are less innovative and lose highly qualified employees to their competitors. In short, a lack of inclusion leads to a loss of talent.

Despite the importance of the problem, social scientists and practitioners know relatively little about how to produce lasting changes in people's *intergroup attitudes*, that is, attitudes toward members of other social groups. Most prodiversity initiatives are not evaluated, and among the few that have been, most turn out to be ineffective. In this article, we propose that

attitude resistance limits the effectiveness of commonly used methods for curbing prejudice. We highlight the usefulness of narrative-based approaches for overcoming this resistance. Stories in general, and television shows in particular, are a great way to get people to change their intergroup attitudes and to behave in a less discriminatory manner.

Intergroup Attitudes Are Highly Resistant

Attitude researchers have long focused on a construct that prevents attitude change: resistance. Highly resistant attitudes tend to be immune to pressures to change. When individuals are exposed to persuasive messages related to a resistant attitude, they often generate counterarguments, discount the persuader, selectively attend to attitude-congruent information, or even experience anger (Knowles & Linn, 2004).

Corresponding Author:

Markus Brauer, University of Wisconsin–Madison, Department of Psychology, 1202 West Johnson St., Madison, WI 53706-1611
E-mail: markus.brauer@wisc.edu

We propose that intergroup attitudes tend to be highly resistant for two primary reasons. First, intergroup attitudes are closely tied to our *social identity*, the part of our self-concept that is based on the social groups of which we are members. As a way to feel good about ourselves, we tend to attribute positive traits to groups we belong to (*in-groups*) and negative traits to groups that we are not members of (*out-groups*; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Second, we frequently engage in psychological processes known to reinforce intergroup attitudes. We tend to subtype counterstereotypical out-group members into a special category of individuals who do not represent that out-group. Intergroup attitudes can turn into self-fulfilling prophecies when we create the conditions for out-group members to behave in expected ways, and we are often affected by a confirmation bias and thus interpret ambiguous behaviors by out-group members negatively.

There is an extensive scientific literature on how to change resistant attitudes (Petty, Wheeler, & Tormala, 2003). Unfortunately, this literature seems to be ignored by many educators, employers, policymakers, and sometimes even researchers who have proposed pro-diversity initiatives or prejudice-reduction methods. As an example, consider methods aimed at changing people's implicit biases. A recent analysis aggregating the results of nearly 500 earlier studies revealed that these methods have no effects on discriminatory behavior (Forscher et al., 2018). The same is true for diversity training, which encourages individuals to become aware of their own privileges, increase their knowledge of discrimination, and learn about behaviors that perpetuate power differences between groups. Such training has been shown to be either ineffective or counterproductive in recent empirical research involving hundreds of studies (Dobbin & Kalev, 2016). Numerous other traditional methods, such as increased contact between members of different ethnic groups, have not been adequately evaluated in field settings (Paluck, Green, & Green, 2018).

We suggest that these traditional methods do not adequately deal with the high resistance of intergroup attitudes. When exposed to these methods, people know that they are the target of a persuasive attempt, which has been shown to lead to biased cognitions and greater resistance to change (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). People are often obligated by their employers or educational institutions to participate in traditional methods, which threatens their self-determination and therefore increases resistance to attitude change (Silvia, 2006). In addition, the methods indirectly communicate to people that there is something wrong with them and that they need to change, therefore creating reactance (Brehm, 1966). Finally, traditional methods rely on a

thoughtful consideration of the arguments in relation to one's personal views and attitudes and require high motivation to address one's own biases (Monteith & Mark, 2005)—two conditions that are rarely satisfied in real-world settings.

Using Narratives to Overcome Resistance

Are there prejudice-reduction methods that effectively address the resistance problem of intergroup attitudes? We suggest that *narrative-based methods* do precisely that. A narrative is a series of events that are tied together through characters and that usually has a beginning, a middle, and an end. Narrative-based methods for creating positive intergroup attitudes transmit messages to audiences using a variety of formats, such as television, YouTube, radio, podcasts, books, comics, and paintings.

There are at least three reasons why narrative-based methods are particularly effective in reducing attitudinal resistance (see Fig. 1). First, narratives have the unique ability to contain rather subtle messages about positive intergroup relations. Because the plot is usually the most salient aspect of the narrative to consumers, their "perception of persuasive intent" is minimized (Dal Cin, Zanna, & Fong, 2004, p. 177). When individuals decide to read a book or watch a television program, they are expecting to be entertained, not persuaded to shift their attitudes. Subtle messages included in narratives are thus less likely to threaten individuals' basic need for independence and therefore less likely to create reactance.

Second, narratives reduce resistance because consumers feel transported; that is, they feel absorbed by the narrative world and visualize themselves in the story (Green & Brock, 2000). They also tend to identify and get emotionally involved with the characters. When individuals feel transported and identify with the characters, they are less likely to scrutinize the embedded messages because they are less motivated and have fewer cognitive capacities to do so (Kreuter et al., 2007). As a result, they are less likely to identify points to counterargue. They also perceive the messages as more personally relevant to them, which increases their receptivity to those messages (Petty, Cacioppo, & Haugtvedt, 1992).

Third, narratives allow people to observe social role models. Consumers can observe characters receive rewards for behaving in prosocial ways, experience something negative for behaving in undesirable ways, or transition through situations that might be experienced in real life (Bandura, 2004). Thus, role models increase consumers' self-efficacy and shift outcome expectations for engaging in particular behaviors. This

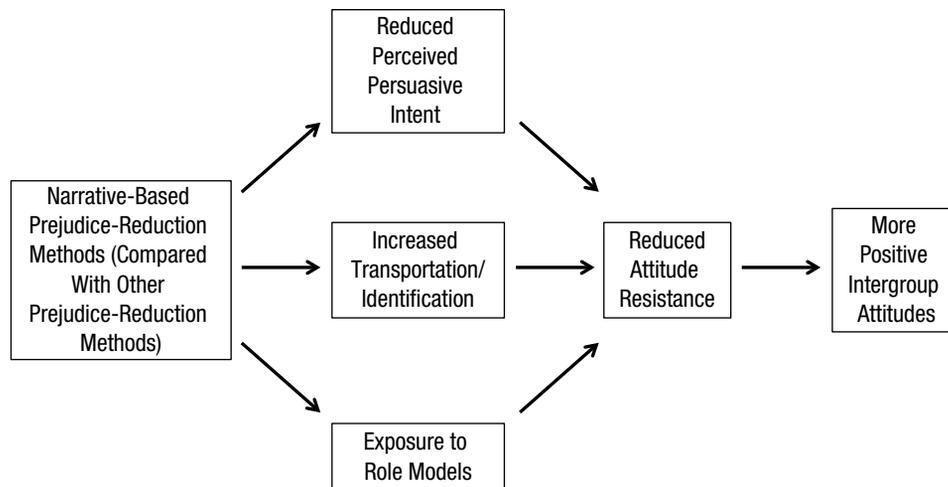


Fig. 1. Schematic illustrating three paths through which narrative-based prejudice-reduction methods can reduce attitude resistance and thus create more positive intergroup attitudes.

is particularly important because people are more resistant to attitude and behavior change when they have a low sense of self-efficacy.

Successful Use of Narratives

Psychologists and practitioners interested in using narratives to create more positive intergroup attitudes need not start from scratch. Entertaining narratives, with persuasive messages weaved into their storylines, have effectively been used to shift people's attitudes, beliefs, and intentions in numerous domains and countries (Braddock & Dillard, 2016).

In the prejudice domain, there is some research suggesting that narratives might be a useful tool for creating more positive intergroup attitudes. Correlational studies show that the consumption of television narratives infused with messages about positive intergroup relations is related to positive attitudes toward out-group members (Schiappa, Gregg, & Hewes, 2006). In a recently conducted study, Murrar and Brauer (2018) demonstrated that consuming a narrative with positive messages about intergroup relations and minority groups has a causal effect on intergroup attitudes. When randomly assigned to watch episodes of a popular sitcom portraying Muslim Canadians in a relatable way, individuals were less prejudiced toward Muslims immediately after viewing and 4 weeks later, compared with individuals who watched episodes of a popular sitcom that did not portray any minorities or topics related to intergroup relations.

Other research suggests that radio narratives can have a positive effect on perceptions of social norms for intergroup interactions in contexts of conflict. When adults in villages of Rwanda listened to a radio soap opera

about reducing intergroup hostility and mistrust for 12 months (several years after the Rwandan genocide), they became more open to future generations marrying members of a religious, ethnic, or regional out-group (Paluck, 2009). Narratives in books also seem to have a positive effect. For example, having 6- to 12-year-old European Americans listen to short narratives about famous African American historical figures and their encounters with racism led them to rate African Americans more positively (Hughes, Bigler, & Levy, 2007).

Murrar and Brauer (2018) and Johnson, Jasper, Griffin, and Huffman (2013) summarize several other empirical studies on the effects of narratives on intergroup attitudes. Although the existing studies show promising results, many of them suffer from methodological shortcomings that prevent the authors from excluding plausible alternative interpretations. In fact, none of the published studies satisfy the six essential and desirable characteristics described in Table 1. Most studies also do not identify the underlying mechanism and limit themselves to testing the effect with a single narrative. These methodological shortcomings may be the reason why narrative-based methods are hardly ever mentioned in flagship publications on prejudice reduction (e.g., Dovidio, Hewstone, Glick, & Esses, 2010; Fiske, Gilbert, & Lindzey, 2010). Clearly, more research is needed to better understand the role of narratives in creating more positive intergroup attitudes. We make some suggestions regarding this research in the next section.

Moving Forward

It is important to rigorously evaluate whether narrative-based methods can effectively create more positive

Table 1. Characteristics of Empirical Studies That Allow for Rigorous Scientific Testing of the Effectiveness of Narratives to Create More Positive Intergroup Attitudes

Essential characteristics
1. Participants are randomly assigned to experimental conditions.
2. The narrative in the control group is comparable in length, genre, production quality, and entertainment value with the narrative in the experimental group. It has also been shown not to create more negative intergroup attitudes compared with a control group that is exposed to no narrative at all.
3. Intergroup attitudes are measured with validated outcome measures and in multiple ways (e.g., self-reports, behaviors, perceptions of climate by individuals who are the target of prejudice).
4. Outcomes are assessed both immediately and after a delay.
Desirable characteristics
5. The narrative is tested in a field setting.
6. The effectiveness of the narrative is compared with that of other methods aimed at creating more positive intergroup attitudes.

intergroup attitudes. Such rigorous tests can occur only if empirical evaluations have the characteristics listed in Table 1. As already mentioned, none of the existing studies satisfy these six criteria, and the current empirical evidence is suggestive at best.

Furthermore, we propose that it is theoretically important to examine whether the effectiveness of narrative-based methods is indeed attributable to their enhanced capacity to reduce resistance. It is thus important to measure attitude resistance (in addition to intergroup attitudes). This can be done by providing participants with an opportunity to express components of resistance, such as counterarguments or opposing information to the messages embedded within the narratives. Participants can be asked open-ended questions about, for example, what they thought of the narratives or how acceptable they found them. Reactance can be assessed among participants through explicit inquiry about their affective responses (e.g., irritability, aggravation) and cognitive responses (e.g., perception of constraint) to the narrative (see Moyer-Gusé & Nabi, 2010). The final step is to show that the effect of narrative type (experimental vs. control) on intergroup attitudes is indeed mediated by resistance.

Future research should identify the components of narratives that are crucial for creating positive intergroup attitude shifts. The following components are likely to play an important role (see Murrar, Gavac, & Brauer, 2017): (a) displays of intergroup friendships; (b) displays of romantic relationships involving members of different social groups; (c) portrayals of minorities in a way that fosters perspective taking and

empathy; (d) modeling of the “right” behaviors, such as behaving in an inclusive way or speaking up against discrimination, by dominant group members; (e) displays of minority groups as being heterogeneous; and (f) display of minorities in (moderately) counterstereotypic ways. Once such narrative components are identified and isolated, it will be possible to examine the relative strength of their influence on intergroup attitudes, that is, the extent to which the effectiveness of a given narrative is moderated by the presence or absence of each of these components.

Relatedly, our field would benefit from research identifying the components that are counterproductive. Some narratives can have a negative effect on intergroup attitudes and behaviors. Vidmar and Rokeach (1974) suggested that consumers of the television show *All in the Family*, featuring Archie Bunker as the protagonist, became more prejudiced with exposure. This research suggests that the portrayal of an undesirable (bigoted) character can backfire. Social psychological theorizing suggests that the portrayal of negative characters may be effective, but only if these characters are not the protagonist (because of our strong tendency to identify with the protagonist of a story) and if the characters experience negative social sanctions for their bigoted behavior in the narrative. Future research is needed to verify this suggestion.

Self-selection is also a key variable in media research. Consider two television shows that both have prodiversity messages embedded in them. Show A focuses on perspective taking and empathy and thus contains mostly minority characters, whereas Show B portrays a larger number of nonminority characters who model the “right” behaviors. It could be that Show A leads to positive intergroup attitude shifts that are twice as large as those induced by Show B when consumers actually watch them, but Show B is viewed by five times as many people as Show A. In that case, Show B would be more effective than Show A on a societal level. A shift toward more positive intergroup attitudes on a societal scale is dependent on both the effectiveness of a given narrative and the likelihood that consumers will choose to expose themselves to that narrative. Future research thus has to examine what factors cause consumers to actually expose themselves to the narratives with embedded positive messages.

Conclusion

Narratives have a unique power to reduce resistance to attitude change. Given that intergroup attitudes tend to be highly resistant, narrative-based approaches to reducing prejudice are likely to produce enduring effects. Furthermore, narratives are usually communicated

through media that are widely available. The average American consumed about 4,000 hr of media in 2016, and yet the media continue to be underexplored in the domain of intergroup attitudes. Prejudice researchers and diversity practitioners interested in creating positive social change should turn their attention to the media and harness the power of narratives to bring a well-crafted story of social equality into reality.

Recommended Reading

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- Johnson, D. R., Jasper, D. M., Griffin, S., & Huffman, B. L. (2013). (See References). An empirical article on the effects of narratives on intergroup prejudice that includes an overview of the research on this topic.
- Moyer-Gusé, E. (2008). Toward a theory of entertainment persuasion: Explaining the persuasive effects of entertainment-education messages. *Communication Theory, 18*, 407–425. A theoretical review of how entertainment media involve audiences with narratives and characters and expose them to persuasive messages.
- Murrar, S., Gavac, S., & Brauer, M. (2017). (See References). An overview of psychological processes related to prejudice reduction.
- Paluck, E. L., & Green, D. P. (2009). Prejudice reduction: What works? A review and assessment of research and practice. *Annual Review of Psychology, 60*, 339–367. A review of the prejudice-intervention literature.

Action Editor

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ORCID iD

Markus Brauer  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4395-2282>

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

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