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-minute 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 prejudice 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 non-transgender. Their results show that the carefully-scripted discussions led by both transgender and non-transgender 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 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 would do well to continue collaborating with practitioners on the design and study of these brief but meaningful interventions.

REFERENCES