

# People confront prejudice only when they believe others' personalities can change

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Confronting someone who makes a prejudiced remark can be a good thing—but not everyone does it. Researchers at Stanford University studied how and when targets of bias will speak up, and found that they're more likely to do so if they hold a particular belief: that people's personalities can change.

In one experiment, students (who were all ethnic minorities and/or women) were told they were going to discuss college admissions with another Stanford student over instant message. (The other student was actually a researcher.) In the course of his messages, the student, a white sophomore named "Matt," suddenly made a statement that communicated [bias](#). He stated that he thought he had to be overqualified for college "because of the whole diversity admissions thing...so many schools reserve admissions for students who don't really qualify the same way." The participant had a chance to respond to the biased statement, or not. Who spoke up? Participants who thought personalities could change were more likely to point out and disagree with the comment. Two other experiments found that the same was true for a more blatantly prejudiced remark. The research is published in *Psychological Science*, a journal of the Association for [Psychological Science](#).

"Many people think of situations where confronting of prejudice happens as conflict situations," says Aneeta Rattan, a Ph.D. candidate at Stanford who co-wrote the study with her advisor, Carol S. Dweck. "But if confronting of [prejudice](#) is an expression of belief that people can change, to me it suggests that there's profound hope in that act as well."

Other research has found that confronting people with biased views in a direct, educational way can help them learn not to behave in a prejudiced way.

Rattan also points out another implication: some areas of law are based on a belief that people who are the targets of bias should speak up. "In the law, speaking up in the moment is very important in terms of whether people can bring lawsuits and the strength of their claims, especially in sexual harassment law," she says. The implication is that if the bias was all that bad, the person would have confronted it. This study suggests that people may have many reasons for not speaking up when they're the target of bias, including their own beliefs about personality. "Maybe our standards should not start with the idea that all people want to speak up—it may depend upon their beliefs about personality," she says.

Provided by Association for Psychological Science

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