

Motivation to end racism relies on 'yes we can' approach

November 29 2010

If you're trying to end racism, it's not enough to get people to understand that racism is still a problem. You also have to make them feel like they can do something about it, according to a new study published in *Psychological Science*, a journal of the Association for Psychological Science.

Tracie L. Stewart of Georgia State University was inspired to conduct the study by work she's done on evaluating a popular diversity training program. She found that the program reduced many white participants' bias in the short term, which was good. "But some white participants later reported that the exercise left them with feelings of guilt and self-directed anger about continuing racial inequality," she says. "Others talked about how they left feeling helpless about changing institutionalized [racism](#)." And people who feel helpless don't feel motivated to bring about change. So she and her colleagues, Ioana M. Latu and H. Ted Denney of Georgia State and Nyla R. Branscombe of the University of Kansas, wanted to see if they could change how people act by making them believe their efforts would be successful.

For the experiment, they recruited 82 white university student participants. In a fictional cover story, each participant was told about a pattern of [racial inequality](#) at their university, particularly in regard to African American students having fewer African American faculty role models. They were then asked to write a letter to the university administration, expressing the need to hire more African American professors. But first, the experimenter said something about whether the

effort was likely to work, ending with, "I'd guess that there's probably a 95 percent chance that our efforts will affect the administration's hiring practices." Other participants were told there was a 50 percent chance of success, and some were told 5 percent.

After hearing that introduction, the participant wrote the letter, filled out some questionnaires, and, finally, was given a chance to take some anti-discrimination flyers out of a folder. The experimenter left the room—so that the volunteer wouldn't feel obligated to take more flyers than they wanted to—then later counted the remaining flyers to see how many the volunteer had taken.

People who believed there was a high chance of success took more flyers, evidence that they were willing to take more action to fight racism. These people also had more positive attitudes toward African Americans. Interestingly, the researchers also found that white participants' guilt about how their group benefits from inequality wasn't bad; instead, it was inspiring them to action. But participants only felt guilty if they believed that they could be efficacious in fighting institutional racism. Participants who felt low efficacy to make a difference rejected feelings of guilt and, consequently, exhibited less positive racial attitudes and less engagement in antidiscrimination action. The next step, Stewart says, is to incorporate this sense of efficacy into diversity training programs, to get people out there and acting.

Provided by Association for Psychological Science

Citation: Motivation to end racism relies on 'yes we can' approach (2010, November 29) retrieved 17 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2010-11-racism-approach.html>

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