

# To reduce prejudice, try subtlety: study

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(Medical Xpress) -- A team led by University of Arizona researcher Jeff Stone sought to expand what is known about effective prejudice reduction strategies, finding that a key when confronted by a prejudiced individual is to ask self-affirming questions.

Try this: The next time you are confronted by a biased individual and feel the need to lash out in rage, try taking a more subtle approach.

University of Arizona researcher Jeff Stone has led a team studying individuals prejudiced against Arab-Americans.

The team found that "highly prejudiced" people are more apt to perceive injustice and feel empathy and guilt when first asked to answer self-affirming questions than having a more direct conversation about prejudice.

"When a target feels discriminated against, the last thing they want to do is to make the prejudiced person feel good about themselves," said Stone, an associate professor of social psychology in the UA psychology department.

But asking self-affirming and reflective questions is not a matter of making the targeted individual appear more friendly, but about getting into the subconscious mind of the prejudiced individual – providing perspective before the tension arises.

The study and its findings have been published in a co-authored article,

["Thanks for Asking: Self-affirming Questions Reduce Backlash when Stigmatized Targets Confront Prejudice,"](#) in the *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*.

Stone's co-authors are: Elizabeth Focella, a graduate student of psychology; Jessica Whitehead, who graduated from the UA with a doctoral degree in psychology; and Toni Schmader, an associate professor of psychology at the University of British Columbia, Canada.

For the investigation, the team conducted two experiments with 170 male and female undergraduate students, asking participants to complete a brief survey judging the prejudice they held for Arab-Americans.

They were then asked to view three MySpace pages, supposedly created by students – Jason, Chris and Ahmad – containing personal information and questions.

On the page posted by "Ahmad" in the key experiment, readers were asked to consider when they had been fair to others and were treated fairly by others. The site then asked readers to consider what it must feel like to be alienated on the basis of race.

"Highly prejudiced people feel like the groups they dislike are just different; that they have values that are different, that they are out to take their resources, that they are threatening," said Stone, who also heads up the UA Self and Attitudes Lab and the Social Psychology of Sport Lab.

"People think they are in control of their biases but they are not aware to the degree that they harbor these intense biases," Stone said. "If I affirm your cherished values, you are more resilient to threats."

The values were reaffirmed through the questions that likely let the

participants to believe that "Ahmad" also valued being treated fairly.

"What probably happens if you lower the threat is that they believe, 'I won't let my attitude affect how I treat you,'" Stone said, adding that he and others are conducting research to determine whether the same is true for other populations, including women and individuals who are gay and lesbian.

Thus, the team measured how interested each participant was in meeting "Ahmad," finding that those who had tested as being prejudiced toward Arab-Americans were at least open to the thought.

"When it comes to prejudice reduction strategies, you must do it in a way that the person doesn't feel you are making them do it," said Focella, a third-year graduate student who helped run the experiments.

"Most times, confronting someone about prejudice really backfires. It really doesn't work," she said.

Prior research has found that even when prejudiced individuals feel shame or guilt that those feelings are somehow diminished if the individual feels attacked, resulting in the people being alienated or becoming the target of a backlash.

"Some affirmations seem very successful, like affirming an egalitarian value or creativity," Focella said, adding that more research must be conducted to understand why these work well.

"We are thinking that it is possible that you aren't just causing people to think about their in group, but causing them to think outside the box," she added. "We think this is a subtle way of encouraging people to open their minds."

The team also came upon one troubling finding: Even though participants reported feeling comfortable meeting with "Ahmed" they retained negative associations toward Arab-Americans.

This creates an interesting conundrum, especially for those actively working to reduce instances of prejudice.

"Although we firmly reject the notion that targets should have to shoulder the burden of reducing prejudice, it is important to provide targets with effective options to use when they choose to address the biases held by others," the team affirmed in the co-authored article.

The investigation did not attempt to understand why individuals would measure high or low on a scale for prejudice or why they even felt threatened.

But the findings do offer important implications for individuals working to reduce instances of [prejudice](#) and discrimination.

"Macrostructural changes will have to be made at the level of the community," Stone said. "It can happen in schools and in organizations, but the change will be slow."

Stone said the team, then, is considering developing strategies for targeted individuals to use when encountering prejudiced individuals.

"These are skills like anything else that a person could learn," Stone said. "It's about empowering people to fight back against biases, and to do it effectively."

Provided by University of Arizona

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