

What comforts targets of prejudice the most

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Rare in history are moments like the 1960s civil rights movement, in which members of a majority group vocally support minority groups in their fight against prejudice. New research not only confirms the power of speaking up for those facing prejudice but also underlines the importance of exactly what is communicated. Looking at YouTube video messages, researchers found that homosexual youth found the most comfort in messages that both supported them and advocated social change.

The new work takes a closer look at the "It Gets Better" YouTube campaign. "Like many people, I was fascinated and inspired when I saw the grassroots online movement that started in late 2010 of people posting video messages to teenagers who faced prejudice and harassment based on their actual or presumed sexual orientation," says Aneeta Rattan of London Business School. "I was not just moved as an individual, but as a researcher because this behavior – publicly addressing prejudice toward another group and communicating support for members of that group – is so rare that there is not a clear body of psychological science on it."

Rattan along with collaborator Nalini Ambady of Stanford University decided to use the YouTube videos as a window into the content and impact of such "intergroup" communication. "Social media is a new frontier for communicating intergroup attitudes," Rattan says. In contrast, past research has shown that [majority group](#) members rarely confront prejudice in person.

First, Rattan and Ambady analyzed the content of the 50 most viewed videos with the #ItGetsBetter hashtag, which together were viewed more than 15 million times. "We wanted to capture the complexity of people's naturalistic communications, but we also wanted to be able to test for systematic differences in what people said," Rattan says.

They "coded" the messages in the videos as either: messages of comfort, of social connection, or of social change. "Just saying, 'it gets better,' would be counted as a message of comfort," Rattan explains. Social connection messages focused on the idea that lesbian, gay, bisexual, and questioning (LGBQ) teenagers targeted by prejudice would find social acceptance in the future. Social change messages focused on the idea that the situation can, should, or will change.

As published today in *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, Rattan and Ambady, who passed away in October, found that while all the messages communicated comfort, and many included messages about social connection, only 22 percent mentioned social change. An additional analysis of university student's written messages confirmed that social change messages were least frequent. These findings conform to a body of previous research showing that majority group members focus more on interpersonal relationships rather than empowerment in their interactions with stigmatized minorities.

Merely knowing the content of the messages was not enough, however; the researchers also wanted to understand how the messages were perceived both by the targets of the prejudice and majority group members. They asked self-identified LGBQ participants to evaluate either a social connection-focused or a social change-focused message, as well as examined heterosexuals' perceptions of the two messages.

"Our findings showed that intergroup support messages that included ideas about social change were more comforting to LGBQ participants

than those that included ideas about social connection," Rattan says. "This suggests that there is a benefit to communicating ideas about social change more often."

Interestingly, the heterosexual participants did not note a difference between the social connection and social change messages. That they saw the messages as equally comforting suggests that YouTube messages were not skewed toward social connection because people thought that would be more effective. It also highlights the difference in the impact of the messages on targets of prejudice versus non-targets. "Because LGBTQ participants reacted differently to the two messages while heterosexuals did not, we know that the psychological dynamics have to do with the difference in perspective between targets and non-targets, rather than the speaker vs. listener difference," Rattan says.

In the end, all the messages comforted the LGBTQ youth. "The act of speaking out to address anti-LGBTQ prejudice directed at teenagers mattered," Rattan says. "What was really amazing was that LGBTQ youth were maximally comforted when support messages raised the possibility of social change." In future work, Rattan would like to investigate the other potential benefits of social change messages.

Asked about historic examples of intergroup support, such as when substantial numbers of White Americans joined in the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s, Rattan says: "We might consider that their presence may have had the benefit not just of showcasing their positive beliefs and providing support for the movement, but also of providing immediate comfort to Black Americans facing [prejudice](#)."

More information: The study, "How 'It Gets Better': Effectively Communicating Support to Targets of Prejudice," Aneeta Rattan and Nalini Ambady, was published online on January 17, 2014, and is forthcoming in print in April 2014 in *Personality and Social Psychology*

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