

# Speaking up against bigotry can reduce bad behavior

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In the middle of a holiday meal, someone says something unintentionally (but unmistakably) bigoted. What will you do? Diana Sanchez and Kimberly Chaney say you shouldn't let it pass. Credit: Rutgers University

If you're sitting around the holiday table and one of your curmudgeonly uncles says something unintentionally bigoted, your inclination may be to ask for more mashed potatoes and get on with the feast. But Rutgers University-New Brunswick researchers say that might be a mistake.

Social psychologists Kimberly Chaney and Diana Sanchez have studied the way people react to being confronted about making bigoted statements and discovered that people who are confronted feel bad and consciously try to avoid repeating such statements. Their new research is published in the journal *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*.

"We found that participants who were confronted felt bad about their behavior, ruminated more, showed an enduring prejudice reduction," said Sanchez, an associate professor of psychology in the School of Arts and Sciences. "And we didn't just look at their immediate response, but looked at them a week later."

The researchers recruited two groups of university students, each numbering about 100. All the students self-identified as white. The researchers showed them a series of images, each paired with a [sentence](#). The participants were asked to draw an inference from the picture and sentence. For instance, they might be shown a photo of an African-American man, paired with the sentence: "This man spends a lot of time behind bars." The researchers were hoping to draw a bigoted, or stereotypical response: This man is a criminal. Randomly, the researchers either let the responses go unremarked upon or said, "Gee, that's kind of stereotypical, don't you think? I mean, this guy might be a bartender."

A week after the initial test, the same people were called back and showed a different set of faces and sentences. Those who had been confronted earlier were asked if they had thought about their previous responses and stereotyping. They had. Most of those people were markedly less stereotypical the second time around, the researchers found.

A second group of students went through the same process, and then underwent follow-up examinations online, with researchers adding (or

not) words designed to elicit a stereotypical [response](#). The second group also filled out an online questionnaire probing how much they had thought about their initial experience and how it made them feel. Again, Chaney and Sanchez found the second [group](#) much less likely to stereotype than they had been originally.

Chaney, a graduate [student](#) in the School of Graduate Studies, and Sanchez write that this research shows for the first time that "the effects of intrapersonal confrontation endure."

"I think this is important because we need to understand what reduces prejudice," Sanchez said. "Confronting people is hard, and unless [people](#) know it will be effective, they won't do it."

**More information:** Kimberly E. Chaney et al, The Endurance of Interpersonal Confrontations as a Prejudice Reduction Strategy, *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* (2017). [DOI: 10.1177/0146167217741344](#)

Provided by Rutgers University

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