

The Top 10 Strategies for Reducing Prejudice by Rodolfo Mendoza-Denton

To greet the new year, Rodolfo Mendoza-Denton provides the best research-based tips for overcoming our differences.

Tis the season for countdowns—of the past year’s best movies, albums, news stories, and more.

In that spirit, I’ve compiled a list of my own: the top ten strategies for reducing prejudice and improving intergroup relations. Here they are.

10. Travel (somewhere that challenges your worldview)

The word “prejudice” can literally be broken down into “pre-” and “judgment.” Aptly, much of prejudice stems from our pre-judging other people’s habits, customs, clothes, ways of speaking, and values. We often do this with no basis for the judgment other than the fact that they (the customs, values, food, etc) are different from our own.

As anthropologist Richard Shweder reminds us in his Psychology Today blog, the world doesn’t come with one “Truth” or one “Reality.” Rather, what we call Truth is very often a social construction that differs across cultures (this is an issue I explore at length in this article).

When we are confined to a single culture, it’s incredibly difficult to see that one’s way is not the only way, that one’s Truth is not the only possible way in which things are done. I vividly remember the experience of traveling in Beijing 20 years ago, on the hottest day of the year, and discovering that one could simply not find cold drinking water anywhere (this is no longer true). Hot tea, I learned, was the answer to scorching thirst.

It was a relatively minor event, but from then on I was less inclined to scoff in disbelief at people’s diverse taste preferences. It helped me realize that there is nothing biological or innate about the need for a cold drink on a hot day, or for the “naturalness” of any of the habits or customs we follow.

There is no better way to be convinced of this than to go to a country where millions of people are doing something different from you so that you—not them—are the oddball. Try fried grasshoppers in Thailand, or haggling for the price of your weekly groceries in Ivory Coast. If your budget doesn’t allow you to go that far, try this book.

9. Take a course on prejudice

Part of the reason that I write this blog is to help disseminate what psychology can offer us about processes related to prejudice and stigma. This knowledge forms, quite simply, the basis for the introspection that each of us needs to successfully challenge deeply rooted negative attitudes and stubbornly entrenched patterns of behavior driven by our biases. If there were ever a domain where the axiom “knowledge is power” is true, prejudice and stigma is it.

A course on prejudice, for example, will likely review unconscious bias—the ways in which we can be prejudiced due to processes that happen outside of our awareness. A course on prejudice can help not only convince you that unconscious bias exists; as you better understand the phenomenon of unconscious bias, you’ll likely also become more aware of your own biases, enabling you to address them. If you are the target of stigma, learning about how stereotypes affect us gives you a powerful tool to understand your

feelings, and give you a sense of the larger societal processes impacting you.

A study by Laurie Rudman, Richard Ashmore, and Melvin Gary in 2001 showed that students who had enrolled in a prejudice and conflict seminar showed significant reductions in their levels of prejudice (both conscious and unconscious) compared to a similar group of students who took a research methods course. This study reminds us that our biases are malleable: Learning about them can give you the self-insight and motivation you need to undertake the journey of change.

8. If you value egalitarianism, recognize that unconscious bias is no more “the real you” than your conscious values

In a 2000 episode of Dateline called “Pride and Prejudice,” Stone Phillips asked viewers whether they would be prepared to take a test to prove that they are not prejudiced. That test is the Implicit Association Test, which you can take online.

Yet implicit in Phillips’ own statement is the assumption that somehow, your implicit or unconscious biases reveal “the real you”—how you really feel about X or Y group despite your best, superficial efforts to hide it.

This assumption is incredibly detrimental to improving intergroup relations. Why? The assumption that prejudice and egalitarianism is an all-or-none proposition (i.e., one is either prejudiced or one is egalitarian) makes us feel very threatened by the possibility that we may harbor a prejudiced impulse, as that impulse would thus reveal our “true” nature.

This threat is particularly strong among people who strongly value egalitarianism, since egalitarianism is likely to be part of their self-concept. In a recent study by Nicole Shelton, Jennifer Richeson, Jessica Salvatore, and Sophie Trawalter, Black and White volunteers were asked to talk about race relations. Surprisingly, the researchers found that the more egalitarian the White partners were, the less their Black partners liked them! This and other research suggests that people who value egalitarianism, in an effort to communicate their fair-mindedness and not trip up, spend so much mental energy monitoring their behavior that they then have less mental resources for the actual interaction at hand.

In a previous blog entry, I summarized a study that found that under conditions of cognitive load (when you are mentally busy doing multiple tasks), people were more likely to label a Black child as “aggressive” than they were a White child. People often interpret this finding as evidence that people, deep down, really are prejudiced.

But I hasten to point out the other side of that coin: When people were not under cognitive load, the ratings of the Black and White child were the same. I believe this finding represents their “real” racial attitudes no less than their reactions under cognitive load do. If people consciously and intentionally shun racism, who’s to say that those conscious efforts are any less authentic than some knee-jerk, unconscious impulses?

So the question should not be, “Are you prejudiced or not?” but rather, “When are you more or less likely to show prejudice vs. egalitarian beliefs?” And knowing our weak points helps us address them better.

7. Laugh a little

The recent book I co-edited with Jason Marsh and Jeremy Adam Smith, *Are We Born Racist?*, highlights some recent advances in the neuroscience of prejudice. Research summarized in the book suggests that when we see members of groups that we don’t consider our own, an almond-shaped part of the brain called the amygdala lights up. The amygdala is an old (from an evolutionary perspective, relative to other parts of the brain) structure that activates our “fight-or-flight” response, and indicates a threat response that stems, literally, from our very core.

This type of neuroscience finding is often misinterpreted to suggest that our prejudices being hard-wired. If brain regions light up when we look at pictures of the Other, then we must be born racist.

But a fantastic essay in the book by Kareem Johnson speaks volumes about the plasticity of our biology. Johnson describes a study he conducted in which he showed participants faces of Black and White people; later he showed these participants some of the same faces, mixed in with new ones, and asked the participants to recall whether they had seen each face or not.

Johnson found that White participants made many more errors for the Black than the White faces, and vice-versa—evidence for the notorious “outgroup homogeneity effect,” where members of other groups (aka “outgroups”) look a lot more like one another than members of our own “ingroups.”

However, Johnson had some of the participants watch a short video clip that made them feel happy before seeing the second round of faces. The result? The own-race bias disappeared, and people were no worse at recalling White versus Black faces.

In a separate study, psychologist Tiffany Ito found that when she induced participants simply to smile while looking at a set of Black and White faces (Ito had them hold a pencil in their mouth to simulate the experience of smiling—try it!), they showed less implicit bias on a subsequent test of racial attitudes.

So if smiles and happiness are enough to trump racial bias, here’s my suggestion: Rent a copy of *Elf* (my favorite holiday movie), and next time you’re deep in thought, release that furrowed brow and hold a pencil to your mouth.

6. Find some mean zombies

My wife and son are hooked—nay, positively addicted—to the video game *Plants versus Zombies*. My heart melts when they play together: The way she scaffolds the game for him, helps him with strategy, and speaks to him like an equal mind and partner in the game is beautiful to watch. (Read this piece for more on why playing video games doesn’t necessarily doom for children’s development, particularly when it’s used as a tool for teaching or family closeness.) It’s really them (and the plants) versus the zombies. And herein lies a secret to intergroup relations.

Research by Sam Gaertner and colleagues on the “common ingroup identity model” shows that when we are able to recategorize other people according to features or characteristics that we share, we are more likely to see them as part of “us,” and are therefore less likely to show prejudice towards them.

I’ll never forget the days after September 11 when I lived in New York City: New Yorkers of all races and creeds were united by the terrible events of the day. Everyone felt like a New Yorker. People opened doors for each other, ceded disputed taxis, and smiled at each other on the streets with zero regard to background.

It happens at sporting events, too: People are united by a shared identity and the other differences melt away.

The upshot here? The way you categorize others (“us” vs. “them”) is more malleable than we imagine, and really highlights one way in which race, religion, gender, sexuality, disability, or ethnicity are social constructions.

Fortunately, you don’t need extraterrestrials or zombies to achieve a common ingroup identity. All you need is a little compassion and flexibility of thought.

5. Do your part to save the planet

One of the classic studies in social psychology was conducted by Muzafer Sharif and was called “The Robbers’ Cave Experiment.” In this real-world study, Sharif studied the intergroup attitudes of boys in a summer camp setting.

The boys were grouped into the Scouts and the Eagles, and from the previous item on this list, you can guess what this categorization did for intergroup relations. When Sharif put the boys in direct competition with one another (e.g., when medals or prizes were at stake), Sharif found that the boys were less likely to have friends on the other team and showed an increase in aggressive behavior towards members of the other team (e.g., putting their underwear in the freezer. Ah, boys.).

By contrast, when Sharif induced the boys to all work together—to fix the camp’s water

supply (how's that for a common goal?)—he was able to shift, quite dramatically, their intergroup attitudes: Scouts and Eagles spent more time together during free time, and close friendships developed across group lines.

In addition to reaffirming the Common Ingroup Identity Model (see #6 above), Sharif's classic study is a reminder that when resources are scarce, people are more inclined to decide how to divvy up these resources according to—yes—socially constructed categories. This “we get the goods, they don't” mentality is sometimes referred to as “realistic conflict theory,” and it has a powerful effect on our behavior because we then use negative stereotypes to justify the negative behavior itself (e.g., “We don't share with Them because They can't be trusted.”).

Do we face a collective challenge as important as maintaining the camp's water supply was for the Eagles and Scouts? Of course. Sharif's research can serve as motivation to all of us to do our part to ensure that we have enough resources to sustain the human race. Don't get sidetracked by doomsday warnings on climate change: Do what you can to promote the health of Mother Earth.

4. Keep that resolution to stay healthy

It's the new year, and many of us are likely to make New Year's resolutions to lose weight, work out, and get healthy. Here is a bit of extra motivation: While you may adopt such a resolution to increase your own well-being, chances are that outgroup members may indirectly benefit from your regimen as well.

How? Research by Sheldon Solomon, Jeff Greenberg, and Tom Pyszczynski shows that when we experience “mortality salience”—that is, when our own imminent demise is front and center in our consciousness—the things that transcend us, like our country, our values, and our customs, become all the more important to us. It's like we want to become symbolically immortal by cherishing our cultural traditions even more.

This is nice, except that one unintended consequence is that those who do not share these particular values are more likely to be the targets of our prejudice. In other words, those who challenge our cultural worldview become a threat to our continued immortality, and we grow intolerant of them.

Many things can remind us of our own mortality, and many of them are outside of our control. But we do have control over our health (to an extent, of course). If you can lose those extra pounds, jog that extra mile, or lower your cholesterol or blood pressure, you'll at least feel comfortable knowing you are doing what you can to increase your time on this Earth. And when you do that, and feel more secure about your place in the world, you'll likely be more tolerant of other worldviews.

3. Soup or salad? Salad, by a long shot

You may remember En Vogue's 1992 hit “Free Your Mind.” Did you catch those lyrics?

Free your mind
And the rest will follow
Be colorblind
Don't be so shallow

A great, catchy song with its heart in the right place, for sure—but its recipe for tolerance is wrong. An example illustrates why.

If I tell you, “No matter what you do, do not think about a Pink Elephant,” you are actually more likely to think about that elephant. This is because you need to activate a constant monitoring process that asks, “Am I thinking about that Pink Elephant?”—which, ironically, increases the activation of the term “Pink Elephant” in your mind.

The same is true for colorblindness: If you say to yourself, “I'm not going to notice race!” you are actually more likely to become preoccupied with whether you are thinking about race, which will then make race a more salient category that you spend even more time trying to ignore. And as strategy #7 reminds us, you can spend so much energy

worrying about not noticing race that you do worse in your social interactions as a result. Further, research has shown that colorblindness can actually increase prejudice, precisely because the salience of race makes it more likely to be used unconsciously.

The solution? Acknowledge differences, rather than try to fight an uphill battle to ignore them. This strategy is known as multiculturalism, and differs from colorblindness in that it embraces diversity and difference. In the battle of the “melting pot” versus the “salad bowl” ideologies, the research is clear: The salad wins by a long shot.

2. Remember that people are really bad mind-readers

People are poor mind readers, unlike the X-Men’s Professor X.

This may sound silly, but it’s remarkable how much we behave in our daily interactions as if members of other groups have direct access to our thoughts and feelings. Research by Jacquie Vorauer has shown that when people experience anxiety during intergroup interactions, they also expect their cross-race partners to know how they feel—to know why they are acting awkwardly—and to overestimate the amount of positivity they are conveying during interracial interactions.

Unsurprisingly, though, people in fact can’t read minds, and instead interpret nervousness as dislike or discomfort due to prejudice. This can easily turn into a vicious cycle, because we then feel further rejected (and nervous) when our partner does not reciprocate the positivity we think we are showing.

In related research, Nicole Shelton and Jennifer Richeson have shown that while both Whites and Blacks are actually interested in interracial interactions, both groups believe that the other group is not interested in interracial interaction—and neither initiates interaction based on this false belief. When asked about what led to the lack of intergroup contact, each group correctly said that they themselves avoided contact because of their fears of rejection, but incorrectly attributed the other group’s avoidance to lack of interest.

So let’s remember that we are not like Professor X. We’re better off a) assuming people from other groups are interested and willing to reach across group boundaries, and b) not assuming other people can correctly intuit the reasons for your anxiety and nervousness. Even better: Work on that anxiety and nervousness through strategy #1!

1. Make a cross-race friend

Recently, I wrote, “If you looked and looked at all of the solutions proposed by scientists over the years to combat prejudice and racism, you’d be hard pressed to find a more effective antidote than intergroup friendship.”

‘Nuff said. You can read more about this strategy here.

A Happy New Year to all. Peace on Earth.