Reducing Racial Stereotypes by Encouraging Interaction in South Africa

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Sector(s): Education

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Location: South Africa

Sample: 495 university students

Target group: Higher education and universities Students

Outcome of interest: Discrimination Student learning Attitudes and norms Social cohesion

Intervention type: Social networks

Partner organization(s): University of Cape Town

Racial stereotypes are at the forefront of public debate in contemporary societies. Researchers studied the effects of a university policy in South Africa to promote racial integration by randomly allocating incoming students to roommates of a different race. The policy reduced negative racial stereotypes among white students, improved attitudes and behaviors towards members of other races, and improved academic performance among black students.

Policy issue

Contemporary societies are becoming increasingly diverse, and prejudice and stereotypes against certain groups are at the forefront of public debate. Stereotypes against a certain group may result in reduced economic, social, and political opportunities for members of that group. It is unclear whether increasing interactions between groups can reduce the stereotypes they may hold about each other. While social psychologists have examined the role of social integration in changing individual attitudes and stereotypes, literature in economics has largely focused on integration as a tool to reduce racial gaps in economic and related outcomes. In this study, researchers attempt to combine these elements by examining how increasing interaction between members of different races impacts students' racial attitudes and performance in college.

Can promoting inter-group interactions by assigning students roommates of a different race promote positive attitudes and behaviors? Can positive inter-group interactions result in improved academic outcomes for the individuals involved?

Context of the evaluation

Researchers conducted the evaluation in South Africa, in partnership with the University of Cape Town. The university enrolls approximately 5,000 students every year, more than half of whom live in university residences. The experience of apartheid, which led to the economic marginalization of black South Africans, made people relatively more prone to attaching negative stereotypes to members from different races.

Out of the students who participated in this study, 67 percent were black, 23 percent were white, and 10 percent belonged to other races. Prior to the evaluation, implicit association tests revealed that all participants held negative stereotypes about black

students and their academic abilities, relative to white students. On average, white students held more stereotypes against black students when compared to students of other races. Prior to the evaluation, white students' academic ability, as measured by their performance in high school, was higher compared to black students.



University students working together

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Details of the intervention

Through a policy designed by the University of Cape Town, which randomly allocated roommates to students, researchers evaluated whether interracial interaction affects students' stereotypes, attitudes and performance. Out of 495 incoming students, the university policy randomly allocated 154 to a roommate of a different race, while the rest shared a room with a student of their own race. To measure the impacts of the program, these students were interviewed at the beginning and end of their freshman year.

Researchers measured a variety of outcomes, including racial stereotypes and students' academic performance. Since individuals may be reluctant to disclose prejudice or may not be fully aware of their prejudices, researchers measured racial stereotypes using Implicit Association Tests (IATs). These tests require the taker to complete rapid association tasks, which help measure racial stereotypes with a certain degree of objectivity. Researchers also asked participants about their friendships with members of other races, attitudes towards racial issues, and participation in community service or volunteering. During the follow-up survey, researchers also conducted lab experiments to measure pro-social behaviors exhibited by students.

Results and policy lessons

The results point to a number of positive effects from the inter-racial contact generated through this policy. For white students, living with a roommate of a different race during their first year in college reduced negative stereotypes based on race and increased positive attitudes towards other races. For black students, inter-group contact significantly improved academic performance.

Stereotypes: Researchers found that exposure to members of a different race, through shared rooms, led to significant changes in stereotypes among white students. White students became 0.6 standard deviations less prejudiced against black South Africans, according to the Implicit Association Tests.

Attitudes and Behaviors: Students who are paired with roommates from different races also tended to have more positive interactions with members of other races outside the room. For students in mixed rooms, an index which captured individuals' friendships with members of other races improved by 0.57 standard deviations. The effect on white students' index of friendships was stronger than the effect on black students. Similarly, students' attitudes also improved by 0.25 standard deviations. Students reported talking more frequently about race and feeling more comfortable about it.

Perceptions about academic abilities: Mere exposure to students of a different race did not change perceptions about their academic abilities. However, academic stereotypes did respond to new information regarding the abilities of members of other races. For instance, white students in mixed gender rooms who initially underestimated their roommate's academic ability changed their academic biases.

Academic performance: Researchers found that the policy significantly increased academic achievement among black students. On average, black students' grade point average improved by 0.26 standard deviations when they shared a room with non-black students. This amounts to closing one third of the gap in performance between black and white students. Further, black students in mixed race rooms were also more likely to pass exams and continue on to the following year of college. The positive effect on the likelihood of passing exams and continuing university persisted into black students' second year at university, when they were in a different residential setting.

Mechanisms: Black students who were paired with white roommates who were less prejudiced tended to have greater academic gains. Researchers found that a black student could improve their GPA by 0.12 standard deviations if they were paired with a white student without prejudices, compared to a white student with an average level of prejudice.

Thus, the improvement in academic performance could be the result of better wellbeing, brought about as a result of positive interactions with roommates who are not prejudiced. Alternatively, it's also possible that when paired with a roommate with lower prejudices, students perceive a lower risk of being stereotyped or confirming to a stereotype. This may help them improve their academic performance.

Corno, Lucia, Eliana La Ferrara, and Justine Burns. Interaction, stereotypes and performance: Evidence from South Africa. No. W19/03. IFS Working Papers, 2019.