

# Study reveals prejudice strongly influenced by inequality

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New research co-led by a Victoria University of Wellington researcher shows that encouraging interpersonal interactions to reduce prejudice—a key strategy used around the world—might not be as effective as previously thought.

The research, published in the journal *Social Psychological and Personality Science*, looked at 660 studies conducted across 36 countries.

It sought to understand the role that [inequality](#) levels in wider society has in the success of this [strategy](#), says co-author Associate Professor Ronald Fischer from Victoria's School of Psychology.

"This approach, known as the 'Contact Hypothesis', involves people from different groups in society interacting and talking with each other, which then helps to reduce stereotypes and prejudice as a result. It's an approach that has been supported by a lot of studies, and it's widely accepted and is now being used around the world as a way to reduce prejudice.

"The hypothesis takes into account the conditions that may favour positive outcomes for reducing prejudice, such as matching the status of those involved in the interaction, but a criticism of it is that it hasn't taken into account the wider societal inequality. We know that around the world there are countries that are more egalitarian or more hierarchical, so we wanted to test the impact that the wider society had on the effectiveness of this strategy."

The researchers assessed the degree of inequality in the 36 countries in the study by using two measures. The first, the Social Dominance Orientation scale, asks citizens to rate whether they believe all groups are equal, and the second, the Schwartz Value Survey, looks at how highly people value principles of equality.

When you take into account the wider societal context, it shows inequality has a strong influence on the outcomes, says Associate Professor Fischer.

"It's a strategy that works well in more egalitarian societies—those that are more equal and value equality. On the other hand, in societies where there is less equality, or it is less valued, the impact of intergroup interaction was less effective at reducing prejudice, and at times could even have the opposite effect.

"A complicating factor is that not only are there differences between societies, but also individual societies are not fixed, and over time both the degree of equality and the importance placed on equality can vary. So we need a broader toolkit to identify mechanisms to reduce prejudice.

"We started this project on the Contact Hypothesis because we wanted to use social psychology to understand, and help address, some of the big problems in [society](#). The results of this study can help us better understand some of the contributing factors in what drives inequality and [prejudice](#)."

Provided by Victoria University of Wellington

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