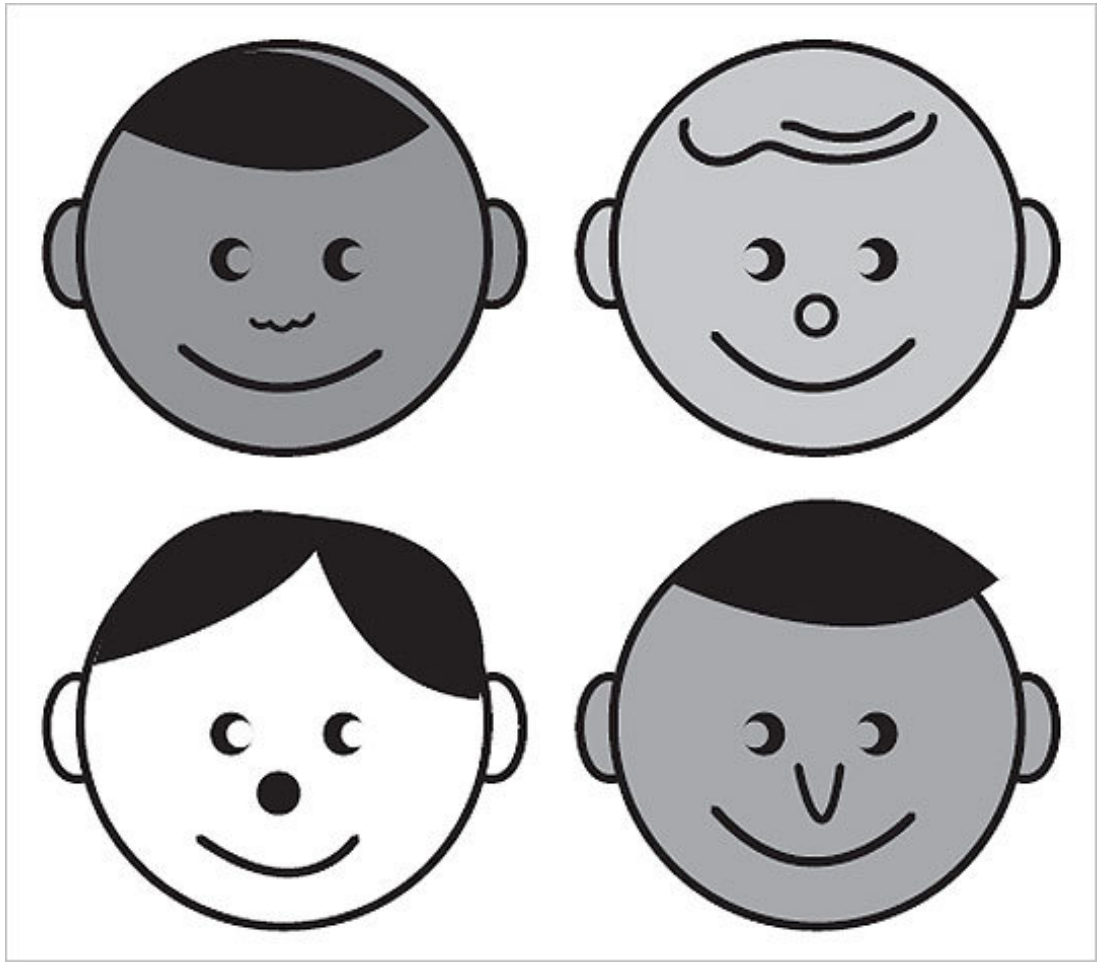
Those people

What if our prejudices could be transformed into a force for good? A Harvard scholar suggests a new way to think about social relations.



(Globe Staff Illustration/Greg Klee)

By Rebecca Tuhus-Dubrow

Email | Print | Single Page | Text size

January 6, 2008

IN A WORLD FRAUGHT with ethnic, religious, and sectarian tensions, "tolerance" is a familiar mantra. Diversity training sessions in schools and workplaces try to instill it. Mitt Romney, in his recent speech on faith, praised our nation's embrace of it. The UN has even designated an International Day for it. (The date - mark your calendars - is Nov. 16.) Across the political spectrum, extolling tolerance is as obligatory as condemning terrorism.

Of course, no one could deny the misery caused by social divisions, from Iraq to the Balkans to Jena, La. The consequences can be as personal as hurt feelings or as sweeping as warfare, and show little sign of abating.

But Harvard social psychologist Todd Pittinsky believes that our reverence for tolerance may be misplaced. The tolerance agenda aims to improve society by eliminating negative attitudes, but has nothing to say about generating positive ones.

Pittinsky's work focuses on what he has dubbed "allophilia," borrowed from the Greek for "love of the other." In survey studies that began in 2005, Pittinsky has found that high levels of allophilia for a particular group predict positive behaviors - such as donating to relevant charities and supporting sympathetic policies - significantly better than low levels of prejudice against the same group.

Pittinsky's research suggests that negative and positive attitudes are not opposite ends of a spectrum, but at least partially independent - that all the tolerance training in the world would not instill affection for a group. Pittinsky's investigations - conducted among diverse populations in the Middle East, New England, and elsewhere - suggest a novel approach to transforming relations among social groups.

Instead of merely training people to hate each other less, Pittinsky says, it may be time to teach them to like each other more.

"Would you want to be tolerated?" Pittinsky says. "The synonyms are even worse - to endure, to put up with. . . .We can and must do better than tolerance."

Pittinsky, an associate professor of public policy at the Center for Public Leadership at Harvard's Kennedy School, stresses that he is at the beginning of a life's work. (He has not yet published this work in a peer-reviewed journal; two papers are under review.) His research has largely focused on verifying the existence of allophilia and developing the scale to measure it. He has begun to look into what causes allophilia and how to promote it - several studies are underway - but has yet to establish conclusive answers. And not everyone is convinced that positive attitudes are a revolutionary remedy; some scholars caution that positivity can in fact be linked with prejudice.

"Prejudice doesn't necessarily require negative feelings," says Brian Nosek, a psychology professor at the University of Virginia. For example, he says, it is possible to have positive attitudes toward women, but based on stereotypes of them as cooperative and nurturing, a kind of "benevolent sexism."

Pittinsky believes we are capable of positive feelings that do not rely on harmful stereotypes. Yet Nosek's point raises one of the central questions of the allophilia research. The theory implies that we should not abolish prejudice per se, but inculcate new, albeit positive, prejudices. We may bristle at this prospect: America is founded on the ideal of individuality, the notion that all citizens have the right to be judged by their own unique characteristics and accomplishments. But a large body of research - to say nothing of history - suggests that the human mind inevitably categorizes people into groups. Should we aim for color-blindness? Or should we, as Pittinsky suggests, accept the futility of that goal and instead cultivate affection for others because of, not despite, these differences?

Combining fatalism and idealism, allophilia offers a rosy philosophy for an irredeemably tribal world.

Since the publication, in 1954, of psychologist Gordon Allport's landmark book,

"The Nature of Prejudice," a mountain of psychological research on group relations has accumulated. The vast majority has focused on conflict and tension. Over the last decade or so, some scholars have begun to inch toward a more positive orientation. But even much of this research has been loath to leave the negative altogether behind. Some of it has examined sympathetic attitudes rooted in pity, while other work has looked at ambivalence - "envious prejudice" and "paternalistic prejudice," each of which integrates positive and negative attitudes.

Other work has sought ways to mend divisions by encouraging people to see themselves as part of a bigger, "superordinate" group. If Sunnis and Shi'ites in Iraq could identify primarily as Iraqis, for example, they might be less inclined to dehumanize one another. An oft-quoted maxim in the field alludes to the ultimate superordinate group: "The best way to achieve peace on earth is an invasion from Mars."

Yet a small, emerging body of research has focused on purely positive feelings across group lines. In 1997, research by C. Daniel Batson, a psychology professor at the University of Kansas, showed that urging people to "take the perspective" of members of another group can enhance empathy and generate more positive attitudes. At around the same time, scholars such as Thomas Pettigrew, a psychology professor at the University of California, Santa Cruz, began investigating how friendship with a member of another group can promote an affinity for that group as a whole.

Pittinsky is part of this vanguard studying what he calls "unmixed positive regard." With his colleague Seth Rosenthal, a research fellow at the Center for Public Leadership, he is the first to codify these feelings into a numeric scale. Even more than his peers in this contingent, Pittinsky's work emphasizes the discrete spheres of positive and negative feelings; most researchers do not distinguish between increasing the positive and reducing the negative. And in this regard, Pittinsky is applying findings from other areas of psychology to the

study of group relations.

"In a larger context, there are theories about affect that suggest that positivity and negativity are separate dimensions," says Marilynn Brewer, a professor of psychology at Ohio State University. For example, over the past decade, several researchers have argued that trust and distrust are two distinct constructs, rather than opposite ends of a continuum. Attraction and repulsion form another pair like this. Classic psychological research in the 1950s showed that perceiving another person as beneficial to oneself leads to attraction, while perceiving someone as harmful leads to repulsion. Studies over the years (not to mention a wealth of collective dating experience) have confirmed that less repulsion does not necessarily translate into more attraction, and vice versa.

Pittinsky's work extrapolates from these insights to understand group relations. His first effort, in 2005, was to develop an allophilia scale by surveying lay participants as well as "allophilia experts," such as academics specializing in foreign cultures. They were asked to list thoughts, feelings, and behaviors they would exhibit toward a target group. Based on these responses, Pittinsky and Rosenthal identified five components of allophilia - kinship, comfort, affection, engagement, and enthusiasm - and formulated items for the surveys.

A study in 2006, for example, measured allophilia toward African-Americans. Subjects (who belonged to a variety of other races) were asked to rate their degree of agreement with statements such as: "I feel like I can be myself around African-Americans"; "I would like to be more like African-Americans"; "I am truly interested in understanding the points of view of African-Americans." The study also used several preexisting scales - each based on survey questions - to gauge racism against black people.

Then the surveys asked subjects about their willingness to proactively intervene on behalf of African-Americans, e.g. "I would speak in defense of African-Americans if I heard someone demeaning them." Subjects also rated their

support for affirmative action policies. In both cases, high scores on the allophilia scale were a better predictor of these supportive responses than were low levels of racism. As one would expect, allophilia tends to correlate negatively with prejudice. But, counterintuitively, some subjects exhibit high levels of both, bolstering the claim that the two dimensions are independent.

Studies conducted last year measured feelings between Israeli Jews and Israeli Arabs, and the attitudes of native Maine residents toward the growing influx of Muslim immigrants from Africa. Pittinsky and his colleagues have also done studies unrelated to race: one involved rival colleges, and another assessed attitudes toward gay men. In all of these studies, allophilia for a group predicted positive behaviors better than lack of prejudice. Moreover, the studies have taken care to distinguish between allophilia and indiscriminately bleeding hearts. They measured other factors, such as altruism and liberal political outlooks, and found that allophilia beat them in predicting positive behaviors.

Pittinsky's newest research is examining how feelings affect positive and negative attitudes differently. Feeling accepted by a group is more likely to increase allophilia toward that group than to reduce prejudice. Conversely, feeling sympathy for a group might make us hate them less, but does not necessarily make us like them more. These findings are consistent with the classic research about our attraction to people: feeling accepted by someone forms a bond that feeling sorry for someone does not.

Pittinsky has chiefly focused, so far, on measuring allophilia and understanding its effects, but work from other researchers hints at what may be done to foster it.

Linda Tropp, associate professor at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, has found that a single friendship can have a ripple effect on attitudes. In the laboratory, she paired up people of different races to engage in friendship-building activities, such as sharing embarrassing moments and cooperating on Jenga, a game involving building blocks. Afterward, participants reported

initiating more interracial contact.

"When you forge close relationships across group boundaries," Tropp says, "you become invested in the friend and their group."

On a larger scale, the idea of "positive role models" may seem quaint, but it does appear to have a real effect. In psychology studies, Americans of all races have more negative subconscious associations with black people than with white people, according to Nosek, the University of Virginia psychology professor. But when they are exposed to black role models, such as Oprah Winfrey or Martin Luther King, Jr., immediately before tests, this negativity is mitigated.

"The associations we absorb from our cultural context can change," says Nosek.

But, as Nosek points out, it's entirely possible to experience warmth for a group without wanting to change its position in society. One example is the "benevolent sexism" that keeps women cherished but marginalized, as vividly manifest in 1950s sitcoms. There are other examples: "White masters were said to very much like their slaves," Nosek remarks. But this affection was dependent on "a very particular context - as long as they were well-behaved and maintained the role structure."

Yet in other cases, as Nosek agrees, positive feelings can nurture a drive to improve a group's situation. As Pittinsky has found, allophilia is linked with enthusiasm for supportive policies and even social activism on a group's behalf. Pittinsky hopes that as the research progresses, government programs and school curricula will use it to teach allophilia promotion in addition to prejudice reduction.

More broadly, though, he hopes that simply introducing the concept of allophilia into the popular imagination could disrupt ossified assumptions about social relations. Group differences are powerfully associated in the public mind with conflict and discrimination. Despite good intentions, many of us have anxieties

about interacting with other groups because we expect them to be prejudiced against us, or because we fear we are prejudiced against them. But, Pittinsky and others insist, that's not the whole story. Many of us have positive feelings, too, but they may be overlooked, misunderstood, or unexpressed because we lack a vocabulary to articulate them. By demonstrating the existence of these feelings - and by giving them a name - Pittinsky says he is aiming to "interrupt vicious circles and launch virtuous ones."

Rebecca Tuhus-Dubrow is an associate editor at Boston Review Books. She can be reached at rebecca.tuhusdubrow@gmail.com. ■