

What the Struggle for Gay Rights Teaches Us about Bridging Differences

In just a few decades, GLBT+ rights moved from the margins to the mainstream. Here's why.

About the Author

To many people, prejudice [seems to be rising](#) in American society. In 2009, around a quarter of Americans identified racism as a “big problem.” By 2015, that number had doubled. Since then, we’ve seen a measurable jump in reported hate crimes. Today, six in ten Americans believe gay and lesbian people [face a lot of discrimination](#).

But [research](#) by Harvard psychologists Tessa Charlesworth and Mahzarin Banaji suggests a paradox: Even as Americans grow more aware of bias, we appear to be becoming less biased in many areas—especially when it comes to same-sex relationships and gender nonconformists.

In order to study prejudice, Charlesworth and Banaji used 4.4 million tests of social attitudes collected by Harvard’s [Project Implicit website](#). The test asks participants about their conscious—or *explicit*—attitudes toward a group,



such as the young, the disabled, different ethnic groups, and more. However, it also tries to measure unconscious—that is, *implicit*—bias by measuring response

time. In general, faster responses are thought to be more automatic ones—and so more revealing of implicit bias. Explicit bias is bias that we are conscious of; implicit bias, on the other hand, is typically unknown to us but may nonetheless affect our words and actions. Quickly associating negative words with, say, the elderly, can suggest bias, but so can taking a long time to consciously choose positive ones.

While the project's Implicit Association Test (IAT) has been controversial among scientists as a reliable measure of personal bias, Charlesworth and Banaji weren't interested in individuals. They used data collected between 2007 and 2016 to investigate a simple question: How are both implicit and explicit attitudes changing over time? Are Americans becoming more biased, less biased, or are attitudes staying stable?

What they found is that Americans are becoming less biased in a wide range of attitudes, including on race, both explicitly and implicitly. However, the single largest shift happened in attitudes toward sexuality. "Explicit

sexual attitudes revealed the largest overall change of any explicit attitude, moving toward neutrality by approximately 49 percent since 2007," the researchers [write](#). Implicit attitudes saw a similar but smaller change, moving towards neutrality by 33 percent.

Why have attitudes toward sexual minorities changed so much?

Charlesworth says her team is currently running studies to find causal explanations, but she credits society-wide conversation about bias for reducing it. "Sexuality, race, and skin tone are all topics that we discuss frequently as concerning social biases," she suggests. "There's a large discussion surrounding racism, surrounding homophobia." In areas where that discussion hasn't happened as much—as with attitudes towards the elderly or disabled, for example—bias hasn't budged.

What triggered the discussion around sexuality, after being long taboo? According to other research, there were two major catalysts. First, grassroots activists emphasized increasing contact and exposure between gay and lesbian Americans and everyone else. Secondly, elite leadership encouraged members of their in-groups to be more accepting of gay and lesbian Americans, providing the example needed to change attitudes. In this massive shift, we can find lessons for other bridge-building efforts.

Coming out, making contact

Although there are examples of socially accepted homosexuality in distant history, for most of modern history, gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people faced intense prejudice.

As recently as 1979, a majority of Americans [told pollsters](#) that consenting relations between gay and lesbian adults should be illegal. As late as 1996, only a quarter [believed](#) same-sex marriage should be legal.

In just over two decades, those numbers changed dramatically. By 2018, three-quarters of Americans believed consenting relationship between gays and lesbians should be legal. Sixty-seven percent supported marriage equality—which is now the law of the land, thanks to a Supreme Court that actually skews conservative.

What made the difference?

Back in 1996—when attitudes towards gay rights were far less positive than they are today—researchers Gregory M. Herek and John P. Capitanio used a two-wave national telephone survey to query adults about their attitudes towards lesbians and gay men. They found that “heterosexuals who had experienced interpersonal contact with gay men or lesbians expressed significantly more favorable general attitudes toward gay people than

did heterosexuals without contact.”



San Francisco politician Harvey Milk

Their research validated the strategy proposed by leaders like the late Harvey Milk, an openly gay San Francisco politician who [urged](#) gays and lesbians to “come out” to their parents, neighbors, friends, and coworkers.

Milk was murdered in 1978, but that didn’t stop the movement from gaining steam. In subsequent decades, more and more heterosexual people came to discover how many of their loved and respected friends, family, and colleagues were gay or lesbian. This process filtered up from living rooms and offices to mass media—print, radio, TV, and, later, the Internet.

In 2017, a group of researchers [looked at how](#) media freedom and access to the Internet related to support for gay rights worldwide. They found a strong positive correlation, using data across 160 countries (including the U.S.) from 2009 to 2015. The researchers predicted that protection of gay rights would improve as Internet access rose—which indeed turned out to be the case. “We posit that this is because the Internet facilitates networking and people-to-people communication, which

in turn can bring about shifts in societal views as people learn that people who are close to them may be gay," says Jenifer Whitten Woodring, a political scientist at the University of Massachusetts, Lowell, who helped conduct the study

In the 1990s and '00s, Americans saw a sharp spike in gay and lesbian representation in mass media. Ellen Degeneres, star of the hit sitcom *Ellen*, [famously came out](#) as a lesbian while her show was one of the most popular in America. Though being outed as gay or lesbian had damaged the careers of previous generations of actors, Degeneres managed to stake out new ground. More actors came out; more characters appeared on TV and in movies. [Several studies](#) by University of Minnesota academic Edward Schiappa found that the presence of gay characters in major television programming was associated with less prejudice among viewers. One of the shows that Schiappa studied was *Will & Grace*, which is often credited alongside *Ellen* as programming that normalized the presence of gay and lesbian characters in television.

More recently, the LGBT+ rights group GLAAD [found](#) that in the 2018-19 television season:

The overall percentage of LGBTQ series regular characters on scripted broadcast is 8.8 percent, an increase of 2.4 percentage points from the previous year's 6.4 percent (58 of 901). This is the highest

percentage of LGBTQ series regulars GLAAD has found since beginning to gather data for all series regulars in the 2005-06 season.

This trend serves as yet another confirmation of the [contact hypothesis](#), which suggests that increasing exposure to out-group members will help an in-group to accept them. The contact hypothesis can apply even at the level of elite leadership. In 2013, Ohio Republican Senator Rob Portman came out in favor of same-sex marriage rights.

“That isn’t how I’ve always felt,” he wrote at the time in [an op-ed](#). “As a Congressman, and more recently as a Senator, I opposed marriage for same-sex couples. Then, something happened that led me to think through my position in a much deeper way.” Two years prior, Portman wrote, his son [came out as gay](#) to him. That changed how he felt about the issue.

Why in-group leadership matters

In their book, [Listen, We Need to Talk: How to Change Attitudes about LGBT Rights](#), researchers Brian Harrison and Melissa Michelson offered their own model for how public acceptance towards homosexuality has advanced so quickly—one that emphasizes in-group leadership from people like Portman.

In an experiment they performed with a gay rights

organization called One Iowa, some phone-banking volunteers identified themselves on the line as gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender, and some did not. Unexpectedly, they found coming out to strangers on the phone did not necessarily boost support for the organization's goal. In fact, "individuals identified as previous supporters of marriage equality were less likely to donate to an LGBT+ equality organization when the caller self-identified as an LGBT+ individual."

In the course of the book, Harrison and Michelson review the results of several experiments where they found that the most effective tactic was to deploy an in-group social leader to persuade people within their group about the value of LGBT+ rights.

"I opposed marriage for same-sex couples. Then something happened that led me to think through my position in a much deeper way. Two years ago, my son Will, then a college freshman, told my wife, Jane, and me that he is gay. "

—Ohio Republican Senator Rob Portman

In one study, they gave participants paragraphs arguing in favor of marriage equality. Some of those participants received a pro-equality message that was identified as coming from a professional athlete, while others were told the message was coming from a general supporter. The researchers found that respondents "exposed to the

Professional Athletes paragraph were more supportive of marriage equality compared to the placebo, increasing support by more than 10 percentage points among Sports Fans and by just over eight percentage points among non-Sports Fans."

In another experiment, the researchers offered an argument in favor of marriage equality that came from either a "concerned citizen" or from Reverend Richard T. Lawrence, a Baltimore-area pastor. They found that "religious participants exposed to the quotation attributed to Reverend Lawrence were more likely to say that they supported marriage equality, more likely to say that they would likely vote for a ballot measure in their state establishing marriage equality, and more likely to approve of gay and lesbian parenting."

Their data led Harrison and Michelson to argue that "the rapid change in opinion on marriage equality occurred because over time, individuals were nudged by members and leaders of their social groups to reconsider their existing opinions."

It's difficult, even for the researchers, to say for sure if grassroots coming out drove elite conversion to the cause of gay rights—or if causality went in the other direction. What is clear is that a combination of greater exposure and contact with gay and lesbian Americans, alongside social cues by in-group leaders, were associated with a large decrease in bias among

Americans.

Lessons for building other bridges

What lessons can be drawn from the success of the gay rights movement? Can increased visibility and contact help reduce bias against other groups as well?

There is at least one group that specifically borrowed “coming out” as a tactic: undocumented migrants in the [immigrant rights](#) movement. In the past few years, as rhetoric against “illegals” heated up, more and more people stepped forward to say that they, too, arrived in the United States without documents, often as children.

In 2015, Laura Enriquez and colleagues studied how the immigrant rights movement adopted the tactic from the gay rights movement. “The successful use of ‘coming out’ within the gay rights movement was precisely why undocumented immigrant youth activists elected to borrow the term for their purposes,” says Enriquez, a sociologist at the University of California, Irvine. “Both groups were trying to build empathy, break down stereotypes, and demand social inclusion.”

As Tessa Charlesworth notes about her study, attitudes toward the disabled haven’t seen much change—but there is a movement toward adopting gay-rights tactics in disability rights. As GLAAD says in its [annual report](#), “The amount of regular primetime broadcast characters

counted who have a disability has slightly increased to 2.1 percent, but that number still vastly underrepresents the actualities of Americans with disabilities." Around [20 percent](#) of Americans have some form of disability, and more and more people appear to be speaking up about it on social media, coming out as physically or mentally disabled in order to reduce stigma.



Game of Thrones star Peter Dinklage with his wife, Erica Schmidt, and their daughter.

© The Instagram account of Peter Dinklage

people in the country have not come across a little person in real life unless it is directly around them where there's a family member or friend or stranger that happens to live in the area."

She notes that there are a number of challenges to increasing disabled representation in the media, including

Of course, some differences can't be hidden, making representation a key issue. Becky Curran is a "little person" who works to increase the representation of disabled people in television programming. "There are only 30,000 little people in the United States," she says. "So, that means most

a perception by producers that there is a high “cost of accommodation” for a disabled actor. Curran said one of the biggest issues in casting right now is finding child actors with disabilities. “None of us can promise that it’s a sustainable career because you may get a gig right off the start...or it may be a pilot that flops,” she says of the challenges of the Hollywood job market. “But if you think about it, everyone has to start somewhere.”

There are signs change may be afoot. Peter Dinklage, a little person, is one of the stars of the hit fantasy show *Game of Thrones* and also had a role in the Oscar-nominated film *Three Billboards Outside Ebbing Missouri*. In an [interview](#) with *Entertainment Weekly*, Dinklage reflects on how important it is to offer positive representation.

Not to get too political about it, but it’s a stereotype that still exists. Dwarf tossing still exists. There are still people of my size dressing up as elves at Christmas time. And if everybody continues to do that, then it won’t stop. But my daughter doesn’t think I’m a mythical creature. Unicorns don’t exist, but I do. It’s tricky, what we put out there, to perpetuate for future generations.

Perhaps Dinklage will prove to be the Ellen Degeneres of disability. As a blogger at the Ruderman Foundation [argues](#), we might need a *Will & Grace* for the disabled—a mainstream, prime-time show where disabled characters

are at the forefront, to help expose viewers to the lives of people who are different from them.

So, what are we to make of the fact that the perception of discrimination is rising, while attitudes seem to be improving in areas like sexuality and race? It is possible that these are simply two sides of the same coin. While American society is growing far less homophobic and racist, we are more attentive to the homophobia and racism that still exists. At the same time, greater diversity and a reduction in social bias may cause a small group that clings to bias to feel under greater threat, which may be one of the reasons we see a spike in hate crimes.

In addition, it's important not to overstate the findings of the Harvard study, as bias does remain a persistent problem. "At baseline, most people have preference for the dominant or high-status group," says Charlesworth. "So most people have a preference for, say, white Americans, for straight people, for younger people, for thin people, for light-skinned people, for able people, those are what we see across the board."

The good news is that according to this study, the trends are moving in the right direction. "Over time, though, those preferences are weakened so people are becoming more equivalent, essentially," she concludes. "They're showing less preference for one group over the other."