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Overcoming Resistance to Change:
Using Narratives to Create More Positive Intergroup Attitudes

Sohad Murrar¹ & Markus Brauer¹

¹ Department of Psychology, University of Wisconsin – Madison, 1202 West Johnson St. Madison,
WI 53706-1611, USA

Abstract

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Researchers and practitioners have proposed numerous methods to reduce prejudice and create more positive attitudes towards members of other groups. Most of these methods have recently been shown to be ineffective. In this paper, we propose that intergroup attitudes tend to be highly resistant to change and, as a result, any method aiming to change these attitudes will be effective only if it successfully overcomes resistance. We show that traditional methods used to promote positive intergroup attitudes are inadequate in this regard. Next, we suggest that narratives are a unique way to overcome resistance because they appeal to emotional responses, transport consumers into a story world, and provide them with social models. We then describe empirical evidence suggesting that narratives are likely to be particularly useful for creating more positive attitudes towards members of other social groups. Finally, we propose a number of empirical and theoretical questions that present challenges for the research on narratives and intergroup attitudes.

Keywords: intergroup attitudes, resistance, narratives, prejudice, discrimination

Members of many groups face a lack of inclusion or, even worse, discrimination: Ethnic minorities, first-generation college students, members of the LGBT community, religious minorities, women in technological fields, and people with disabilities are just a few examples. Reducing prejudice and promoting positive attitudes toward these groups is not only an ethical imperative; it is also crucial for the future of our society. When individuals are not included in settings they are in, they drop out at higher rates (e.g., from their jobs or educational institutions), are less productive, and suffer from poorer mental and physical health than their included peers. Companies that fail to create an inclusive work climate are less innovative and lose highly qualified employees to their competitors. In short, lack of inclusion leads to a loss of talent.

Despite the importance of the problem, social scientists know relatively little about how to change people's "intergroup attitudes," i.e., attitudes towards members of other social groups. Most pro-diversity initiatives are not evaluated and the few that have been turned out to be ineffective. In this paper, we propose that "attitude resistance" limits the effectiveness of commonly-used methods for curbing prejudice. We highlight the usefulness of narrative-based approaches for overcoming this resistance. Stories in general, and TV shows in particular, are a great way to get people to change their intergroup attitudes and to behave in a less discriminatory manner.

Intergroup Attitudes Are Highly Resistant

Attitude researchers have long focused on a construct that prevents attitude change: resistance. Highly resistant attitudes tend to be immune to pressures to change. When individuals are exposed to persuasive messages related to a resistant attitude, they often generate counterarguments, discount the persuader, selectively attend to attitude-congruent information, or even experience anger.

We propose that intergroup attitudes are more resistant to change compared to other types of attitudes, primarily for two reasons. First, intergroup attitudes are closely tied to our "social identity,"

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4 the part of our self-concept that is based on the social groups we are members of. As a way to feel
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6 good about ourselves, we tend to attribute positive traits to groups we belong to (our “in-groups”) and
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8 negative traits to groups we are not a member of (the “out-groups,” Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Second,
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10 intergroup attitudes are highly resistant to change because we frequently engage in psychological
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12 processes known to reinforce attitudes. We tend to “subtype” counter-stereotypical out-group
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14 members into a special category of individuals who do not represent that outgroup (Weber & Crocker,
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16 1983). Intergroup attitudes can turn into self-fulfilling prophecies when we create the conditions for
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18 out-group members to behave in expected ways. And we are often affected by a confirmation bias, i.e.,
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20 we interpret ambiguous behaviors by outgroup members negatively.
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25 There is an extensive scientific literature on how to change resistant attitudes. Unfortunately
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27 this literature seems to be ignored by many educators, employers, policy makers, and even researchers,
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29 who have proposed pro-diversity initiatives or develop prejudice-reduction methods. Let’s consider a
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31 few examples of traditional methods that have been widely used, but have all been shown to be
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33 ineffective or counterproductive in recent empirical research.
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37 Discussion-based approaches consist of having individuals belonging to different social groups
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39 engage in conversations about their feelings and their relationships. Diversity training programs
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41 encourage employees to become aware of their own privileges, to increase their knowledge of
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43 discrimination, and to learn about behaviors that perpetuate power differences between groups.
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45 Implicit bias training teaches people about the existence of biases that they are not aware of and
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47 provides them with thought exercises that could help reduce them. The implementation of grievance
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49 systems, approaches focusing on “White guilt,” or so-called “recategorization exercises” also belong
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51 to the list of traditional methods that fail to create more positive intergroup attitudes.
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55 We suggest that these traditional methods do not adequately deal with the high resistance of
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4 intergroup attitudes. First, when exposed to these methods people know that they are the target of a
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6 persuasive attempt, which has been shown to lead to biased cognitions and greater resistance to change
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8 (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986; Chaiken, Liberman, & Eagly, 1989). Second, people are often obliged by
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10 their employers or educational institutions to participate in the traditional methods, which threatens
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12 their self-determination and therefore increases resistance to attitude change (Silvia, 2006). Third, the
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14 methods indirectly communicate to people that there is something wrong with them and that they need
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16 to change, therefore creating reactance (Brehm, 1966). Fourth, traditional methods rely on a so-called
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18 systematic processing style, which entails thoughtful consideration of the arguments of a persuasive
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20 message, requires high motivation to process the message in depth, and usually prevents the change of
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22 highly resistant attitudes.
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26 27 **Using Narratives to Overcome Resistance**

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29 Are there prejudice-reduction methods that effectively address the resistance problem and
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31 therefore lead to more positive intergroup attitudes? We suggest that *narrative-based methods* do
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33 precisely that.
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36 Narrative-based methods for creating positive intergroup attitudes transmit messages to
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38 audiences using a variety of formats, such as television, YouTube, radio, podcasts, books, comics, and
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40 paintings. A narrative is a series of events that are tied together through characters and that usually
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42 have a beginning, a middle, and an end.
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45 We believe that there are at least 4 reasons why narrative-based methods are particularly
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47 effective in reducing resistance and creating positive intergroup attitudes (see Table 1). First, when
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49 exposed to narratives, people are more likely to process information heuristically, which requires less
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51 motivation and reduces resistance (Chaiken, Liberman & Eagly, 1989). When consumers process a
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53 persuasive message in a superficial manner, they are less likely to question the message's validity.
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Kahneman (2011) describes hot/fast thinking as emotionally aroused, irrational thinking and cold/slow thinking as calmer, rational thinking, with the former often overriding the latter. By appealing to the more automatic, emotional parts of the self – those parts that hold more control over attitudes and behaviors – narratives can forego resistance to change.

1. Narratives do not rely on conscious rationality, but appeal to the automatic, emotional responses that play an important role in attitude change.
2. Messages about positive intergroup relations can be embedded in narratives in rather subtle ways.
3. People are transported into stories and get involved with characters, which makes them less likely to counterargue or feel manipulated, and more likely to find the embedded messages personally relevant.
4. Narratives provide social role models for people to observe and learn from.

Table 1. Four reasons why narratives reduce attitude resistance and are thus an effective tool to create more positive intergroup attitudes.

Second, narratives have the unique ability to contain rather subtle messages about positive intergroup relations. Because the plot is usually most salient to consumers, their “perception of persuasive intent” is minimized (Dal Cin, Zanna, & Fong, 2004, p. 177). When people decide to read a book or watch a television program, they are expecting to be entertained, rather than be persuaded to

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4 shift their attitudes. Furthermore, because narrative messages are often implied, rather than stated
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6 explicitly, it is difficult for consumers to identify exact points to counterargue (Slater, 2002).
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9 Third, narratives reduce resistance because they transport consumers into a story. Individuals
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11 often feel absorbed by the narrative world and visualize themselves in the story (Green & Brock,
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13 2000). They also tend to identify and get emotionally involved with the characters. When people are
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15 transported into narratives they are less likely to critically assess the embedded messages because they
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17 are less motivated and have fewer cognitive capacities to do so (Kreuter et al., 2007; Slater & Rouner
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19 2002). The messages also become more personally relevant to them, which increases their receptivity
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21 to those messages (Petty, Cacioppo, & Haugtvedt, 1992).
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25 Fourth, narratives allow people to observe social models. Consumers can observe characters
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27 receive rewards for behaving in prosocial ways, experience something negative for behaving in
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29 undesirable ways (Bandura, 2004), or transition through situations that might be experienced in real
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31 life. As such, role models increase consumers' self-efficacy and shift outcome expectations for
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33 engaging in particular behaviors. This is particularly important because people are more resistant to
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35 attitude and behavior change when they have a low sense of self-efficacy.
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38 **Successful Use of Narratives**

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41 Psychologists and practitioners interested in using narratives to create more positive intergroup
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43 attitudes need not start from scratch. Entertaining narratives, with persuasive messages weaved into
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45 their storylines, have effectively been used to shift people's attitudes, beliefs, and intentions in
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47 numerous domains and countries (Braddock & Price Dillard, 2016).
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51 In the prejudice domain, there is some research suggesting that narratives might be a useful
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53 tool for creating more positive intergroup attitudes. Correlational studies show that consumption of
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55 television narratives infused with messages about positive intergroup relations is related to positive
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4 attitudes towards outgroup members (Schiappa, Gregg, & Hewes, 2006). In a recently conducted study
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6 (Murrar & Brauer, 2017), we demonstrated that consuming a narrative with positive messages about
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8 intergroup relations and minority groups has a causal effect on intergroup attitudes. When randomly
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10 assigned to watch 6 episodes of a popular sitcom portraying Muslim Canadians in a relatable way,
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12 individuals were less prejudiced towards Muslims immediately after viewing and 4 weeks later,
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14 compared to individuals who watched 6 episodes of a popular sitcom that did not portray any
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16 minorities or topics related to intergroup relations.
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20 Other research suggests that radio narratives can have a positive effect on perceptions of social
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22 norms for intergroup interactions in contexts of conflict. When adults in villages of Rwanda listened to
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24 a radio soap opera about reducing intergroup hostility and mistrust for 12 months (several years after
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26 the Rwandan Genocide) they became more open to future generations marrying members of a
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28 religious, ethnic, or regional outgroup (e.g., Paluck, 2009). Narratives in books also seem to have a
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30 positive effect. For example, having 6-12 year old European Americans listen to short narratives about
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32 famous African American historical figures and their encounters with racism led them to rate African
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34 Americans more positively (Hughes, Bigler, & Levy, 2007).
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38 Although the existing studies show promising results, many of them suffer from
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40 methodological shortcomings such that alternative interpretations cannot be excluded. Most studies
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42 also do not identify the underlying mechanism and limit themselves to testing the effect with a single
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44 narrative. More research is needed to better understand the role of narratives in creating more positive
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46 intergroup attitudes. We will make some suggestions regarding this research in the next section.
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49 **Moving Forward**

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52 It is important to rigorously evaluate whether narrative-based methods can effectively create
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54 more positive intergroup attitudes. Such rigorous tests can occur only if empirical evaluations have
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4 certain characteristics, which we describe in Table 2. Given that none of the existing studies has all six
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6 characteristics, the current empirical evidence is suggestive at best and additional research is needed.
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8 Furthermore, we propose that it is theoretically important to examine whether the effectiveness of
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10 narrative-based methods is indeed attributable to their unique capacity to reduce resistance. It is thus
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12 important to measure attitude resistance (in addition to intergroup attitudes). This can be done by
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14 providing participants with an opportunity to express components of resistance, such as
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16 counterarguments or opposing information to the messages embedded within the narratives.
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18 Participants can be asked open-ended questions about, for example, what they thought of the
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20 narratives or how acceptable they found them to be. Reactance can be assessed among participants
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22 through explicit inquiry about their affective (e.g., irritability, aggravation) and cognitive (e.g.,
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24 perception of constraint) responses to the narrative (see Moyer-Guse & Nabi, 2010). The final step is
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26 to show that the effect of narrative type (experimental vs. control) on intergroup attitudes is indeed
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28 mediated by resistance.
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34 Future research should identify the components of narratives that are crucial for creating
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36 positive intergroup attitude shifts. The following components are likely to play an important role:
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38 (i) Displays of intergroup friendships, (ii) Displays of romantic relationships involving members of
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40 different social groups (e.g., intermarriages), (iii) Minorities portrayed in a way that fosters
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42 perspective-taking and empathy, (iv) Dominant group members who model the "right" behaviors (e.g.,
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44 behaving in an inclusive way or speaking up against discrimination), (v) Displays of minority groups
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46 as being heterogeneous, and (vi) Display of minorities in (moderately) counterstereotypic ways. Once
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48 such narrative components are identified and isolated, it will be possible to examine the relative
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50 strength of their influence on intergroup attitudes, i.e., the extent to which the effectiveness of a given
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52 narrative is moderated by the presence or absence of each of these components.
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ESSENTIAL CHARACTERISTICS
1. Random assignment to conditions
2. The narrative in the control group is comparable in length, genre, production quality, and entertainment value. It has also been shown not to create more negative intergroup attitudes compared to a no-narrative control group.
3. Intergroup attitudes are measured with validated outcome measures and in multiple ways (e.g., self-reports, behaviors, perceptions of climate by individuals towards whom the intergroup attitudes are held).
4. Outcomes are assessed both immediately and after a delay.
DESIRABLE CHARACTERISTICS
5. The narrative is tested in a field setting.
6. The effectiveness of the narrative is compared to that of other methods aimed at creating more positive intergroup attitudes.

Table 2. Characteristics of empirical studies that allow for rigorous scientific testing of the effectiveness of narratives to create more positive intergroup attitudes

Self-selection is also a key variable in media research. Consider two television shows that both have pro-diversity messages embedded in them. Show A focuses on perspective taking and empathy and thus contains mostly minority characters, whereas show B portrays a larger number of non-minority characters who model the "right" behaviors. It could be that show A leads to positive intergroup attitude shifts that are twice as big as those induced by show B when consumers actually

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4 watch them, but show B is viewed by five times as many people as show A. In that case show B would
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6 be more effective than show A on a societal level. A shift towards more positive intergroup attitudes
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8 on a societal scale is dependent on both the effectiveness of a given narrative *and* the likelihood that
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10 consumers will choose to expose themselves to that narrative. Future research thus has to examine
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12 what factors cause consumers to actually expose themselves to the narratives with embedded positive
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14 messages.
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17 **Conclusion**

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20 Narratives have a unique power to reduce resistance to attitude change. Given that intergroup
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22 attitudes tend to be highly resistant, narrative-based approaches to reducing prejudice are likely to
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24 produce large, enduring effects. Furthermore, narratives are usually communicated through media that
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26 are widely available. The average person consumed about 4000 hours of media in 2016, and yet the
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28 media continues to be an underexplored domain in psychology. Researchers and practitioners
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30 interested in creating positive social change should turn their attention to the media and harness the
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32 power of narratives to forge a well-crafted story of social equality into reality.
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Recommended Readings

Braddock, K., & Dillard, J. P. (2016). Meta-analytic evidence for the persuasive effect of narratives on beliefs, attitudes, intentions, and behaviors. *Communication Monographs*, 83(4), 446-467.

-A meta-analysis of the impact of narratives on attitudes, behaviors, beliefs, and intentions.

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