Policy Insights from the
Behavioral and Brain Sciences
2018, Vol. 5(1) 66–74
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DOI: 10.1177/2372732217748671
journals.sagepub.com/home/bbs
SAGE

Prejudiced Places: How Contexts Shape Inequality and How Policy Can Change Them

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Abstract

Psychological theories often locate the problem of prejudice within people. However, prejudice stems from both people and *places*. Prejudiced contexts are places with predictable, systematic inequalities in experience and outcomes based on people's social group memberships—advantaging people from some social groups, while disadvantaging people from others. The prejudice-in-places model illuminates sources of inequality that would otherwise be overlooked and suggests novel avenues for intervention. By understanding how norms, values, policies, practices, and procedures can create prejudiced places, leaders and policymakers can intentionally debias environments so that members of all social groups can flourish in educational and organizational settings.

Keywords

social-contextual model of prejudice, bias, discrimination, structural prejudice

Tweet

Biased outcomes stem from people and places. Understanding how and why prejudice attaches to *places* suggests novel strategies to reduce bias.

Key Points

- Prejudice stems from both people and places.
- Prejudiced places are environments with predictable, systematic inequalities in experience and outcomes based on people's social group memberships.
- Locating prejudice within places—as well as within people—aligns with stigmatized groups' experiences of identity threat, bias, and discrimination; shines a light on overlooked causes of social inequality; and suggests novel interventions to reduce disparities.
- We review the ways that places can become prejudiced and offer evidence-based, context-focused strategies for leaders and policymakers who wish to debias educational and workplace settings.

> I'm not that guy. I'm not that guy.
>
> —Harvey Weinstein (Goodyear, 2017)

> Me, too.
>
> —More than 500,000 women (Gilbert, 2017)

When we think of prejudice, most of us think of it as a problem of people (Allport, 1954). Bigots. Homophobes. Sexists. Racists. Like a scarlet "P" that no one wants for a brand, our lay belief is that prejudice is located within people—their biased attitudes and beliefs—and that by unmasking this prejudice we can isolate these problematic, prejudiced individuals and do something about them. The recent situation of Harvey Weinstein—a powerful Hollywood producer, widely accused of sexually harassing and assaulting women for decades—provides an example of two ways to view prejudice. The "prejudice-in-people" model locates the problem of prejudice within the individual—a deeply disturbed man—with the implication that the individual should be stripped of power, prosecuted, punished, reformed through therapy, or receive other individual-focused intervention. Once the prejudiced individual is appropriately managed, business can proceed as usual.

But what are we to make of the over 500,000 women (Gilbert, 2017) who, in one week, came out en masse to reveal their personal experiences with sexism, harassment, and assault in the workplace? While prosecuting Harvey Weinstein may address the experiences of his particular victims, it will not address the experiences of the hundreds of thousands of women who have been placed at a distinct disadvantage (relative to their male counterparts), with regard to the psychological, behavioral, and economic contingencies that they have had to navigate to be successful in the workplace. A social-contextual theory of prejudice—of

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prejudice in *places*, as well as in people—can address this issue. A view of prejudice in places requires examining values, norms, models, hierarchies, and behaviors that organizations cultivate and how these settings support biased (or unbiased) individuals. What was the context that afforded Weinstein opportunities to serially behave as he did? What were the norms around masking his behavior that allowed it to persist for decades?

The Prejudice-in-People Model

Is Harvey Weinstein a prejudiced person? Yes. But this is only the tip of the iceberg when it comes to understanding the problem. The story of Harvey Weinstein, and of many other "prejudiced people," is more often than not also a story of places. It is a story of an organization with people who facilitated his behavior and of an industry that advantaged people who opted to stay quiet. Why is the prejudice-in-people model so attractive? Because it suggests that identifying the prejudiced people—the bad actors, like Harvey Weinstein—we can root them out. And then a fair, unbiased system will produce equitable outcomes.

The "prejudice-in-people" model is also appealing because it allows people to believe that as long as they are unprejudiced in their hearts and minds—as long as they do not use slurs or deny people rights—that they do not contribute to the problem of bias. The prejudice-in-people model lets people off the hook—absolving and preventing acknowledgment of how one may be complicit in perpetuating the values, norms, and practices that systematically disadvantage some groups, while privileging others. Yet, research suggests that rooting out prejudiced people alone will not solve the bias problem (e.g., Murphy, Steele, & Gross, 2007). Unequal outcomes stem from both people and places.

Ironically, social psychology—a field that touts the power of the situation (Ross & Nisbett, 2011)—has mostly located prejudice within people. Many theories of prejudice are theories of prejudiced attitudes. Sometimes, these attitudes are explicit attitudes stemming from beliefs about the inferiority of certain groups, and sometimes, these attitudes are implicit or unconscious, more readily associating certain characteristics (e.g., dangerous and criminal) with certain social groups (e.g., Black men) (see Dovidio & Gaertner, 2010). Social psychologists tend to think about prejudice as a normal part of the human condition—a function of an efficient social cognitive system that uses heuristics to quickly make sense of the world (e.g., Sherman, Lee, Bessenoff, & Frost, 1998). As the Broadway musical Avenue Q song goes, "everyone's a little bit racist."

Because most theories locate prejudice within people—and because people are motivated to avoid the stigma of being labeled as such (O'Brien et al., 2010)—social psychologists do not fully trust self-report methods to reveal the prejudice within people (e.g., Dovidio, 2001; Schuman, Steeh, Bobo, & Krysan, 1997). Thus, the field has moved toward ever more implicit, covert methods to measure individuals' bias. Ranging from reaction time measures that are difficult to "game," to physiological responses, brain imaging, and hormonal assays, researchers have moved from the macro to the molecular to illuminate the truth within people. When prejudice is discovered, individual-focused interventions—including increasing intergroup contact, introducing counterstereotypical role models, and retraining implicit attitudes to remap biased associations—aim to make people less biased (e.g., Dasgupta & Greenwald, 2001; Devine, Forscher, Austin, & Cox, 2012; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006).

Limitations of the Prejudice-in-People Model

Attitudinal theories of prejudice—with their focus on prejudiced people—have done a lot to illuminate the antecedents and consequences of prejudice (e.g., Hewstone, Rubin, & Willis, 2002). Indeed, people clearly hold biases that function both implicitly and explicitly to influence overt and subtle discriminatory behavior. However, this dominant approach to understanding prejudiced people neglects a broader, social-contextual view of prejudice and brings several limitations.

First, social scientists are deeply interested in predicting specific discriminatory behaviors (e.g., avoiding contact with Black people, refusing to hire Muslims). However, the generalized attitudes—typically measured through feeling thermometers or by the speed of associating "good" or "bad" with different social groups—are poor predictors of these specific behaviors (e.g., Ajzen & Fishbein, 2005). Shifting the dominant focus from the measurement of diffuse attitudes toward understanding how situational factors constrain or compel discriminatory behaviors may provide a more direct path to reducing inequalities. Indeed, examining a setting's norms and values may more precisely predict people's behavior toward specific social groups (Crandall, Eshleman, & O'Brien, 2002).

Second, people often have little awareness of behaving in discriminatory ways (e.g., Dovidio, 2001). When people are made aware of their biased attitudes or behavior, they are likely to deny, dispute, or otherwise respond defensively to the accusation (Czopp & Monteith, 2003), and they are more likely to avoid future contact with outgroup members (Perry, Murphy, & Dovidio, 2015). The possibility that one may harbor prejudice is dissonant with most people's actual and ideal views of themselves (e.g., Monteith, 1993). Dissonance impedes people's awareness of their bias. Perhaps raising awareness about how bias can stem from biased settings, policies, and procedures—even in the absence of biased attitudes and intentions—may provoke less dissonance and defensiveness and motivate greater support for change.

Relatedly, the focus on prejudice as a ubiquitous, implicit, and unconscious dimension of the human condition can

undermine change because this construal of bias unintentionally (and incorrectly) suggests its inevitability (see Devine & Monteith, 1999). When people learn about implicit bias, they often feel that nothing can change these automatic biases, so diversity training programs with these ideas at their core often backfire (Dobbin & Kalev, 2016).

Finally, viewing prejudice as a feature of people forestalls the possibility that individuals can experience prejudiced outcomes—psychologically, physiologically, and behaviorally—even in the absence of prejudiced people in a setting. Contexts, depending on how they are set up, can create prejudice all on their own, even with the most well-meaning, egalitarian people populating them.

The Social-Contextual Model of Prejudice

What is an alternative? A social-contextual approach to prejudice takes the target's perspective to explore how features of a setting shape people's outcomes. Rooted in social identity threat theory (Steele, Spencer, & Aronson, 2002), this approach examines the contexts that disadvantage some groups relative to others. For example, targets of prejudice do not directly experience another person's implicit attitudes score or questionnaire response. Instead, targets experience whether they are valued, respected, included, and promoted in a setting, or devalued, disrespected, excluded, and passed over. In other words, targets experience others' treatment—behavior shaped by attitudes, but also by the settings that constrain or compel it. The social-contextual model of prejudice expands focus, moving from a model of prejudice as a trait or attitude that some (or most) people possess, to a view of prejudice as something that both people and places *do* (Markus & Moya, 2010). Understanding that prejudice can attach to places as well as to people sheds light on previously overlooked disparities and suggests novel interventions to reduce inequality.

Prejudiced contexts are places with predictable, systematic inequalities in experience and outcomes based on people's social group memberships—advantaging people from some social groups while disadvantaging people from others (Murphy & Walton, 2013). Next, we illustrate some prejudiced contexts—that is, situations that systematically disadvantage some groups relative to others. We then describe evidence-based remedies that teachers, administrators, practitioners, and policymakers can use to debias educational and workplace environments.

What Makes Environments Prejudiced?

When environments unequally tax the emotions, physiology, cognitive function, and performance of some groups more than others, they become prejudiced. An example, drawn from the stereotype threat literature, reveals how answering demographic questions before a high-stakes standardized test (e.g., the SAT, LSAT, MCAT) creates a prejudiced context that exacts unequal experiences among people, depending on their social group membership (Steele & Aronson, 1995). On its face, the practice of asking respondents to answer demographic questions before beginning a standardized test is neutral—everyone engages in the same behavior. However, the *meaning* of this behavior and the resulting *experience* differ depending on whether a person belongs to a social group whose intellectual abilities are negatively stereotyped (e.g., women, Blacks, Latinos, Native Americans).

Making those social group memberships salient before taking a test brings to mind the negative societal stereotypes about one's group and increases the pressure to disprove them (Steele & Aronson, 1995). The simple act of checking the demographic boxes changes the situation for negatively stereotyped group members. By doing so, they are reminded of their group membership and the stereotypes that impugn their group's ability—so they contend with the predicament of trying to disprove those stereotypes through their performance. This extra pressure engenders evaluation apprehension, anxiety, physiological stress, and increased rumination, that sap the cognitive functioning needed to successfully perform (Schmader, Johns, & Forbes, 2008). Majority group members, who do not contend with the same intellectual stereotypes, simply check their demographic box (e.g., White, male), and move on—applying their full cognitive resources to the test at hand. This is a prejudiced situation—systematically exacting disparate psychological, physiological, and performance experiences from some social groups, and not others.

Another way that environments can become prejudiced is by requiring some people to hide or give up parts of themselves to be successful in the context. Evaluation and promotion practices may suggest only one preferred way to be successful in the workplace (e.g., through independent, agentic, masculine leadership approaches)—and that preferred way can stereotypically "fit" one group more than others. Or, representations of success may literally and physically comprise just one social group (e.g., all-male conference panels). If so, the environment is prejudiced. To be successful in such environments, those who do not belong to those groups, or who favor different approaches (e.g., interdependent, communal, collaborative), must either suppress parts of who they are or bifurcate their identity—to show only the parts of themselves that are valued in the context (e.g., Pronin, Steele, & Ross, 2004). Contexts that systematically hinder people of some social groups from being authentically themselves—to reap the setting's rewards—are prejudiced.

When environments contain stereotypical representations of groups—either stereotypically positive or negative representations—they signal that stereotypes are an acceptable lens for considering and interacting with people. For example, if posters on the walls at a tech company include only

"bro-grammar" centric images, if all the meeting rooms are named for famous White male executives, or if people are asked to perform stereotypical tasks at work—like asking women to fetch the coffee or African American men to captain the company basketball team—these cues suggest that stereotypes influence how people are treated in the environment. From the target's perspective, these settings bring to mind stereotypes and require contending with them (Czopp, Kay, & Cheryan, 2015; Steele et al., 2002).

When environments include norms that prejudice toward certain groups (e.g., immigrants) is acceptable, these norms can justify the expression of prejudice toward those groups. Indeed, when people believe expression is acceptable, they do not suppress their prejudiced attitudes and behavior (Crandall & Eshleman, 2003; Crandall et al., 2002). The social-contextual approach builds on this theory and goes a step beyond by arguing that prejudiced norms in a context can create prejudice even among people who, before entering the context, do not initially hold prejudiced attitudes.

Returning to our opening example, Harvey Weinstein's sexist behavior was an open secret in Hollywood—a norm of quiet concealment pervaded the industry for decades. However, the consequences of such a norm could be prejudice-creating—even among egalitarian newcomers. Through self-persuasion and dissonance reduction processes, behaving in line with the norms of an environment can shape people's views of themselves and others (Aronson, 1999; Bem, 1965). Environments that include prejudiced norms could create prejudiced behavior and identities all on their own. On the contrary, environments that include egalitarian norms could create egalitarian identities and suppress the expression of bias.

When settings use recruitment and promotion criteria and norms that systematically disadvantage individuals from some social groups compared with others, they become prejudiced. For instance, if—as part of the promotion criteria—employees are expected to work grueling hours and be on call during holidays and school breaks, employees with family commitments are disadvantaged. If they comply with these expectations, they create turmoil at home. However, if they violate these expectations, they risk being overlooked for promotion and being stereotyped as less committed and less capable. Likewise, when policies explicitly conceal group-based inequities, the setting is prejudiced. For example, many companies employ pay-secrecy policies in which employees are not allowed to discuss or compare compensation figures. These policies mask potential inequities and make it almost impossible to discover group-based discrimination. While laws, like the Lilly Ledbetter Fair Pay Act, give employees the opportunity to legally challenge perceived pay discrimination, people will only file complaints if they have reason to believe that they (or their group) have been treated unfairly (Lyons, 2013).

Another way that places can become prejudiced is through certain organizational beliefs and values. Many organizations endorse colorblindness—that is, they opt to avoid race (Apfelbaum, Norton, & Sommers, 2012). However, when organizations do so, they communicate that it is inappropriate to acknowledge cultural differences that make minorities feel seen, valued, and understood. In settings that adopt a colorblind approach, Whites are more likely to avoid intergroup interaction (for fear of appearing prejudiced) (Richeson & Nussbaum, 2004). Moreover, in colorblind settings, Whites avoid giving people of color constructive criticism and feedback for fear that it may be construed as biased (Apfelbaum, Sommers, & Norton, 2008; Cohen, Steele, & Ross, 1999). Thus, colorblind ideology puts racial and ethnic minorities at a disadvantage, as they miss improvement feedback provided to their majority group peers.

Organizations can become prejudiced places when they endorse the belief that valued characteristics—such as intelligence and ability—are innate, unchanging traits found only within certain people (Emerson & Murphy, 2013, 2015; Murphy & Dweck, 2010; Rattan, Savani, Naidu, & Dweck, 2012). Although these organizational beliefs seem innocuous, when organizations describe intelligence as a fixed quality that cannot be developed, it sends a threatening message to people from groups whose abilities are impugned by negative stereotypes. This threat, in turn, undermines people's organizational trust, work engagement, and performance (Emerson & Murphy, 2013, 2015)—ironically creating contexts in which negative stereotypes are perpetuated.

Finally, when environments employ decision-making procedures that seem neutral on their face, but disadvantage some groups relative to others, the environment is prejudiced. Indeed, this is the legal principle of disparate impact. Consider the practice of weighting various criteria in selection decisions. For instance, is the problem of women's underrepresentation in the American legal profession (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2017) one of sexist people or practices? Law school admission decisions often weight two criteria: applicants' undergraduate GPAs and their LSAT scores. Women, on average, have higher undergraduate GPAs, but lower LSATs than men. However, accredited American law schools usually weight LSAT at about 60% and undergraduate GPA at about 40% (Crosby, Iyer, Clayton, & Downing, 2003; Wightman, 1998). The weights apply to all groups equally, but they systematically disadvantage one social group over another.

Likewise, standardized tests, like the SAT, consistently underestimate Black students' academic abilities because the pressure of stereotype threat undermines their performance (Walton & Spencer, 2009). Accepting these scores at face value—for example, by treating a 1200 SAT score by a White and Black student as reflecting the same level of ability and potential—is discriminatory against the Black student who earned the 1200 score in the face of stereotype threat. Not taking this situational difference into account in admission decisions would systematically discriminate against racial and ethnic minority students and women (Walton, Spencer,

& Erman, 2013), and do so even when individual decision-makers are not prejudiced.

How to Debias Places

What follows is an evidence-based analysis of context-focused strategies aimed at debiasing prejudiced places. Each strategy offers policy implications for context- and culture-creators in educational and workplace settings.

First, organizations should engage in *perspective taking*, understanding that majority and minority individuals can experience their environments in different ways. Organizations should survey their members to understand how majority and minority individuals differentially experience their environment. Also, organizations should employ bias incident reporting systems. To develop these systems, include minority groups when creating the reporting and investigation procedures, and the consequences of such reports. Evidence-based practices—such as placing demographic questions at the end of employment and academic tests to reduce the potential for stereotype threat among stigmatized groups—signal an awareness that the same situation can have disparate impact on people from different groups.

Second, organizations should pursue every opportunity to *challenge widespread societal stereotypes*. Assess the physical environment for symbolic cues of inclusion and exclusion (Cheryan, Ziegler, Plaut, & Meltzoff, 2014). Recruit, hire, retain, and promote qualified individuals in counterstereotypic roles. Increase the numerical representation of minorities so that none feel that they must represent their particular group (Steele, 2010). In the meantime, connect underrepresented individuals with a broad network of role models, mentors, and sponsors who will advocate for them and provide them with important insider knowledge about how to navigate the environment. When holding up exemplars of excellence, include individuals from diverse backgrounds.

Third, settings should attend to their *local norms*. How are groups considered? Are racist or sexist jokes acceptable? Organizations should embody norms of group-based respect—acknowledging, accepting, and valuing each group (Huo & Molina, 2006). All-inclusive multiculturalism is a diversity philosophy that enhances group-based respect and that acknowledges that both minority and majority groups enhance the whole (Stevens, Plaut, & Sanchez-Burks, 2008). Teachers, administrators, managers, and leaders should embody these norms through their own behavior—with clear and consistent consequences for individuals who violate norms (Blanchard, Crandall, Brigham, & Vaughn, 1994; Blanchard, Lilly, & Vaughn, 1991; Ruggs, Martinez, & Hebl, 2011; Yukl & Van Fleet, 1992). Behavioral models of egalitarianism—especially among leaders who have the cultural capital to change local norms and create nonprejudiced environments—are powerful in shaping the behavior of others (Emerson & Murphy, 2014). Indeed, when stigmatized individuals experience support from their supervisor, it enhances their satisfaction and commitment—sometimes, even more than when support comes from their spouse (Van Steenbergen & Ellemers, 2009).

Fourth, organizations should *debias* their recruiting, hiring, and promotion procedures. Clear criteria avoid shifting standards that may, unintentionally, favor some groups relative to others (Biernat & Manis, 1994). For example, investors prefer entrepreneurial pitches that are presented by attractive men (vs. women) (Brooks, Huang, Kearney, & Murray, 2014). To address such bias, identity-blind reviews of work products can reduce racial and gender disparities in selection and promotion (Goldin & Rouse, 2000; Robertson & Kesselheim, 2016). Another source of bias occurs when companies announce available positions. Because most new employees come through the informal, social, and professional networks of current employees—that reproduce an organization's current demographics—companies should broaden announcements of new opportunities. Companies should coach candidates regarding interview procedures (i.e., how to prepare, typical questions). This procedure avoids informal network advantages that accrue to individuals with connections inside the organization. In hiring and promotion decisions, consider "distance traveled" as a criterion. Rather than hiring and promoting those who "naturally" or stereotypically fit the role, advantage those who have overcome challenges and demonstrated growth over time—as these characteristics likely bring diversity and resilience.

Fifth, ongoing activities should *value multiple ways* of demonstrating understanding, competence, and mastery. Assessments that allow individuals to show their interdependence (as well as their independence) and communality (as well as agency) broaden the value of individuals from different cultural, racial, and gender backgrounds (Diekman, Steinberg, Brown, Belanger, & Clark, 2017; Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Stephens, Fryberg, & Markus, 2012).

Sixth, *provide training* about how policies, procedures, and practices could favor one group (vs. others)—that is, educate people about how prejudice can come from both people and places. By locating inequalities in policies and procedures, organizations can broaden people's theories about the possible sources of prejudice. Organizations can enlist majority group members who are motivated to be nonprejudiced to help create nonprejudiced environments. Indeed, when majority group members learn about continued discrimination, they are more likely to support structural interventions to achieve fair ends (Son Hing, Bobocel, & Zanna, 2002).

Finally, *evaluate, evaluate, evaluate*. Organizations should regularly analyze institutional data to examine whether practices favor some social groups over others. Upon discovering disparate outcomes in recruitment, retention, performance, evaluation, or promotion, organizations should ask "what are we, as an organization, doing to produce these outcomes?" rather than "what is wrong with these

people?" Attend especially to whether individuals from certain groups are segregated into particular roles (Emerson & Murphy, 2014). Regularly assess how the environment—policies, procedures, and cues—influence the experiences and performance of different social groups.

Risks to Monitor

Potential risks are involved in implementing these policy recommendations. Outlining some risks helps ensure wise implementation.

Organizations that implement diversity efforts should watch for moral credentialing and illusions of fairness that such efforts can bring. When organizations and individuals can point to egalitarian behaviors (e.g., choosing a woman or person of color for a position) or procedures (e.g., a bias incident reporting system), it makes people *less* vigilant to bias in subsequent decisions and interactions (Kaiser et al., 2013). By gaining moral credentials in one situation, people may ironically become more biased in the next (Monin & Miller, 2001). The simple act of having diversity values, policies, and procedures in a workplace can cause people to believe that bias is unlikely to infect decisions and interactions there (Kaiser et al., 2013). Diversity efforts can create an illusion of fairness that biases consideration of specific instances of discrimination and inequality within an organization.

Organizations should guard against shifting definitions of diversity that have the ironic effect of perpetuating gender-, race-, and class-based inequalities (Unzueta, Knowles, & Ho, 2012). For example, construing diversity as "field" or "expertise" diversity risks a practice of hiring and promoting all White men who earned their degrees from different departments within the same few Ivy League universities. This practice of broadening diversity has the ironic effect of maintaining hierarchies that exclude people from traditionally underrepresented and stigmatized groups.

Well-meaning organizations should not misrepresent their diversity. Diversity cannot simply be symbolic—in the form of racially and ethnically diverse recruiters or brochure photos. Discrepancy between these symbols and the actual representation within the organization can leave new employees feeling hoodwinked and disaffected. These individuals may spread this information through their social and professional networks, damaging the organization's reputation and recruitment from these networks.

Finally, because majority group members can feel sidelined by efforts to increase diversity and reduce prejudice, and because their support is essential to creating truly inclusive, egalitarian settings, find ways to include majority groups. One strategy is to educate everyone about the value of diversity—for individuals, teams, and the company as a whole. Understanding how diversity enhances the experience and performance of both majority and minority individuals, as well as the company bottom line (Carter, Simkins, & Simpson, 2003; Herring, 2009), may help bring majority group members to the table. By harnessing people's motivation to be (and appear) nonprejudiced (Plant & Devine, 2009), and by providing concrete ways that they can contribute to nonprejudiced environments, organizations can enlist majority- and minority-group members in achieving egalitarian environments. For example, evidence-based intergroup dialogue programs (Gurin, Nagda, & Zuniga, 2013) provide templates for discussing how people's identities shape their experiences. Finally, the all-inclusive multicultural (AIM) model acknowledges, values, and respects the contributions of all groups—including majority groups.

Conclusion

Understanding how situational factors shape human thought and behavior is a central contribution of social psychology, but many social psychologists have studied prejudiced people, to the exclusion of prejudiced places. Locating prejudice in places—as well as people—aligns with stigmatized groups' experiences of identity threat, bias, and discrimination and shines a light on overlooked causes of social inequality. Moreover, the prejudice-in-places model suggests novel interventions to reduce backlash among majority groups who are vigilant to being labeled prejudiced. Place-based policies, practices, and interventions offer hope of creating more equitable school and workplace environments that suppress the worst and bring out the best in people—allowing all groups to flourish.

Acknowledgment

The authors are grateful to Susan Fiske for her thoughtful editorial assistance and guidance.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: Preparation of this article was supported, in part, by grants awarded to the first author by the National Science Foundation (CAREER DRL-1450755 and HRD-1661004) and the Raikes Foundation.

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