

I am a development and behavioral economist. I study the economic forces that shape intergroup relations and group-based inequality, with work on caste, religion, race, and gender. In other work, I explore the causes and consequences of religiosity and rituals, both of which shape group identity. I have raised roughly US\$2 million for my research.

Intergroup contact. The contact hypothesis, the idea that contact between groups reduces prejudice if certain conditions are met, is a seminal theory in social psychology. Yet no field experiments had tested whether the conditions of contact matter. I ran the first, on caste in India [1]. I organized cricket leagues, randomly assigning players to teams (varying cross-caste *collaborative* contact) and teams to opponents (varying *adversarial* contact). Collaborative contact increases cross-caste friendship and trade, while adversarial contact has negative effects. The net effect is positive: league participation increases cross-caste behaviors overall. Stepping back, I meta-analyzed 41 pre-registered contact experiments, using only pre-registered primary outcomes [2]. The average effect is positive but small (one-tenth of a standard deviation), and I document a *generalization problem*: contact changes beliefs and attitudes about the people met far more than about the outgroup as a whole. To make progress on the generalization problem, we randomized whether Hindu–Muslim contact was broad (a new partner each day) or deep (the same partner for six days) [3]: broad contact yields more accurate beliefs about outgroup strangers, and thus more generalization, consistent with Bayesian learning.

Rituals and identity. Since even well-designed contact has limited effects, I have turned to alternatives, starting with the classic sociological conjecture that collective rituals build shared identity. In a two-week integrated youth camp experiment with Hindu and Muslim boys, we randomized both camp participation and whether camps included collective rituals such as flag-raising, the national anthem, and synchronized dancing [4]. The camps reduce ingroup bias and improve psychological well-being, and campers still have twice as many outgroup friends one year later. Rituals strengthen shared identity during camp, but their lasting effects accrue mainly to the Hindu majority. A second alternative is *recategorization*: across almost 200 Indian schools, we randomized House Systems that assign students to Houses that cut across existing identity cleavages [5]. The Houses become a social identity stronger than caste or religion, yet outcomes tied to the old identities are unaffected.

Managing group divides. Taking prejudice as given, I also ask how best to manage group divides. When we randomly mask caste in mixed-caste work pairs, relations surprisingly get *worse*: uncertainty about group identity prevents coordination on shared norms of interaction [6]. In an audit experiment with over 11,000 academics, we find that social media can be used to identify allies: academics who tweet in support of racial justice are significantly less likely to discriminate against Black students [7]. Finally, using weekly lotteries in the UK Parliament, we show that asking a single question at Prime Minister’s Questions raises an MP’s vote margin by 4%, yet women are 10 to 15% less likely than same-cohort men to enter. The gender gap does not close with experience but nearly disappears after a pandemic-era format change made the sessions less adversarial. In this setting, changing the institution, rather than changing women’s preferences, closes the gender gap [8].

Religion and altered states. In Brazil, we ran the largest psychedelic randomized controlled trial to date, and the first of its kind outside of clinical research, assigning ceremony attendees to ayahuasca or a placebo [9]. Ayahuasca reduces distress and raises happiness for six months, and increases meaning and purpose after two years; the ceremony alone improves mental health; and “mystical” experiences predict well-being improvements in both the psychedelic and placebo arms, suggesting that deep spiritual experiences promote well-being however they are triggered. Emotionally charged religious experiences may work similarly: the Welsh Revival of 1904–05, in which 6% of the population converted within two years, cut drunkenness offenses by 40% and pub employment by 10 to 12%, effects that persisted even though church membership rose only temporarily [10]. Turning to the role of the state in shaping religion, we use eighteenth-century lottery grants to poor Church of England clergy to show that state sponsorship reduced dissent but lowered religious service provision, as Adam Smith predicted [11].

Research plans. First, I am turning to explicit discriminatory norms and their structural causes, through work on untouchability in India—many of India’s 200 million Scheduled Caste individuals remain subject to restrictions on temple entry, water use, and entry into upper-caste houses, among other domains. We are revisiting hundreds of villages surveyed 20 years ago, allowing us to build the first panel data on untouchability practices. We then aim to document whether and how much untouchability practices have declined, and identify the political and economic forces that erode discriminatory norms [12]. Second, in ongoing work we are the first to experimentally study the economic effects of psychedelics: two years on, those assigned ayahuasca report longer hours, higher job satisfaction, and higher income, and we are unpacking why [9].

References

Asterisks indicate nine co-authors who are current or former PhD advisees or pre-docs.

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