

Belief Change & Social Change

Carolina Flores, Department of Philosophy, Rutgers/UC Irvine

Can we get people to abandon resistant social beliefs through structural means?

- **Resistant social beliefs** = beliefs that (a) pose obstacles to the success of structural reforms, and (b) actively resist received counter-evidence (e.g., racist beliefs, pro-status-quo beliefs).
- **Yes, we can!** Through identity-shifting structural changes in social networks (esp. cross-cutting social networks & social movements).

Methodology

1. Look to the **psychology of identity-protective reasoning** for the central mechanisms that sustain resistant social beliefs.
2. Find **structural levers** for reducing identity-protective reasoning about the target beliefs.
3. Argue that this result **supports structuralism** about social change.

Results and Conclusions

What are the causal roots of resistant social beliefs?

General desire to defend the self-concept (Sherman & Cohen 2006)

Desire to defend cherished social identities

Motivated reasoning (Kunda 1990) about beliefs related to these identities.

Resisting counter-evidence to identity-relevant beliefs (Kahan 2012).

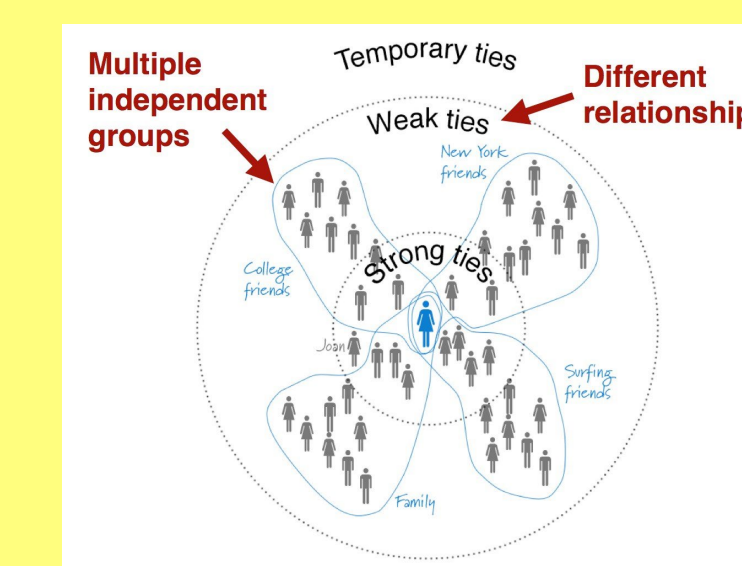
Resistant social beliefs

Other roots: systems justification (Jost 2019), desire to have socially normative beliefs (Williams 2021). Addressable by the same interventions—ask me for details!

Can we shift social identities via social network change?

Yes! Two ways.

Cross-cutting social networks



New Yorker Democrat
Man Surfer
Rutgers alumni
Cross-cutting, balanced, inclusive identities

Less defensive reasoning:
- Balancing out defending different social identities
- Different identities salient across contexts
- Personal characteristics > Social identities

- **Theoretical basis:** common ingroup identity model (Gaertner et al 2000): cross-group contact often produces new shared group identities corresponding to the new group; makes existing identities less important/more identities need to be balanced out.
- Important **application:** reducing **partisanship** through cross-cutting affiliations (Mutz 2006, Mason 2018).

Social movements



Union activist (inclusive identity)

Man Democrat
White New Yorker
Reconceived and de-prioritized identities

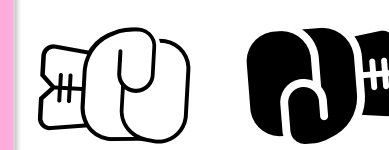
Better defensive reasoning:
- Defending social identities where that helps you track the truth
- Ceasing to defend false beliefs tied up with toxic identities

- **Theoretical basis:** self-categorization theory (Turner & Reynolds 2011): which identities we center and their content is a function of what the salient out-group is.
- Important **applications:** union organizing & racial solidarity (Freymer & Grumbach 2021); veganism and masculinity; Pride.

What does this imply for structuralism vs. individualism about social change?

To achieve social change, we ought to prioritize:

Individualism: individualistic interventions (e.g., implicit bias training; Madva 2017).



Structuralism: structuralist interventions (e.g., legal and material changes; Haslanger forthcoming).

Resistant social beliefs are a problem for structuralism (Madva 2016).

1. Structuralist interventions can only address beliefs that mirror the world.
2. Resistant social beliefs do not mirror the world.
3. Therefore, resistant social beliefs cannot be addressed by structuralist interventions. We need debiasing & virtue.

But, actually, **structuralist interventions—social network change—can address resistant social beliefs!**

Social network change is a structuralist intervention:

- Best fit with literature on integration (Anderson 2010) and agent-based modeling (O'Connor and Weatherall 2019).
- Requires coordinated and large-scale (not 1-by-1) change.
- Cf. changing material/social backdrop for beliefs as opposed to therapy or debiasing exercises.

Further questions:

- Power & effectiveness
- Concrete interventions
- Domain differences
- Integration with Bayesian models



Literature cited

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Further information

Please see <https://carolinaflores.org> for a full paper draft and other work. And feel free to email me at carolina.flores@rutgers.edu with questions or comments.