A refugee holds a photograph of German Chancellor Angela Merkel at Munich’s main railway station in September 2015.
As summer turned to fall in 2015, Ulrich Wagner was glued to the news, watching decades of his social psychology research play out on TV.

Images beamed from Munich, Germany, more than 300 kilometers from Wagner’s home north of Frankfurt, showed thousands of refugees flooding the city’s train station. Their arrival marked the hopeful end of a journey begun in war-torn Syria and other Middle Eastern hot spots. And Wagner was impressed to see the welcome extended by his fellow Germans. Outside the station, tankards of water with plastic cups lined the sidewalk. Volunteers sorted through boxes of cereal and diapers. One photo showed a German police officer crouched and smiling, eye-to-eye with a young refugee boy who wore the officer’s forest green hat and a broad grin.

The scale of the migrant influx into Munich and elsewhere in Germany was hard to fathom: one million people entering a country of 80 million. It was a test for Germany as a nation. “If we do this well,” Germany’s Chancellor Angela Merkel was quoted as saying, “we can only win.”

The influx also has morphed into a giant, ill-controlled social experiment. How much social support should the government provide? How can it find long-term housing for everyone who needs it? Will newcomers embrace the social norms of their adopted country, and what happens if they don’t? These are among the most pressing questions, but in the background hovers another: How can individuals, civic groups, and governments manage prejudice against refugees?

Despite the encouraging scenes at the train station, alarms soon went off for Wagner, who teaches at the Philipps University of Marburg. The refugees were funneled into reception centers, where they stayed for up to 8 months, he says. In his town, which took in hundreds of people, the refugees were first housed in enormous tents and then in an expanse of prefabricated houses, isolating them from life in the surrounding community. Separating newcomers from the home population, according to Wagner’s studies and many others, “is not really a good idea.” If there’s one factor that fights prejudice, Wagner says, it’s contact: neighborly greetings, children mixing in school, sports teams of refugees and native Germans passing the soccer ball back and forth.

Wagner is 65 years old, with a close-cropped graying beard and frameless glasses. Until 2015, he had studied prejudice against Turkish guest workers in Germany. Then, he pivoted to the refugee crisis, hoping that both findings drawn from past work and innovative studies involving the newcomers might point to policies to reduce the prejudice the refugees would probably encounter. “That,” he says, “was the starting point” for a new career trajectory.

Wagner is one of many social scientists riveted by events unfolding in Germany and elsewhere. Prejudice has an ancient history rooted in evolution and human behavior. But recent events have upped the stakes: the war in Syria and outflow of refugees, the election of President Donald Trump in the United States, Brexit in the United Kingdom, and the rise of far-right parties in Europe, which many attribute to hostility toward immigrants. In the last 5 years, “there’s been a mam-
moth sweep of increased anti-immigration prejudice,” says Winnifred Louis, a social psychologist at the University of Queensland in Brisbane, Australia. Figuring out what to do about it is more pressing than ever.

“HUMAN BEINGS have always been group beings,” says Rupert Brown, a social psychologist at the University of Sussex in Brighton, U.K. Over millennia, our survival as a species has hinged on small groups sticking together, with members supporting one another. Today, each of us belongs to many such “in groups,” as psychologists and anthropologists call them. Those groups might include our neighborhood, our ethnic identity, our religious community, a sports team, or our political affiliation. “One or more of those groups that we belong to may influence our thinking, our emotions, and our behavior,” Brown says.

Prejudice of course can be directed against any group by any other. But immigrants, and even more so refugees and asylum seekers, may be especially vulnerable because of their tenuous place in a larger society. “You don’t really belong anywhere; by definition you’re stateless, you’re fleeing some place of torture or persecution,” Brown says. “And yet you’re not a citizen of the country in which you’re now living,” either.

Studies of ancient and modern peoples indicate that prejudice flows largely from a perception that such “out groups” pose some threat: to one’s economic security, one’s physical safety, one’s way of life, or one’s national identity. And volatility, like an economic meltdown or a terrorist attack, can intensify those fears. “We tend to pull in, and our definitions of who is part of the national group get narrower,” says Victoria Esses, who studies immigration and prejudice at the University of Western Ontario in London, Canada. “There’s more outsiders.”

To social psychologists, those ebbs and flows can be encouraging. Even if prejudice never disappears, attitudes are malleable. People can be swung toward prejudice. But with the right tactics, they can also be swung away from it.

One of the first people to launch a rigorous, real-world experiment to reduce intergroup prejudice was a young psychologist named Betsy Levy Paluck, now at Princeton University. In 2003, when Paluck was a graduate student at Yale University, her mentor asked for a favor: He was teaching a class on political intolerance and prejudice and needed to update his syllabus with examples of successful interventions.

“I went to the literature,” Paluck says now. “I couldn’t find them.” Although many laboratory studies had been conducted, often with college-aged volunteers, to her surprise she could find almost none in the real world.

So Paluck designed one. She focused on the aftermath of the Rwandan genocide, when, 9 years earlier, members of the country’s Hutu majority had slaughtered 800,000 minority Tutsis. Not surprisingly, suspicion and negative stereotypes continued to fester.

Paluck wanted to test whether mass media could be a prejudice-busting tool, and turned to a nonprofit called La Benevolencija for help. The group was writing a soap opera, New Dawn, for Rwandan radio. Central to the show were two hostile communities that ultimately reconcile, along with a romantic interest between a woman in one and a man in another. The story did not refer to Hutus and Tutsis directly. “It went over weeks,” says Brown, whose own work on anti-immigrant prejudice was influenced by what Paluck found. “Would they, wouldn’t they, all the usual stuff” of soap opera lovers.

Paluck recruited small groups all over the country who gathered to listen. To create a control group, she offered hundreds of other volunteers a radio show on health and HIV that said nothing about reconciliation—along with financial incentives not to listen to the La Benevolencija show for the time being. The intervention lasted a year, and the show was a huge hit.

The positive effects were striking. Soap opera listeners were far more likely to say their community supported intermarriage between Hutus and Tutsis. They were also more likely to agree that people should speak up about their trauma. “You’re still left with tons of questions,” Paluck says. How long do those effects last? What types of propaganda work against it? “It takes a lot of time to accumulate the evidence, and then you’re left with evidence from one program in one context.”

Paluck was fortunate to find a show with finely honed messages to which people actually wanted to listen. Still, her project underscored the ability of mass media to modulate perspectives of community norms. In Canada, Esses and her then–graduate student, Andrea Lawson, studied the reverse effect, showing volunteers an editorial cartoon suggesting that immigrants spread infectious disease. Esses, who published her results in 2013, says she couldn’t imagine that looking at one cartoon would influence what she assumed were deeply held beliefs. “I was surprised,” she says, that it did, with prejudice against immigrants increasing by 0.5 to 1.5 points on a five- or seven-point scale. Such attitudes can have a real impact on immigrants, whose mental health can reflect the degree of welcome they receive in a host country (see p. 682).

MEDIA MESSAGES EXERT POWER—for better and worse—because they play on our emotions. But they can also influence attitudes by communicating outsiders’ experiences to the broader public. Such “indirect” contact is easier to engineer than actual friendship between real people, and it is gaining attention.

Aware that Paluck pulled off a version of indirect contact with the Rwandan radio show, Brown in the United Kingdom has teamed up with an Italian children’s book author named Laura Ferraresi to design books for elementary schoolers. One book, Adventures and Mysteries at School: Tales Against Prejudice Drawn by Children, describes children from Africa and China who move to It-

In Berlin, a volunteer tutor offers language instruction to two asylum seekers. Learning a home country’s language, research has found, is one of the best ways for newcomers to forge connections with natives.
We think of government as reflecting the will of the people. But it tells us how we define ourselves as a nation.

Victoria Esses, University of Western Ontario
Battling bias
Jennifer Couzin-Frankel

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