# Prejudice reduction techniques to draw tentative recommendations aimed at AFROPUNK festival

In the last decades **gangsta rap** has gained a disproportionate attention in the media and in popular perception because of its controversial content: its themes revert around the violent street gang life led by many of the exponents of the first generation of artists, whose social and economic disadvantage resulted in the adoption of a criminal lifestyle. The commercial success of gangsta rap coincided with its institutionalization into a highly codified practice, language and aesthetic: examples of the culture revolving around it are rap battles, a vocabulary composed of denigrating terms and the glorification of criminality, violence and promiscuity. Consequently, rap has been accused of inciting crime, violence, rape, misogyny, materialism and drug consumption. Besides these accusations regarding deliberate encouragement of socially undesirable behaviours, rap has been accused of perpetuating a negative image of African Americans, possibly feeding the widespread prejudice towards them.

**Opponents** to these criticisms cite the right to freedom of speech, also highlighting how this music portrays the real life of unprivileged young Black men. Blaming it for the prejudice against them would mean blaming the messenger, completely ignoring the real issue of discrimination that originally was its terrain of growth. Rap provides firstly an outlet for protest, a tool to communicate an important and problematic side of the African American experience, secondly a way out of misery for many young musicians, living on the brink of criminality. Although one may agree with the importance of giving exposure to these themes, the issue in consideration is the image gangsta rap creates and its consequences on the broader societal level.

As far as **music and society** are concerned, the African American community is well aware of the social value of music and its power as a path to social rehabilitation. Music has always been a crucial part of the African American identity and tradition, in addition to being an occasion for social gathering and a vehicle of social protest, since the times of slavery chants until the recent developments in hip hop, passing by the experience of the joint rise

of jazz and civil rights movement.

## Afropunk: "the other back experience"

In line with this trend, **Afropunk Festival** was born in 2005 in Brooklyn with the intention to celebrate the black identity and community through a glimpse of its creative outputs, especially music. The purpose of Afropunk is to build a positive image of the black community, highlighting its creativity, resilience and solidarity, fighting against the prejudice that haunts contemporary America and is at the root of system-wise discrimination. From a simple weekend in the park, the Festival has evolved into a complex manifestation of alternative black music and culture, expanding to other American and European cities. From a do-it-yourself initiative it has grown into a full-fledged, brand-sponsored festival, including music acts ranging from rising black artists to established acts such as Janelle Monae, Grace Jones, Lauryn Hill and many more.

Nowadays Afropunk strives to impose itself as a platform to empower the Black community worldwide. Taking into account the social activist nature of the project, it provides an interesting case to focus on the management and implementation of **art as a tool for social change**, a topic that often escapes the research of management since it involves non-economic goals. If on one side there has been a scarce interest on social goals from the management perspective, on the other side the design and implementation of actions directed towards social goals is often subject to scarce scientific documentation and rare result measurement. The insights on of the dynamics of [prejudice](#) formation and strengthening through music exposure provided by *social psychology* will be exploited to propose an effective strategy to prejudice reduction applied to the case of Afropunk Festival.

## Prejudice reduction techniques and their application to Afropunk Festival

**Intergroup approaches**, such as contact hypothesis and re-categorization, are based on the interaction among groups in different settings and modalities. They are proven to be more effective than individual approaches, confirming the effectiveness of adopting prejudice-reduction strategies in social occasion settings, bringing together different social groups.

Considering the effects of [stereotype](#)s on Blacks by Blacks, proven to hinder performance and damage self-perception of African Americans, providing an occasion to celebrate the positive achievements and identity of the Black community serves the prejudice reduction goals. Nevertheless, promoting a different narrative on African Americans by themselves only is not enough to fight against *[discrimination](#)*, implemented by a majority of Whites. Therefore, Afropunk must attempt to attract a white audience, whose presence is a

prerequisite to the application of contact hypothesis.

## Contact hypothesis

Generally speaking, **contact hypothesis** refers to the approach of bringing holders of prejudice together with members of the prejudiced group, over a well-defined time frame. The effectiveness of this approach is subordinated to the presence of specific conditions: groups must possess equal status; the interaction among groups must be aimed at a positive perception; relationship must be cooperative instead of competitive and oriented towards the achievement of common goals; the contact must happen under a social climate or authority supporting intergroup contact. As far as Afropunk is concerned, the participation to a common festive experience provides the ideal setting to organize activities aimed at collaboration, while the underlying philosophy of the Festival should be enough to ensure the creation of a social climate sanctioning aggression, stereotyping or discriminatory behaviour and favouring encounter and discussion.

In addition to activities targeting the adult audience, the Festival could propose activities targeting the younger audience, following the strategy of **cooperative learning**: as the research by Neto et al. suggested music education seems to have a long prejudice reduction effect on children, while the design of cooperative learning, in which participants to didactic activities must teach and learn from one another, provides common goals and a collaborative climate, optimal conditions for the effectiveness of contact hypothesis.

## Social identity and categorization theories

Social identity and categorization theories recommend interventions that break and reshape social boundaries among groups to reduce prejudice among them. Of all the different shapes that this branch can take, the most relevant one is probably **recategorization**. Once again, engaging in cooperative tasks helps build a common identity, influencing the cognitive representation of the group through a re-categorization to a "we" rather than "us" and "them", resulting in a perceived group homogeneity that reduces prejudice.

In the case of Afropunk, the communication should probably promote a wider group identity by advocating the fight against all kind of discrimination and injustice, similarly to what the motto of the Festival already states (see annexes), or by adopting material cues such as the sale of merchandising (which once worn signals the affiliation to the same values of Afropunk, of Blacks and White alike). Finally, fostering White participation equally, Afropunk could design a series of concerts having Black and White artists collaborating, bringing fans together in a welcoming setting and encouraging the creation of a common identity. This strategy is possibly better conceptualized under the label of cross-categorization, since it creates a third category (a superordinate category of "Afropunk goer"), while maintaining the pre-existent ones.

With respects to the **social identity** theory, the positive effects of the association between gypsies and flamenco suggest a similar strategy for the program of Afropunk, which could include acts that associate the Black minority to a positive feature of their identity, namely jazz. In fact, jazz is currently drawing new energy from contaminations from and to hip hop, as testified by many hip hop artist adopting jazz sounds. This fruitful contamination helps revive the creativity of jazz, but also rehabilitates rap, exposing subgenres that are characterized by their strong political messages of resilience, responsibility and justice. Associating the Black identity with jazz could activate the positive stereotype connected to this genre, thus reducing the negative prejudice against them. Therefore, Afropunk should give more relevance to these artists, while the success and media coverage of the Festival would ensure the expansion of this effect beyond the first-hand participants.

**Individual approaches to prejudice reduction**

Individual approaches are based on the action on the single subject and include interventions on instruction, expert opinion, consciousness-raising and targeting personal identity or emotion. Afropunk as a collective event cannot focus on specific individuals, but it can develop strategies that give exposure to content defying the stereotypes associated to Black people and encouraging empathic response in its fans. **Consciousness-raising** operates by bringing to light the implicit prejudice held by an individual: sometimes, it is sufficient for an individual to recognize prejudice in order to reduce it. Currently Afropunk is proposing a lively discussion on political matters, discrimination and prejudice on its social media channels. The proposed content is presented in a familiar, fun way, encouraging its diffusion and participation to debate.

Another strategy to adopt would be to favour the **recondition** of implicit attitudes and beliefs about African American by giving resonance to positive figures, those that achieved success in a number of fields, creating therefore a *positive narrative* of the Black individual and community. The repetitive exposure to positive examples through simple strategies such as naming stages after influential Black figures or dedicating homages to them in various forms could create a positive change in the implicit attitudes of Black and Whites alike. With respect to the stereotypes associated to African American in general, the climate of free self-expression that Afropunk creates has potential consequences in creating attention to the individual rather than the category, hindering stereotype application and allowing for a wider, more varied representation of contemporary Black culture.

Furthermore, the approach of **appeal to empathy** brings us to consider once again the choice of artists according to the content of their musical production. While gangsta rap does not contain any appeal to empathising with the artist or the Black condition, other forms of rap convey personal stories of struggle, sufferance and moral values. Giving priority and resonance to artists spreading positive personal narratives is therefore a possible strategy to motivate perspective taking and empathy.

# Final considerations on prejudice reduction and media

Afropunk is currently adopting an overall good strategic direction to reduce prejudice against African Americans, broadcasting their achievements and creativity in a welcoming, collaborative setting. Its biggest **limitation** at the moment resides in the scarce participation of other ethnic groups, especially the White predominant group that is mainly responsible of systemic discrimination. Regarding Black on Black prejudice, the participation to the Festival shows a high potential in empowering the Black community to fight against the threat self-prejudice poses. The exposure to positive stereotypes and positive narratives defying stereotypes is a program that can successfully reduce prejudice on Blacks in Blacks and White subjects alike. Music has the power to convey positive messages about the African American community, both from the mere exposure to worldwide valued traditions (jazz) and from the exposure to personal narratives showcasing the diversity and difficulties of the Black community in America.

It should also be noted that lately music was used in a different media outlet, **TV shows**, precisely to construct different narratives on Blacks, of course adopting (whether deliberately or not) individual approaches to prejudice reduction. These narratives can defy the stereotypical depiction for the use of an extremely wide audience: for example, *Marvel's Luke Cage* (2016) by Netflix and Donald Glover's *Atlanta* (2016) on FX are both portraying alternative Black heroes, characterized by their resilience to the difficulties posed by life in underprivileged, crime-riddled neighbourhoods. Interestingly, music plays an important role in both of them: while Luke Cage is set Harlem, displaying the best of jazz-inspired modern music production, Atlanta revolves around the sudden success of a gangsta rapper.

## Definitions of social psychology concepts

The basic concept underlying stereotype is the one of **attitude**, which is defined as an evaluation response, negative or positive, to an object. An attitude is therefore identified by three characteristics: its object (a thing, person or aspect of the social world), its direction (positive or negative) and its strength (weaker or stronger intensity). Attitudes are developed through our experiences in the world (behavioural dimension), our emotional responses (emotional dimension) and our knowledge of the world (cognitive dimension), factors that explain the strong influence of repeated media depictions in attitude formation.

**Stereotype** is a cognitive attitude about a specific category that is not based on reality-grounded experience or knowledge but on impressions, beliefs and generalizations. Similarly to regular attitudes, stereotypes can be positive or negative. They are often learnt through culture and media, once again confirming the importance of media representations, and can be accurate or inaccurate in depicting reality. In fact, stereotypes are a manifestation of one of the fundamental mechanisms of human mind, namely *categorization*: humans organize, structure and perceive reality through categories, which reduce the

cognitive effort by providing an easily accessible heuristics. Categories, in their essential kernel, are based on a comparison between the similarities and differences among objects or people, which in the social world leads to accentuate the differences between groups (intergroup) and the similarities inside groups (intragroup).

Social stereotypes are related to social groups and are at the source of prejudice: **prejudice** is in fact the emotional response associated to individuals or groups because of their affinity to a social group or category. Very often intragroup prejudices are positive, creating a bias or in-group favouritism, while intergroup prejudices are more frequently negative, providing a justification for the existing social structure. Being an emotional response, prejudice can be ambivalent: an individual can hold at the time a positive and a negative prejudice towards the same social category.

Stereotype and prejudice are the foundation for **discrimination**, a behaviour that consists in treating people differently because of their affiliation to a social category or group. Discrimination can be positive, resulting in someone being treated more favourably because of group membership (as in-group favouritism), while negative discrimination results in people being treated less favourably, resulting in a limitation of choices, rights, mobility or access to information for the discriminated group.

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