

BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN PEOPLE WITH AND WITHOUT INTELLECTUAL DISABILITY: INSIGHTS FROM CONTACT THEORY

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Policy Context

- Goal of inclusion has been central to service policy
- Inclusion is more than community presence
 - associated with individual rights and social justice
 - being part of the social networks of people without intellectual disability

Current Context

- Social exclusion continues
- Social networks remain restricted
 - Interaction with wider community casual rather than personal and meaningful
 - Prejudicial attitudes unchallenged
- Assumed link in many programs that contact will lead to changed attitudes and positive attitudes
- This assumption needs to be tested

Contact theory

- Literature review shows limited testing of contact theory in intellectual disability
- Contact theory suggests that through certain types of contact, prejudice is diminished and the way opened for a more inclusive society
- Contact theory is a way of understanding the processes involved when a dominant group holds negative attitudes towards a minority group

Allport's ideal conditions

Prejudice is a “pattern of hostility in interpersonal relations which is directed against an entire group or against its individual members” (Allport, 1954).

- equal status
- mutually rewarding
- personal
- persists over time
- focus of mutual goals
- support from authority

Contact in unfavorable conditions

- Unfavorable conditions are more likely to reinforce negative perceptions and stereotyping
- Casual contact is more likely to increase rather than decrease prejudice

Dimensions of contact

- Quantitative aspects (frequency, duration)
- Status aspects (inferior, equal, superior)
- Role aspects (competitive or cooperative)
- Social atmosphere (real/artificial, voluntary/involuntary)
- Individual factors (personality)
- Areas of contact (casual, residential, recreational)

Findings –general population

- Prejudice has a common structure (Akrami et al. 2006; Pettigrew and Tropp, 2006)
- Ideal conditions function as interrelated bundle
- There is a consistent relationship between intergroup contact and positive attitudinal change (Harrington and Miller, 1992; Pettigrew 1971)

Findings – general population

- Some forms of contact have been shown to reinforce negative stereotyping and prejudiced beliefs
 - when it produces competition rather than cooperation
 - is unpleasant, involuntary or tension laden
 - involves proximity without meaningful contact

Mediation factors

- Early studies emphasized increased knowledge
- Recent research has found that anxiety and empathy are more important mediators (Pettigrew and Tropp, 2006)
- Knowledge and empathy are unrelated (Brown and Hewstone, 2005; Stephan and Stephan, 1985)
- These only explain about half of the contact-prejudice association (Pettigrew and Tropp, 2008)
- An 'enlightened climate' has a direct impact on the personal attitudes that individuals hold (Lee et al. 2004)

Vicarious contact

- Vicarious contact (having an in-group friend who has an out-group friend)
- Vicarious contact reduces prejudice at levels comparable to having direct contact (Pettigrew, 2007)
- Friendship networks provide social context for tolerant norms to develop across a community (Wright et al. 1997)

Studies- children with disability

- Increased contact decreases prejudice
- Consistent gender effect
- Positive endorsement of authority figures
- De-emphasizing disability has a positive effect

Studies- children with disability

- Structured activities that foster cooperative interaction important (Maras and Brown, 2000; Rynders et al. 2000)
- Some situations can accentuate difference
- Sensitivity to competence
- Sensitivity to level of social skills and socially appropriate behavior (Fishbein, 2002)

Friendship Choices

- Positive attitudes did not impact on friendship choices
- Those with disabilities consistently rated unfavorably in socio-metric play or friend intention
- This was found with young children and also adolescents

Contact and intellectual disability: Adult studies

- Contact often used as a variable but lacking consistency in how it is understood and measured
- Consistent patterns
 - Common structure of prejudice
 - Regular structured contact leads to more positive attitudes
 - Length of exposure important
 - Proximity reinforces negative stereotypes

Contact and intellectual disability: Adult studies

- Consistent patterns

- Reduction of anxiety most important mediator
- Initial experience crucial in determining attitudes toward inclusion
- Not necessarily related to level of disability

Issues specific to disability studies and contact

- Lack of impact on reported friendship choices
- Role of the professional
- Difficulties in creating equal status conditions
- Sensitivity to competence and social skills (in children's studies)

Implications for research

- Need for more research about
 - the mediating factors that facilitate positive attitudes
 - how to create the link between attitudinal change and friendship intention
- Need for consistency in the way that contact is understood and measured
- Differentiate between meaningful contact and proximity

Implications for research

- Certain types of contact will lead to more positive attitudes but the development of ongoing relationships requires more than contact alone.
- Programs that address Allport's ideal contact conditions more likely to be successful

References

