

Discuss explanations and research studies relating to the reduction of prejudice and/or discrimination

Prejudice is an extreme attitude which can be either positive or negative. Research which focuses on reducing prejudice focuses on hostile prejudices. Discrimination is the behavioural component of prejudice.

The contact hypothesis proposed by Allport (1954) aims to reduce prejudice by promoting equal status contact between majority and minority groups. Allport emphasised the importance of the role of institutional support when initiating and maintaining such contact. For example, equal status contact between two opposing groups can be supervised by local community leaders or law enforcers. Another key aspect of the contact hypothesis is that both parties should work towards a common goal. Supervised contact should lead to the defining of shared interests and common ground between the opposing groups.

Equal status contact is a key facet of the contact hypothesis. When groups are separated (segregated) they lose touch with what is really going on in the other group. This ignorance is likely to lead to negative interpretations of the other group's behaviour, which will also lead to the reinforcement of negative stereotypes. This maintains the 'them and us' mentality of segregated parties. As there is no contact between the groups, the perceived gap between them widens to the extent to which group members believe they are less similar to the other group (the outgroup) and are more similar to the group to which they belong (the ingroup). The aim of the contact hypothesis is to bring the two groups together, thus reducing the perception of differences between the groups and increasing the similarities. Thus, prejudice and discrimination between the groups is diminished.

Bronfenbrenner (1960) identified the mirror-image phenomenon, which describes one group as seeing themselves as being in the right and the other group as being in the wrong. Both groups tend to attribute negative characteristics to the other. By increasing contact between the two groups, the illusion of outgroup homogeneity (that is, the perception that all the members of the outgroup possess the same characteristics) is reduced. Therefore, the underlying prejudice and discrimination is reduced.

Research generally agrees that increased contact on its own will not reduce prejudice. For contact to be successful, equal status contact is required. One study which supports this is Deutsch & Collins (1951), who found that residents of a housing project which was thoroughly racially integrated had a greater amount of neighbourly and casual contact than residents of a similarly matched housing project where the racial groups were segregated. Significantly, there was a corresponding decrease in prejudice from whites towards blacks in the integrated project compared to the segregated project.

However, Amir (1969) found that interracial attitudes between black and white soldiers were good when the soldiers served together in battle, but relationships between the two groups at base camp were not harmonious. This demonstrates that prejudice and discrimination cannot be overcome by equal status contact alone.

Clearly fundamental changes in intergroup relationships are required to reduce prejudice. If contact between groups is at an individual level, i.e. between one member of each side of a group, then reduction in discrimination and prejudice only occurs for that particular individual: it does not generalise to other group members. We also need to examine the wider context in which the prejudice occurs, for example, by trying to undo historical and economic reasons for particular discriminations. This is a difficult concept to tackle as

prejudice and discrimination are multifaceted and reflected at all levels in society in many different ways.

Co-operative situations, where group members work towards common (superordinate) goals, is another method by which prejudice can be reduced. Aronson (1978) created the 'jigsaw' method, an attempt to create equal status contact and mutual cooperation in the classroom. Using this technique, interracial groups of children are reliant upon each member of that group to understand and communicate key information about a lesson. The jigsaw method has achieved good results in reducing prejudice. According to Aronson (1999, 2000), it consistently enhances students' self-esteem, improves academic performance, increases liking for classmates, and improves interracial perception.

However, while this research has shown that the interpersonal relationships between the children had improved, this did not necessarily translate into improvements for intergroup relations. The positive experiences learnt from equal status contact working towards a common goal with one member of a racial group did not generalise to all members of that ethnic group. However, most studies using the jigsaw method are small-scale and relatively short-term, however, so it is hard to understand the long-term impact this may have.

Creating superordinate goals may sometimes increase hostility between groups, particularly if the group does not meet its goal. This leads to internal blame which can increase the divide between the groups.

Prejudice and discrimination can also be reduced if we understand their source. According to the authoritarian personality explanation of the origins of prejudice, if we change the personality structure of the prejudiced individual, then this negative attitude will decrease. However, this is only theoretically possible and would prove difficult to orchestrate in practical terms. Alternatively, if prejudice arises from frustration which then leads to aggression, then preventing frustration or providing safe ways for people to vent their frustration would help reduce prejudice. However, this is perhaps only treating the problem at the surface level.

Consequently, prejudice reduction is a complex issue. Allport's contact hypothesis has provided one method of reducing certain types of discrimination but does not seem to tackle the roots of the issue. Prejudice and discrimination run deep through all layers of society and many of these attitudes have their roots in history. Therefore, a radical method would be required to eradicate some deep-seated prejudices. Others could be overcome through interventions such as proposed by the contact hypothesis, but these seem only to be effective at the individual level.