

# Research on Prejudice Reduction

Research shows that people who accept themselves are likely to accept others and that, if conditions are right, social contacts can improve relations among races.

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Most of the writing on prejudice has described and documented the types and extent of prejudice or prescribed what to do about it. Surprisingly little empirical research has been reported on the subject. Fortunately, however, there have been some productive studies on which we can base generalizations.

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1. *Facts or information about another group are not sufficient to change attitudes.*

The most common approach to combating prejudice is to increase one group's knowledge about another group—on the assumption that if we have accurate information, we will not hold misconceptions and false stereotypes. As long ago as 1946, a few people recognized that this is an ineffective approach. "Perhaps the most glaring defect of intercultural education as it functions at present is that it is geared for the most part only to intellectual values. It assumes—an assumption yet to be empirically confirmed—that ignorance is the real barrier, that the truth will set men free, that the objective facts about race and race prejudice are sufficient automatically to eliminate bias and suspicion and hatred" (Glucksberg, 1946). Similar conclusions were later reached by Trager and Yarrow (1952) in studying prejudices expressed by children.

Tansik and Driskill (1977) discovered negative changes in racial attitudes held by supervisors at a military base. The supervisors who attended a required training course, viewed the message as manipulative and propagandist. If we require such an experience for students, we need to be careful about how we package and present the program.

"Facts do not speak for themselves; rather they are interpreted through the experience and biases of those hearing them" (Morland, 1963, p. 125). Knowledge *alone* will not reduce prejudice; knowledge is something of a prerequisite to prejudice reduction, not the sole means.

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2. *Class prejudice may be stronger than racial or religious prejudice.*

Perhaps if white people do not like Blacks, it is not because of racial differences, but because Blacks are perceived as being poor and of a lower class. As Clore and his associates (1978) discovered in a study of interracial attitudes and behavior at a summer camp, "One of the most stubborn obstacles to positive changes in racial attitudes is the brute fact of class differences between Blacks and Whites. Blacks as a group do not enjoy the same economic positions as Whites and are, therefore, associated in fact and fantasy with the characteristics of lower class membership" (p. 107).

In an exhaustive study of prejudice among adolescents, class prejudice was an extremely strong factor (Glock and others, 1975). "These results identify a significant element of class prejudice in racial social distance just as the earlier results demonstrated the importance of class prejudice in teenagers' expression of social distance toward Jews" (p. 137). The power of class prejudice presents a tremendous challenge to society and schools. As Glock and others point out, "Unfortunately, it is not possible to sort out what is uniquely racial in racial social distance from what is class-based. The presence of both elements, however, makes it probable that, as the social status of Blacks improves, some reduction in gross prejudice is to be expected" (p. 138). The improvement in the social status of Blacks is slow and in fact is retarded by prejudice. Thus we have a vicious cycle.



3. *An individual who has a high degree of self-acceptance will likely have a low degree of prejudice.*

This point is in line with the theory that you cannot like other people if you do not like yourself. Research substantiates the relationship between self-concept and prejudicial attitudes. Rubin (1967) verified the correlation between self-acceptance and prejudice in an experimental study. More important, he was able to increase one group's self-acceptance and observed a significant decrease in prejudice.

In a sophisticated laboratory experiment, Cook (1972) compared

individuals who changed their attitudes in a positive direction with people who did not change. The primary difference was that those who changed held positive attitudes toward people in general. Those who changed also scored higher on self-esteem measures. Probably the most effective approach schools can take to combat prejudice is to improve students' self-concept.



4. *Students who work in interracial learning teams develop positive attitudes and cross-ethnic friendships.*

Of great relevance to classroom procedures are the findings of Weigel and others (1975). They studied the impact of two different teaching methods in seventh- and ninth-grade classrooms—the traditional whole-class method and a method designed to foster intragroup cooperation. The latter teaching technique involved the formation of small, ethnically heterogeneous groups that shared goals and rewards. Intergroup competition was used to foster intragroup cooperation. The small-group competition was better evaluated and endorsed by the teachers and resulted in greater cross-ethnic friendship choices. Comparable findings were reported by Cohen (1973) and Slavin (1979).

The implications of the cross-ethnic learning teams must be taken with a caveat, however: it is extremely important that the group experience success. This caution is expressed by Cohen (1973) and Weigel and others (1975), who concluded from reviewing the literature on the success-failure variable that "Greater group attraction occurs under conditions of group success than group failure and that subjects may exhibit increased prejudice if the interracial group is unsuccessful" (p. 773).



5. *The cognitive, affective, and behavioral components of prejudice are not necessarily related.*

One of the primary shortcomings of prejudice reduction programs in schools is confusion as to the exact nature of the objectives. Are we trying to change what students know and how they think, what attitudes they hold, or how they act? Programs that focus on the cognitive, such as

teaching information about ethnic groups, do not necessarily change students' affective and behavior dimensions of prejudice.

We might expect that the way people think, their attitudes, and their behavior would be closely related; research indicates that this is not always true. Studies by Merz and Pearlman (1972) and by Mann (1972) show that one of the three dimensions may change while the other two dimensions remain constant.

A study of the literature also identifies a controversy over cause and effect. Some writers believe that attitudes determine behavior while others feel that attitudes adjust to be consistent with behavior, even though the behavior may have initially been forced. Schools should target their prejudice-reducing efforts toward any of the three dimensions without expecting unrealistic results in the other dimensions. It is important for schools to deliberately focus their objectives and not attempt to reduce prejudice in general with vague and unclear objectives.



6. *Films and other media improve students' attitudes.*

Most teachers are familiar with the power of audiovisual techniques, and the application of these techniques to attitude modification is no exception. I remember the effect on my eighth grade students of the film, "The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman."

In addition to the overall effectiveness of film, Kraus (1972) found that an integrated cast had more effect than either an all-white or all-black cast. Kraus also summarized research on changing attitudes (primarily racial) through media (primarily film), and developed certain generalizations. The core of these is that the intended objectives and knowledge of the audience must be clear and specific.

In a study of two experimental groups and a control group, Houser (1978) found that audiovisual media was an effective instructional approach and that the group which had viewed the most films gave significantly fewer prejudicial responses. While most of us are prepared to accept the power of media, no studies are available that accept the long-term effects of these approaches.

7. *Social contacts may reduce prejudice under certain conditions.*

There is substantial information in the literature to suggest a relationship between social contact and prejudice. Social contact may be one of the essential conditions for reducing prejudice if the contact is positive. However, social contact is not a panacea for eliminating the widespread effects of prejudice. It may be either positive or negative, favorable or unfavorable.

In general, contact between different racial or ethnic groups does indeed reduce prejudice if certain conditions of the contact are met. Excellent overviews of the research are given by Amir (1972), Mack (1970), and Selltiz and Cook (1963). According to Selltiz and Cook (p. 159), "It appears that personal association with members of an ethnic group other than one's own generally leads to favorable changes in attitude toward that group—if the following conditions hold:"

- There is an opportunity to get to know one another as individuals.
- The individuals in the two groups have equal status in the situation. This point has been verified using college students (Cook, 1972), merchant seamen (Brophy, 1946), department store employees (Harding and Hogrefe, 1952), housing projects (Deutsch and Collins, 1951), soldiers (Stouffer, 1949; and Mack and Duster, 1964), and was pioneered as a crucial variable by Allport (1954).
- They have common interests and similar characteristics such as age or occupation.
- The social norms are favorable to association between the two groups.

The social climate established by the leaders or authority figures in a situation, especially in school settings, is part of and largely determines the social norms. The importance of climate has been established by Fishman and Fishman (1977) in working with Jewish youth on racial attitudes and by Bennett (1979) in studying friendship patterns. Selltiz and Cook (1963, p. 160) state, "One of the most solidly supported findings about intergroup contact is that the social climate within which it

takes place—and especially the standards and the example set by leaders in the situation—strongly influence the outcome."

- The circumstances of the situation favor cooperation or at least do not introduce competition or conflict. This point is reinforced by the findings on the effects of learning teams discussed earlier.
- The presence or the activities of members of the two groups help in the achievement of the individual's goals, or at least do not present an obstacle to them. This principle is supported by the early work of All-



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port (1954) and more recently by Amir (1972).

Many of the conditions which are thought to reduce prejudice may also serve to increase prejudice when misapplied. Conditions that reflect competition, ethnocentrism, differing absolute values and beliefs that are objectionable to others, poor education and socioeconomic class differences (Amir, 1972; Rose, 1974) may also lead to more prejudice.

Obviously there are many contact situations that do not meet the criteria for positive effects, and there is research to support negative results.

Kramer (1950) studied housing patterns and found that Whites living close to a black neighborhood had stronger hostile feelings toward Blacks than did Whites who lived a greater distance from the neighborhood. Fairchild and Gurin (1978, p. 763) reviewed research and found, "Studies in privately owned residential areas revealed a sharply contrasting (with public housing) set of outcomes. Despite varying methodologies and locations, the trend of the research during the early 1950s clearly indicated a pattern of initial and continuing hostility on the part

of the White residents." Carithers (1970, p. 41) also summarized research and reported, "There is no general agreement about the effects of interracial contact on attitude change. Some studies have found heightened tolerance; some heightened resistance; some no change. There seems to be, however, a general agreement that racial contact per se will not bring about increased tolerance or acceptance." However, these negative findings and opinions do not detract from the contact theory; rather, they underline the need for the essential conditions of

contact to be met.

Positive social contact can result in students' becoming less sensitive about their differences and less critical and less judgmental about the differences of others. Teachers can help reduce prejudice in the classroom by minimizing conditions that promote prejudiced feelings and behaviors. Students can be encouraged to work together harmoniously, rather than separately, on various classroom assignments. Criteria for grouping can be based on obvious differences as well as on the attainments and abilities of students. Also, since teachers are critical in influencing student behaviors, teachers should consider further modeling the behaviors and forming the diverse associations that they expect of their students.

In light of the reported research, it appears that we have some substantial knowledge about the reduction of prejudice. In spite of this, several salient questions remain for which we need answers in order to promote a prejudice-free society:

- It is quite possible that a prejudice or tendency to stereotype serves a psychological function. If we are able to remove prejudice within an individual, do we need to replace it with something else to serve the function? If so, with what?

- Is there an age at which prejudice stabilizes? Is there an age beyond which it is virtually impossible to change a person's attitudes? There is current speculation that early adolescence is a crucial period.

- Most of the studies that demonstrate effective prejudice reducing techniques have been conducted in controlled, experimental settings. Are these findings maintained under "real world" conditions? Can we effectively manipulate the "real world" environment?

- Virtually no studies attempt to measure effects of prejudice reduction on a long-range basis. What are the long-term effects? If long-range effects are weak, what is the value of short-term effects?

Despite the relative lack of attention to the reduction of prejudice, there is enough knowledge available. If we are serious about developing the type of society we claim we want, we must begin to apply what we know. ■

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