



# The relationship between contact and attitudes: Reducing prejudice toward individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities



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## ABSTRACT

Increases in intellectual and developmental disability (IDD) diagnoses coupled with higher rates of inclusion in school and community settings, has created more opportunities for exposure and integration between those with IDD and the mainstream population. Previous research has found that increased contact can lead to more positive attitudes toward those with IDD. The current study further investigated this impact of contact on attitudes by examining the influence of the quality and quantity of contact on both explicit and implicit levels of prejudice, while also considering potential mediation via intergroup anxiety and implicit attitudes. Based on past research and theory, we predicted that contact (especially quality contact) would have a strong relationship with explicit and implicit positive attitudes toward individuals with IDD. In the present study, 550 people completed a survey and short task that measured their level of contact with individuals with IDD across their lifetime, their current attitudes toward these individuals, and other constructs that are thought to influence this relationship. Multiple regression analyses suggested consistent links between higher quality of contact and lower levels of prejudice toward individuals with IDD at both the explicit and implicit levels. After controlling for quality of contact, higher quantity of contact was either not significantly associated with our measures of prejudice or was, importantly, associated with higher levels of prejudice. Additional analyses support intergroup anxiety and implicit positive attitudes as significant mediators in the associations between quality of contact and the various dimensions of explicit prejudice. Thus, it would seem that it is the quality of interpersonal interactions that is most strongly related to positive attitudes toward individuals with IDD, making it crucial to take care when developing inclusion opportunities in community settings.

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## 1. Introduction

The prevalence of individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) in the United States is estimated to range from 4.6 to 7.7 million (Larson et al., 2000; Morstad, 2012). Changes in inclusive education, workplace integration, and individualized support programs have created a community that allows for more exposure and interaction between the mainstream population and those with IDD (Metzel & Walker, 2001). Because integration is present across a variety of

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settings, it is essential to understand the positive and negative outcomes of increased interaction. While increases in inclusion have had many positive effects (Odom, Buysse, & Soukakou, 2011), these effects may be attenuated by residual prejudice and discrimination toward those with IDD. Past studies have found compelling evidence that suggests that prejudice negatively impacts those with IDD, leading to a devaluation of themselves, mistrust in systems that show social stigma, difficulty feeling like a part of a broader community, and distancing from other individuals with IDD (Jahoda & Markova, 2004; Metzel & Walker, 2001). Similarly, in a paper on mental illness, Corrigan and Watson (2002) emphasized how stereotypes and prejudice can take away opportunities including good jobs, safe housing, adequate health care, and the ability to interact with a diverse group of people. In addition, Corrigan et al. (2003) found that stigmatized individuals suffered from low self-esteem and demoralization as a result of internalizing this stigma. Continued research is needed to increase understanding of prejudice toward individuals with IDD in an effort to reduce these negative attitudes and the deleterious effects that can result from prejudice and discrimination.

A classic theory on prejudice, the intergroup contact hypothesis, addresses the way in which exposure to a dissimilar group of individuals, termed the out-group, can lead to a reduction in negative attitudes toward that group (Allport, 1954/1979). This theory proposes that interacting with members of another group can lead to an increase in positive feelings if certain conditions are met, such as shared goals, equal status, cooperation, and institutional support. Following Hewstone and Brown's publication of *Contact and Conflict in Intergroup Encounters*, several studies have furthered the contact hypothesis by analyzing key components of inclusive opportunities that lead to varying levels of decreased prejudice in a diverse range of populations. This theory has been used as a framework in research on prejudice for the past several decades. For example, the principles of this theory were present in studies investigating racial prejudice between Muslims and Hindus (Islam & Hewstone, 1993), cross-group friendship between White and South Asian elementary school children (Turner, Voci, & Hewstone, 2007), prejudice toward other nationalities (Pettigrew, 1997), and attitudes toward gay men (Vonofakou, Hewstone, & Voci, 2007).

The intergroup contact hypothesis has also been used as a guiding framework in research on prejudice toward individuals with IDD. Manetti, Schneider, and Siperstein (2001) investigated the acceptance of students with intellectual disabilities by their peers, by comparing children's attitudes in elementary schools that did or did not have programs to foster interaction between groups. They found that children who had regular contact with peers with intellectual disabilities had more positive attitudes toward IDD than children who did not have regular contact. The former group reported more positive attitudes toward hypothetical peers with IDD and also reported that they enjoyed their interactions with their classmates with IDD, but in psychometric analyses showed unfavorable views toward the less socially skilled students with a disability. The school that fostered inclusion also found that their students placed less weight on the disability-status of a classmate when forming impressions than the students in the comparison school. Piercy, Wilton, and Townsend (2002) emphasize the importance of cooperative-learning procedures through the results of a 10-week inclusion program that produced social acceptance of typically developing children toward classmates with moderate to severe intellectual disabilities. The authors found that feelings of peer acceptance and popularity indices increased more after children worked together on a cooperative learning task than in conditions in which there was mere exposure or no contact at all. This finding is important as it shows that meaningful, non-superficial contact can occur between typically developing children and those with moderate to severe IDD.

The studies above suggest that both the quality and the quantity of contact may be central to changing attitudes toward IDD. When the type of contact was specifically analyzed, quality and quantity of contact were often found to have significant and different effects on perceptions of and attitudes toward out-group members. Islam and Hewstone (1993) used an integrative model to show how varying dimensions of contact between Muslim and Hindu participants affected prejudice toward their respective out-groups. The authors developed a comprehensive scale that assessed quantitative and qualitative aspects of contact, finding that quantity of contact decreased the perceived homogeneity of the group, while quality of contact was the main factor affecting attitudes toward the minority group. Looking at variations in contact with individuals with IDD, McManus, Feyes, and Saucier (2010), found that quantity of contact was not associated with attitudes, whereas quality of contact was related to more positive attitudes. Based on past research, the specific influence that the quality of contact has on prejudice toward individuals with IDD above and beyond the quantity of that contact (and vice versa) is unclear and needs further study.

Examining possible mediators in the relationship between contact and prejudice increases our understanding of the mechanisms by which contact may influence attitudes. This is important as it may help to maximize the benefits of inclusion when developing integration opportunities. Past research examining indirect effects in the association between contact and prejudice identified intergroup anxiety as an important mediator (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2008; Voci & Hewstone, 2003). Stephan and Stephan (1985) described intergroup anxiety as the uncomfortable feeling individuals may have while interacting with an out-group member. They posited that this anxiety may be a result of poor past experiences with a person from an out-group, which produce negative expectancies of future interactions. These difficult feelings can lead to a dislike or avoidance of the interaction or even of the out-group members themselves (Plant & Devine, 2003). Voci and Hewstone (2003) discussed the influence of contact on attitudes toward immigrants and found that intergroup anxiety may mediate this relationship with less anxiety leading to decreased prejudice. Similarly, Crowson and Brandes (2010) reported that quality of contact indirectly predicted attitudes toward inclusion of students with disabilities through intergroup anxiety. While some research has investigated the role of intergroup anxiety in a model between contact and prejudice, further research is needed to better understand this construct as it relates to prejudice toward individuals with IDD, as it may serve as a crucial point of intervention in this relationship.

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