



# Tackling stigma associated with intellectual disability among the general public: A study of two indirect contact interventions



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## ABSTRACT

Although evidence abounds that people with intellectual disabilities are exposed to stigma and discrimination, few interventions have attempted to tackle stigma among the general public. This study set out to assess the impact of two brief indirect contact interventions on lay people's inclusion attitudes, social distance and positive behavioral intentions, and to explore emotional reactions towards the two interventions. 925 participants completed the first online survey. Participants were randomized to watch either a 10 min film based on intergroup contact theory, or a film based on a protest message. In total, 403 participants completed the follow-up survey at one month. Both interventions were effective at changing inclusion attitudes and social distance in the short term and these effects were partially maintained at one month. The protest based intervention had a greater effect compared to the contact one on aspects of inclusion attitudes and evoked stronger emotional reactions. Despite small effect sizes, brief indirect contact interventions may have a potential role in tackling public stigma associated with intellectual disability but their effects on behavioral intentions are questionable.

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## 1. Introduction

The International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health (ICF) has suggested that 'disability' is defined according to environmental or contextual factors, and that negative societal attitudes are one of the most disabling factors for people with disabilities (World Health Organisation, 2001). Negative attitudes undoubtedly influence societal responses and research in intellectual disabilities has tended to focus on prejudicial attitudes (Werner, Corrigan, Ditchman, & Sokol, 2012). However, the concept of stigma can offer a broader perspective that does justice to the experiences of people with disabilities. Stigma is an overarching term used to describe three elements: problems of knowledge (ignorance), attitudes (prejudice) and behavior (discrimination) (Thornicroft, Rose, Kassam, & Sartorius, 2007). The present study focused on stigma processes in the general population, referred to as 'public stigma' (Link et al., 1997).

While self-reported attitudes towards people with intellectual disabilities in recent research appear fairly positive (e.g. Ouellette-Kuntz, Burge, Brown, & Arsenault, 2010; Scior, Kan, McLoughlin, & Sheridan, 2010), discriminatory behavior towards people with intellectual disability is an ongoing problem. There is ample evidence, for example, that people with intellectual disabilities continue to experience social exclusion, limited social relationships, very lower rates of employment,

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and a reduced likelihood of participating in community based activities (Verdonschot, de Witte, Reichrath, Buntinx, & Curfs, 2009). In many cases, people with intellectual disabilities who participate in community activities are subject to hostility from non-disabled peers and find this experience stressful (Cummins & Lau, 2003; Stalker & Lerpiniere, 2009). More recently, researchers and disability rights campaigners have drawn attention to hate crimes committed against people with intellectual disabilities, alongside frequent instances of bullying, abuse and harassment (Fyson & Kitson, 2010; Quarmby, 2008; Sheikh et al., 2010; Sin et al., 2009). Hence it would seem that there remains a problem of societal attitudes which are sanctioning discriminatory behaviors in some way. Some have gone as far as proposing that “casual disablism permeates our society” (Quarmby, 2008, p. 32).

Finding effective ways of challenging negative attitudes and discriminatory behaviors should be a priority for researchers in intellectual disabilities. As recent theoretical evidence suggests that the constructs of prejudice and stigma overlap and complement each other (Phelan et al., 2008), interventions to challenge public stigma have drawn on theories of attitude change. For example, intergroup contact theory hypothesis (Allport, 1954; Pettigrew, 1998) posits that direct interaction between members of the in-group and out-group can improve prejudicial attitudes. Allport (1954) originally named four conditions necessary for positive attitude change, namely (a) equal status between members of different groups; (b) working cooperatively; (c) working on a common goal; and (d) the perception that the interaction receives social sanction. However, there is now considerable evidence to suggest that these conditions are not needed and contact alone, or mere exposure, can be an effective means of attitude change (Pettigrew, 1998; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006; Zajonc, 2001). Several studies have found a positive effect of direct contact on attitudes towards those with intellectual disabilities (McConkey et al., 1993; Rillotta & Nettelbeck, 2007; Roper, 1990). While direct contact is highly valuable, it can be difficult to secure on a large scale and in positive way. Potentially more promising is the use of indirect contact via film footage which has the possibility of reaching much larger audiences as part of anti-stigma interventions.

Several evaluations of indirect contact interventions show some promising results (Carsrud, Ahlgren, & Dood, 1986; Hall & Minnes, 1999; Smedema, Ebener, & Grist-Gordon, 2012). The effects of either a TV documentary or drama about a person with Down's syndrome on students' willingness to volunteer with intellectual disability services was compared by Hall and Minnes (1999). The documentary was associated with greater feelings of comfort and increased willingness to volunteer intentions (Hall & Minnes, 1999). The authors explained these differences with reference to the perceived authority of the presenter in the documentary and to differences in the way information was presented. Unfortunately, these results are limited by a small sample size ( $N = 92$  split across a control and two intervention groups) and lack of repeated measures design. A study by Smedema et al. (2012) found that a humorous film resulted in more positive attitudes than a film promoting ideas of similarity and inclusion or a control film. The authors suggested that humor provides a non-threatening and less anxiety provoking means of communicating information about disability (Smedema et al., 2012). Their study unfortunately did not assess emotional reactions, which are important to bear in mind in designing stigma change interventions. Social psychological research has suggested that dramatic portrayals (i.e. via film) promote persuasion by creating an experiential learning situation, engendering an empathic emotional response, and encouraging inferential processes in the viewer (Stern, 1994). Furthermore, there is evidence from social marketing campaigns that persuasion occurs by creating an emotional response in the viewer (Joffe, 2008).

Existing indirect contact interventions (Carsrud et al., 1986; Hall & Minnes, 1999; Smedema et al., 2012) have provided positive portrayals of people with intellectual disabilities integrated into their communities and closely match Allport's (1954) conditions of contact. An alternative intervention is known as 'protest', which highlights the injustice of stigma and creates a moral appeal for people to change their beliefs (Corrigan & Penn, 1999; Corrigan et al., 2001). At present, empirical evidence does not support the application of protest interventions to influence mental illness stigma (Corrigan et al., 2001; Macrae, Bodenhausen, Milne, & Jetten, 1994; Thornton & Wahl, 1996). However, an experimental study found that protest could influence attitudes (Penn & Corrigan, 2002), and as such, warrants further research. Therefore, this paper will consider the potential of protest messages delivered via indirect contact, as a way of tackling stigma towards people with intellectual disabilities.

Behavioral intentions are considered a precursor of actual behavior (Ajzen, 1991). Research has shown that behavioral intentions predict around 40% of the variance in actual behavior (Armitage & Conner, 2001). Thus assessing the impact of any intervention on behavioral intentions is important, yet to date only one study in the intellectual disability field has expanded the assessment of stigma change to include a measure of potential behavior (Hall & Minnes, 1999).

The present study aimed to explore the impact of indirect contact, that is exposure to individuals with intellectual disabilities via the medium of film, on public stigma towards people with intellectual disabilities. In order to rectify gaps in the evidence, the study used a measure of not only external stigma (inclusion attitudes) and social distance, but also positive behavioral intentions. Data were collected at baseline, immediately post intervention and at one month follow-up to assess whether a brief intervention can produce changes in attitudes and behavioral intentions, and importantly whether any changes are maintained over time. Emotional reactions to the interventions were compared to enhance our understanding of factors that may affect the stigma change process.

Two interventions were compared; both consisted of 10 minute films that included an expert talking head outlining what intellectual disabilities are and noting that many people with this condition are still not treated as equal citizens. One of the interventions attempted to match Allport's (1954) conditions of contact, the other one was designed to test the effects of a protest approach, by focusing on injustices, harassment and discrimination experienced by people with intellectual disabilities.

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