Mixed stereotype content and attitudes toward students with special educational needs and their inclusion in regular schools in Luxembourg

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ABSTRACT

Background: Students with special educational needs (SEN) remain one of the most socially excluded and vulnerable groups. To this extent, negative attitudes and stereotypes may impede their inclusion. Theoretical frameworks have suggested that stereotypes and attitudes elicit differential expectations and judgments, which in turn affect (social) behaviors.
Aims: In this study, we aimed to investigate the stereotypes and implicit attitudes held by a sample of Luxemburgish adults toward students with learning difficulties and challenging behavior. We also explored the adults' explicit attitudes towards inclusion.
Method and procedures: Participants ($N = 103$) completed an evaluative priming task and rated students on the stereotype dimensions of warmth and competence. In addition, they completed the German version of The Opinions Relative to Integration of Students with Disabilities questionnaire and provided demographic information.
Outcomes and results: Results showed differential stereotype content with respect to students with learning difficulties and challenging behavior. Results further indicated that participants' implicit attitudes toward both challenging behavior and learning difficulties were negative. By contrast, participants expressed positive attitudes towards inclusion.
Conclusions and implications: The results of the current study contribute to the understanding of why some people accept, whereas others reject students with SEN. Understanding prevalent stereotypes and attitudes can inform the development of targeted interventions to promote and facilitate the social inclusion of students with SEN.

What this paper adds

This study, embedded in theories of social cognition and judgment formation, provides information on the cognitive processes that could affect social behaviors, especially with respect to vulnerable social groups. More specifically, we aimed to investigate stereotypes and attitudes toward students with special educational needs (SEN) to contribute to the understanding of cognitions that may facilitate or hinder their acceptance and in turn their inclusion. Results indicate that different types of SEN are associated with different stereotype content and that, in general, automatic associations are negative. Because such cognitions affect expectations, judgments and social behaviors, this may in part explain the persistent social exclusion of students with SEN, especially students with challenging behavior. By contrast, reflective responses concerning inclusion were positive, indicating that social norms may affect

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response patterns and hence illustrate the value of including both implicit and explicit measures.

1. Introduction

To cope with the complexity of the world, people derive meaning from their perceptions and develop stereotypes and other simplifying principles for thinking about other people (Dovidio, Pagotto, & Hebl, 2011). Labelling people according to their inherent characteristics (e.g., race, gender) forms an essential basis of that process (Dovidio & Gaertner, 2010). Through socialization, people acquire knowledge about different social groups. Through repeated exposure, beliefs about salient social groups (i.e., people who share important characteristics) become well-learned stereotypes that are automatically activated (Devine, 1989).

According to the stereotype content model (Fiske, Cuddy, Glick, & Xu, 2002), stereotype content is shaped by systematic principles, whereby warmth and competence form basic dimensions of the impressions that people form of others. Warmth and competence are essential for self-preservation, are universal (Cuddy, Fiske, & Glick, 2008), and explain over 80% of the variance in perceptions of social behaviors (Wojciszke, Bazinska, & Jaworski, 1998). The warmth dimension captures traits that are related to perceived intent, including friendliness, helpfulness, sincerity, trustworthiness and morality, whereas the competence dimension reflects traits that are related to perceived ability, including intelligence, skill, creativity, and efficacy (Cuddy et al., 2008). The stereotype content model further proposes the occurrence of mixed clusters that are associated with different emotions. For example, groups both high in warmth and competence elicit pride and admiration; groups high in warmth but low in competence produce pity and sympathy; groups low in warmth but high in competence elicit envy and jealousy; and groups low in both warmth and competence are associated with feelings of disgust, anger, and resentment (North & Fiske, 2014). Although the warmth and competence dimensions emerge concurrently, research has suggested that warmth judgments are primary and predict the valence of an interpersonal judgment (i.e., determine approach-avoidance tendencies), whereas the competence dimension predicts the extremity of that impression (Wojciszke, Brycz, & Borkenau, 1993).

According to the three component model proposed by Eagly and Chaiken (1993), stereotypes represent the cognitive component of attitudes. However, according to the model, social behavior is also affected by person perceptions, and judgments are affected by not only stereotypes but also by the affective and behavioral components of attitudes.

More specifically, the affective component refers to the evaluation of an attitude object with some degree of favor or disfavor (Eagly & Chaiken, 1993). Upon encountering an individual, stereotypes are automatically activated, and associated thoughts and feelings (affective component) arise (Fiske & Neuberg, 1990). Theoretical frameworks divide affective attitudes into explicit and implicit attitudes and research findings have supported the idea that these implicit (i.e., automatic) and explicit (i.e., controlled) evaluations originate from different sources and therefore should be conceptualized as distinct constructs (Greenwald & Banaji, 1995; Olson & Fazio, 2009). Explicit attitudes are evaluations that allow for the consideration of all relevant information and are likely to influence behavior when individuals have time to consider the value and consequences of their behavior and the motivation to do so. By contrast, implicit attitudes originate from an automatic process, which is cognitively efficient as it does not require much cognitive capacity, time, or motivation to guide behavior. Research has indicated that explicit and implicit attitudes affect different components of behavior (Dovidio, Kawakami, Johnson, Johnson, & Howard, 1997) and judgment (Fazio, Jackson, Dunton, & Williams, 1995) and usually, there is an interplay between automatic and controlled processes (Olson & Fazio, 2009).

The behavioral component entails people's willingness to interact with another person they might encounter and the manner in which they do so (Olson & Zanna, 1993). Based on people's stereotypical beliefs and associated thoughts and feelings, specific intentions (behavioral component) toward other individuals develop (Ferguson, 2003). Accordingly, attitudes will ultimately affect the level of acceptance or rejection a person experiences.

1.1. Attitudes concerning students with special educational needs (SEN)

In education, the classification or grouping of students is common. Students can be grouped according to their abilities or behavior, and thus might be classified as students with "learning difficulties" or "challenging behavior" or as "slow-learners," 'bright," or "troublemakers' (Henley, Ramsey, & Algozzine, 2010). Such classifications can be helpful as they provide evidence-based direction for strategies and interventions (Brock, Biggs, Carter, Cattey, & Raley, 2016; Carter & Hughes, 2006). However, once a student is classified as having a specific special educational need, this student will likely have to deal with not only the academic challenges associated with this need but also society's stereotypical beliefs concerning this need (Heward, 2014).

In Luxembourg, educational laws were changed in 1994 to encourage the education of students with SEN in mainstream schools with external support (Limbach-Reich & Powell, 2015). Since 2009, further reforms have been implemented to promote inclusion (e.g., by encouraging team teaching and differentiation). The starting point of all measures and educational choices is the acknowledgment of the basic right of all people to receive education, whereby the education system has to provide the necessary support to facilitate students' optimal academic and social development. In 2018, three new competence centers for gifted students, students with learning difficulties, and students with challenging behavior will be founded. Their employees will be in charge of supporting of students with SEN within or outside their regular classrooms. The Luxembourgish ministry of education defines students with learning difficulties as students with dyslexia, dyscalculia, dysphasia, or dyspraxia and students with challenging behavior as students with ADHD and related disorders (Ministère de l'Education nationale de l'Enfance et de la Jeunesse, 2017). However, despite these changes, students with SEN remain one of the most socially excluded and vulnerable groups (Limbach-Reich & Powell, 2015). By seeking the cause of the persisting exclusion of students with SEN, some studies have indicated that negative attitudes toward students with SEN impede their inclusion (Gilmore, Campbell, & Cuskelly, 2003). As long as negative attitudes persist, the rightful