

Classical and modern prejudice: Attitudes toward people with intellectual disabilities

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Abstract

In two studies, Study 1 and Study 2, we examine whether attitudes toward people with intellectual disabilities, like sexism and racism, consist of two forms—a classical and a modern, where the classical is overt and blatant and the modern is more subtle and covert. Self-report scales tapping these two forms were developed in Study 1. Based on confirmatory factor analyses, the results in Study 1 supported our hypothesis and revealed that the modern and classical forms are correlated but distinguishable. This outcome was replicated in Study 2. Construct and discriminatory validations of the scales provided further support for the distinction. The theoretical and practical importance of the results is discussed in relation to previous research on attitudes toward people with intellectual disabilities and other social outgroups.

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1. Introduction

Employing recent methods and theorizing in the domain of social attitudes, the present paper is an attempt to shed light on attitudes toward people with intellectual disabilities and their relation to other social attitudes (e.g., toward ethnic groups, women, lesbians and gay men). Historically, people with intellectual disabilities were considered as a low-power group in most, if not all, societies and they were repeatedly victims of discrimination. The common finding in

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research on attitudes toward people with intellectual disabilities (e.g., Handler, Bhardwaj, & Jackson, 1994; Leyser, Kapperman, & Keller, 1994; Pittock & Potts, 1988; Rimmerman, 1998) is that people, to various degrees, harbor negative attitudes toward persons with disabilities. Negative attitudes toward people with disabilities hinder them from bringing about their life goals (Antonak & Livneh, 2000) and narrow their possibilities to fully exercise the rights conferred on them by community law, for example, the right to free movement and the right to vote.

In search for an explanation of these negative attitudes, and for moderating factors, researchers have examined variables, like gender, age, education, socioeconomic status, and belief in a just world, with a mixed pattern of results. Whereas some researchers have found these variables to be related to attitudes toward people with disabilities (e.g., Furnham, 1995; Leyser et al., 1994), others have not (e.g., Hudson-Allez & Barrett, 1996; Krajewski & Flaherty, 2000).

The research referred to above has, almost entirely, been based on self-report measures and the reported changes across time have been found to be in the direction of more tolerant attitudes toward people with intellectual disabilities (e.g., Antonak & Livneh, 2000). One can question whether this reflects a *real* attitude change or whether the change is due to various response biases in the instruments used. This is an important issue, because social psychologists have questioned the ability of traditional self-reports to accurately reflect prejudicial or negative attitudes that individuals may harbor against social groups (Akrami, Ekehammar, & Araya, 2000; Dovidio & Gaertner, 1986; McConahay, Hardee, & Batts, 1981). Examining whether there is any change in attitudes toward people with intellectual disabilities, Haar, de Vries, and van Maren (2000) found, that after years of campaigning, attitudes toward these people were more or less the same. However, and more interesting for the present study, Haar et al. (2000) found that there is a change in terminology used to describe people with intellectual disabilities. We argue that this change reflects new ways of expressing prejudice beliefs.

The susceptibility of traditional self-report questionnaires to various biases is further supported by people's tendency to present themselves as socially or politically "correct" which may prevent an open expression of negative attitudes and prejudice (e.g., Crosby, Bromley, & Saxe, 1980). Consequently, researchers have recently begun to make a distinction between classical (old-fashioned, blatant, overt) and modern (subtle, covert) forms of prejudice (e.g., Akrami et al., 2000; Glick & Fiske, 1996; McConahay et al., 1981; Swim, Aikin, Hall, & Hunter, 1995), where the classical form taps direct or open prejudice and the modern covert or subtle. Sears (1988) characterized *modern* prejudice by three components: denial of continued discrimination, antagonism toward minority group demands, and resentment about special favors for minority groups. These classifications have been found to be identifiable in various cultural contexts and for different types of discrimination (e.g., Akrami et al., 2000; Swim et al., 1995). Thus, we suggest that the distinction between modern and classical types of prejudiced attitudes is identifiable also for attitudes toward people with mental disabilities.

In Study 1, we develop and validate a modern and a classical scale measuring attitudes toward people with intellectual disabilities, and we examine whether these two forms can be distinguished. Following previous research on modern and classical attitudes in other domains, we anticipate that the responses will be characterized by a correlated two-factor structure, representing a modern and a classical factor, respectively. In Study 2, using another sample, we examine the replicability of the results obtained in Study 1. In addition, we examine the relation of prejudice toward people with intellectual disabilities with sexism, racism, and attitudes toward lesbians and gay men.

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