Influencing Prejudice and Stereotype Communication: The Case of Aboriginal Australians

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Abstract: Australia’s Indigenous people are estimated to have lived on the continent for 60,000 years, their numbers once reaching 750,000, comprising as many as 700 different groups, each with its own unique language and tradition (Wessells & Bretherton, 2000). Today, Indigenous Australians make up approximately 2.3 percent of the country’s population and remain the most disadvantaged group on many critical benchmarks of Western well-being (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2008). The relative disadvantage of Indigenous Australians is a major problem facing Australia and one of the ways that such disadvantage is perpetuated is through high levels of prejudice (e.g. Mellor, 2003; Pedersen et al., 2000; Walker, 1994) and strong knowledge of the negative Aboriginal stereotype in Australian society (Augoustinos et al., 1994; Haslam & Wilson, 2000). A possible for the high levels of prejudice and stereotype knowledge may be that intrapersonal and interpersonal processes tend to maintain rather than transform social stereotypes (Fiske, 1998).

The results of two studies that examined how the Aboriginal stereotype is transmitted by non-Aboriginal Australians in interpersonal communication and whether this process is related to personal attitudes are reported. Results of Study 1 showed that even in a low-prejudiced sample of 60 non-Aboriginal Australians, the negative aspects of the Aboriginal stereotype were reproduced more than any other information. This is a different pattern to that observed when communicating about an auto-stereotype (Kashima & Kostopoulos, 2004). Higher prejudice also led to less reproduction of positive information, suggesting that a relationship exists between intrapersonal attitudes and interpersonal communication. In Study 2, normative and informational social influence strategies were applied in an attempt to make the communication about Aboriginal Australians less stereotypic and more positive. While neither strategy achieved the desired outcome, normative social influence was successful in suppressing the reproduction of negative stereotypic information. The implications of these findings for “closing the gap” on Indigenous disadvantage and reconciliation in Australia will be discussed.
References


