Dehumanization, Prejudice, and Social Policy Beliefs about People with Developmental Disabilities

Mary Hanks, Laura Parker, Margo Monteith
Purdue University

Introduction

• To date, there is a lack of research on dehumanization of and prejudice toward people with developmental disabilities, such as autism and Down Syndrome.

• Historically, the developmentally disabled have been institutionalized, kept away from their family and friends and out of communities, and were considered financial burdens.

• Developments have been made in an attempt to deinstitutionalize and mainstream persons with developmental disabilities, and these efforts have been met with both support and opposition (Lubin, 1982).

• Dehumanization can have serious implications for the treatment of the disabled (Haslam, 2006).

• Based on our knowledge of the ways in which developmentally disabled people have been treated historically, we hypothesized that prejudice toward this group would include hostile and benevolent components.

• The purpose of the current study is to examine a pathway of dehumanization leading to social policy support, which is expected to be mediated by prejudiced attitudes.

Methods

Participants

• 296 participants from Amazon Mechanical Turk (mturk): female (58%), White (80%), with an average age of 37.53 completed an online survey and were compensated with the payment of thirty cents upon completion.

• The survey included the following sections, with all items rated on a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree):

  Section I: Stereotype ratings along dimensions of warmth and competence.

  Section II: Prejudice items

  "(People with autism are impulsive and unpredictable")

  Section III: Social Policy items

  "(People with autism should not get special government support."

  Section IV: Dehumanization items

  "(Moral", "childlike", "cold")

  Section V: Participants rated the extent of contact they had with people with autism/Down Syndrome, and how extreme they thought the disability to be when making their ratings during the study.

Results

• Items concerning Contact, Extremity, Dehumanization, Prejudice, Social Policy, and Stereotypes were averaged together, resulting in reliable indexes.

• Extremity and Contact: Participants in the two disability conditions did not differ with respect to either prior contact or extremity ratings.

• Dehumanization: Participants dehumanized individuals with autism to a greater extent than individuals with Down Syndrome.

• Prejudice: We found no evidence of both hostile and benevolent attitudes of the developmentally disabled, leading us to believe that prejudice consists only of negative (hostile) attitudes.

• Social Policy: Social policy beliefs did not tend to differ based on condition (autism or Down Syndrome).

• Stereotype Content: As hypothesized, greater evidence of paternalism (high warmth/low competence) was found in the Down Syndrome condition than the autism condition.

Mediation Analyses

• The greater the dehumanization, the more prejudiced attitudes participants reported.

• The effect of prejudice on social beliefs was significant when controlling for dehumanization.

• The effect of dehumanization on social policy beliefs was weak when controlling for prejudice.

• A formal test of whether the effect of dehumanization on social policy beliefs was mediated by prejudice was significant, both in the autism and Down Syndrome conditions.

• Thus, it does appear that the extent to which participants dehumanized people with developmental disabilities led to their prejudiced attitudes, which shaped their social policy beliefs.

Conclusions

• We found that our pathway hypothesis of dehumanization leading to social policy support, mediated by level of prejudice, did in fact exist.

• These findings could have important implications for the support of social policies benefitting the developmentally disabled (i.e., funding for special education, discrimination against the developmentally disabled, healthcare, equal opportunities in the workforce, etc.).

• These findings imply that humanization of people with developmental disabilities should decrease prejudice, which in turn should increase support for social policies benefitting this group.