



Inter-racial Attitudes and the Role of Inter-racial Contact

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A SANPAD funded research investigated the degree of inter-racial mixing among students at a university. It found that there was a high degree of informal segregation. However, it also showed there was a strong association between the amount of inter-racial interaction and positive race attitudes.

Racial contact

The large body of research on inter-group contact has indicated that prejudice in the private sphere can only be ameliorated through intergroup contact. But contact alone is not enough. Some forms of racial interaction lead to increased hostility and prejudice. For instance, during the years of *apartheid*, the government was careful to allow only the types of contact that would reinforce racial separateness and negative attitudes. Thus, dominant-subordinate interactions were permissible. The forms of contact that have been shown to facilitate positive outcomes – those involving participants meeting as non-competitive equals, that are pleasant and likely to produce friendships and are supported by the relevant norms and authority.

Research

The choice of the universities as the site for research was prompted by this being a context where these facilitating factors are more likely to be present.

We began by observing patterns of interaction in public spaces on a university campus. We also ran a survey. The observation studies of university students led to the following findings:

- Informal segregation between race groups is very much the norm. The different groups tend to sit together during lectures, in the residence cafeterias, in the leisure spaces.
- Beyond just sitting together, spaces become racialized and come to be seen as “belonging” to specific groups. Certain tables in the cafeterias are known as ‘African’ tables or ‘white’ tables, and certain areas in the open spaces on university campus come to be perceived as the domain of different groups.
- The segregation is not total. In all the spaces observed there were mixed race groups. However, there were relatively few of these.
- When the space boundaries were disrupted through members of the other group entering the space, this resulted in an early departure of the original race group or the space being avoided.



While early studies in desegregation and inter-racial contact focused on real spaces such as neighbourhoods, the importance of space has been lost in the ensuing work on intergroup contact. These studies highlight the fact that physical space has a psychological and social meaning. It is not simply the backdrop to the occurrence or non-occurrence of contact. Space is used, negotiated and contested at the same time.

Positive signs

The next step was to find out what are students experiences of inter-racial interactions and what they thought about mixing or the lack of mixing. We set up an internet-based survey. Volunteers from four universities were prompted to log onto the survey through the use of posters, flyers, notices on communal computers and e-mails were possible. The results from these studies are very optimistic. In general there is a strong correlation between contact and prejudice, such that the more inter-racial contact the respondents have, the less prejudiced they are towards the other race group. This relationship between contact and positive attitudes was significant for both African and white students. However, it is important to note that we cannot make the assumption that there is a direct causal relationship. There is always the possible interpretation that it is people who are low in prejudice that are open to more inter-racial contact. The cross-sectional nature of the survey design makes a definitive statement difficult. Analysis also indicated that the experience of

inter-racial interactions is very important. The students that reported having had pleasant interactions with other groups also report more contact and lower prejudice. While a distressingly low number reported having friends of a different race, where it existed it had a positive effect on inter-racial attitudes.

Thus, both the observation and survey indicate that informal segregation of the races is more common than mixing, though the mixing that does occur appears to lead to more positive inter-racial attitudes. A number of factors emerged as reasons for this lack of mixing. Diversity in language, culture, socioeconomic status and interests were some of the reasons that were endorsed, as were fear of peer and family disapproval. However, an important factor impeding mixing was the beliefs about how members of the other group would respond to them. Fear of negative stereotyping by the other group makes interactions anxiety-provoking.

Conclusion

This research highlights that students of different races still stick together and inter-racial mixing is rather limited. The research suggests that finding means of promoting positive meaningful interactions would do much to improve racial relations.