

The Effects of Principle-Testing Discussions on Student Attitudes towards Selected Groups Subjected to Discrimination

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A l'aide d'un modèle factoriel 3×3 (développement moral par traitement), on a testé l'effet des discussions au cours desquelles sont jugés les différents principes sur les attitudes des élèves envers des groupes fréquemment sujets à discrimination et l'action réciproque entre ces discussions et le développement moral. On a, au hasard, soumis à ce traitement 118 élèves de 9^e année d'une école de grande ville; les professeurs y ont de la même façon été soumis dans le cadre du développement moral. On a évalué leurs attitudes envers les femmes, les handicapés physiques et les natifs du continent indien en utilisant un inventaire Likert comprenant 45 questions. L'analyse multivariée de la variance des résultats postérieurs au traitement ont révélé des différences significatives dans l'attitude envers les handicapés physiques à la fois pour le traitement et le développement moral; on n'a pas enregistré d'autres différences significatives. Ces résultats indiquent une certaine réserve quant à l'utilisation de discussions au cours desquelles sont jugés les différents principes comme méthode de changement d'attitudes envers des groupes sujets à discrimination. On a admis que les attitudes des élèves envers les femmes et les natifs du continent indien étaient déjà fondées en raison de discussions et d'expériences antérieures. A l'opposé, les cas de discrimination à l'égard des handicapés physiques peuvent être plus nouveaux.

The attributes of principle-testing discussions (Coombs & Meux, 1971), a procedure used in values education, are consistent with a number of theoretical formulations concerned with changing attitudes. In principle-testing discussions subjects are presented with the facts of a discrimination case and asked to make a judgment about what ought to be done. Subjects are then asked a series of questions designed to test the consistency with which they are prepared to apply, to themselves and to other cases, the principle implicit in their decision. Dissonance theory (Festinger, 1957) suggests that if enough dissatisfaction with a given behavior or belief exists, then change in that behavior or belief will take place. Demonstrating inconsistencies between the application of a principle toward one group and the application of the same principle toward a second group should produce dissonance and, consequently, a change in attitude.

Principle-testing discussions are also characterized by having subjects

assume the role of a person to whom discrimination is being shown. Hayes and Conklin (1953) compared three methods for changing attitudes of grade 8 students towards minority members. One experimental group had direct experience with a minority. A second group had academic instruction on the nature of prejudice. A third group read, acted, and listened to experiences of minority group members. The last, "vicarious" approach was effective in changing attitudes.

It may also be that a detailed visual presentation of a case of discrimination can cause change in attitude. Goldberg (1956) found that films involving realistic enactments of a social situation in which prejudice was present produced a significant reduction in the prejudice of college viewers. Katz, Sarnoff, and McClintock (1956) presented white college students with a case history of a person holding an ethnic prejudice similar to their own for less than admirable reasons. The treatment seemed to induce self-insight and resulted in a reduction of prejudicial attitudes.

Kohlberg (1971) described three levels of moral development — pre-conventional, conventional, and post-conventional — and suggested that it is only at higher levels of moral development that subjects consider other people to have equivalent value to themselves. Davidson (1975) empirically investigated this proposed relationship between moral development and prejudiced attitudes: working with children aged 7–13 she found a significant inverse relationship between prejudice and moral stage ($r = -.63$; $p < .001$). It may be that at only the higher stages of development or in the transition from conventional to post-conventional morality are subjects ready to accept the consequences of principle-testing discussions.

The present study investigated the relative effectiveness of principle testing and its possible interaction with level of moral development applied in a junior high school classroom situation. Three groups frequently subjected to discrimination were considered: women, the physically handicapped, and East Indians. Specifically, the research questions were:

1. Do junior high students who are shown cases of discrimination and then participate in principle-testing discussions demonstrate more positive attitudes towards these three groups than control group students who receive a placebo treatment?
2. Do junior high students at higher levels of moral development demonstrate more positive attitudes towards these three groups than students at lower levels of moral development?
3. Do experimental subjects at higher levels of moral development demonstrate a more positive attitude towards these three groups than control subjects at higher levels of moral development? And is this difference greater than the difference between experimental and control subjects at low levels of moral development?

METHODOLOGY

Principle-Testing Procedure

Each principle-testing session began with a filmstrip or videotape which presented a realistic enactment of a case of discrimination; the teacher then led the class in a principle-testing discussion. For example, one discrimination case involved a young East Indian male who had been denied an available apartment for rent. Following the filmstrip, the teacher began the discussion with the question "Should the landlady have a right to deny the person rental accommodation because he is East Indian?" After approximately a minute the teacher asked the students to raise their hands if they thought the landlady should have the right, if they thought she should not have the right, or if they could not decide. The teacher then asked the class the following kinds of questions:

1. If the person seeking an apartment was old, English, single, black, handicapped, etc., should the landlady have a right to deny accommodation?
2. Place yourself in the position of the East Indian. Do you think you should have any rights in this situation?
3. Would you accept the consequences if all apartment owners denied accommodation to East Indians?
4. The property rights of the landlady and the civil rights of the young East Indian are in conflict. Which principle is more consistent with the broader principle, "All people should be treated with respect and dignity"?

The first question is a "new cases" test, in which the subjects are asked if they can accept the judgments that follow from attempting to apply the principle in other cases to which it is logically relevant. The second question is a "role exchange" test. In the above example the students were asked to place themselves in the position of the East Indian and to consider whether or not they could still accept the principle as it applied to them in this role. The third question is the "universal consequences" test and asks the subjects to imagine the consequences if everyone in similar circumstances were to engage in the action and to consider whether or not they can accept those consequences. The fourth question is a "subsumption" test, in which the subjects are asked to show that the value principle is a case of some more general principle that they can accept.

In addition to the teacher's using the tests of principle to generate questions, the students were taught these tests to assist them in discussion. They were also taught the concepts of prejudgment and nonrelevant criteria and were encouraged to reject instances of the two concepts since their application frequently led to unfair decisions.

Each experimental class received a different visual presentation each day for four days. Each presentation lasted approximately 10 minutes, and was followed by a principle-testing discussion for the remainder of the class hour.

Subjects

The study was conducted in a large metropolitan high school enrolling grades 8–12 and located in a residential area. The majority of the students were from lower-working-class and lower-middle-class families. Approximately 20% were Chinese or East Indian; most of the remaining students were white.

One block of students, corresponding to five classes of grade 9 social studies, was used. Prior to the treatment period, all subjects were administered the Defining Issues Test (Rest, Note 1), a test of moral development. On the basis of these scores, the students were ranked in three categories — high, medium, and low — with equal numbers in each. Since the classes met at the same time, it was possible then to assign students randomly either to one of the two treatment groups or to the control group. Each treatment group made up two classes of students; the control group made up one class.

The first treatment group considered cases of discrimination towards the physically handicapped (PH) and towards East Indians (EI); the second group considered cases involving the physically handicapped and women (Wo). Both groups followed the principle-testing procedure.

The third or control group participated in *Dangerous Parallel* (Mastrude, 1969), a simulation of events surrounding the Korean War. It was felt that this activity would provide an adequate control given the differences between the simulation procedures and material and those of principle testing.

Assignment of Teachers

All of the teachers of the original intact classes agreed to participate in the study. One teacher agreed to take part only if he was assigned to the control group. The remaining four teachers were randomly assigned to one of the two principle-testing combinations and one of the two classes within each combination. All five teachers had at least four years' teaching experience, and all had been on the staff of the school the previous year.

Prior to the treatment the teachers spent two days in a workshop learning how to conduct a principle-testing discussion. The workshop content included: reading background material on the purpose of principle-testing discussions; viewing a videotape of a discussion with a class; and conducting practice discussions in small groups made up of their fellow teachers. Teachers were observed by the first author until they were competent at asking relevant questions at appropriate times.

Instrumentation

Student attitudes towards women, the physically handicapped, and East Indians were measured by a 45-item Likert-type inventory. Fifteen items were randomly selected from each of three attitude scales: Open Subordination of Women (Nadler & Morrow, 1959); Opinions about Mental Illness

(Cohen & Struening, 1962); and A Measure of Attitudes toward East Indians (Adams, Note 2). The selected items from the mental illness scale were reworded to reflect attitudes towards the physically handicapped. No changes were made in the items from the other two subscales. Items were then randomly arranged in the composite inventory.

The attitude inventory was first pretested in a second, comparable metropolitan high school. The subjects included 108 eleventh-grade students enrolled in a general social science course. Item analysis of the pilot test data revealed that all items within each subscale functioned in the appropriate direction. Internal consistency measures (Hoyt, 1941) were .96, .86, and .82 for the women, physically handicapped, and East Indian subscales respectively.

Since it was possible, in the main study, to randomly assign students to treatment level and to avoid potential pretest–treatment interaction, a posttest-only testing schedule was adopted. On the seventh day following completion of the treatment period, the attitude inventory was administered to all students in their regular social studies classes. The internal consistency estimates from this testing were comparable to those reported above for the pilot study. Taken in the same order, the values were .83, .75, and .92.

Data Analyses

Since it was not possible to develop a fully nested design in the present study, it was necessary first to conduct a preliminary analysis to ascertain the equivalency of the two classes within the PH-EI and PH-Wo treatment levels. Two-tailed *t* tests for independent groups were computed for each of the three attitude subscales. Use of multiple *t* tests together with a relaxed level of significance, .20, provided a liberal test of the differences between classes. In all cases the obtained *t* ratios were nonsignificant, thereby supporting the hypothesis of no significant differences between classes within treatment level.

The final design and sample sizes are shown in table 1. Only students who were present for the entire treatment period and for whom complete data were available were retained for the data analyses.

Table 1/ Final Design and Sample Sizes

	Treatment		
	PH-EI (2 classes)	PH-Wo (2 classes)	Control (1 class)
Moral Development			
Low	14	11	5
Medium	20	16	10
High	15	18	9

Note: PH = physically handicapped; EI = East Indian; Wo = women.

A 3×3 (treatment by moral development) multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) employing Wilks's likelihood ratio criterion was used to analyse the attitude subscales. Where, as a result of the multivariate global test, the null hypothesis of no differences among groups was rejected, the univariate F statistics corresponding to each attitude subscale were tested individually and Scheffe's multiple comparison procedure applied where appropriate (Finn, 1974; Hummel & Sligo, 1971).

Since the cell sizes were not equal, both the multivariate and univariate tests of significance were subject to the ordering of the independent variables. An experimental design approach (Woodward & Overall, 1975) was adopted in which treatment and moral development entered the analysis at the same level, followed by their interaction. Thus the effects attributable to treatment and moral development were adjusted for the presence of each other, while the interaction effect was adjusted for both main effects.

RESULTS

The means and standard deviations for each dependent variable are presented in table 2 for each cell in the design. A higher mean reflects a more favorable attitude. The results of the MANOVA are summarized in table 3.

The multivariate F ratios for treatment and moral development were both significant at the .01 level. The follow-up univariate F statistics indicated that the physically handicapped subscale contributed to the significance for both factors; no significant effects were observed for the remaining two dependent variables. Analysis of the differences between treatment levels revealed that both treatment groups possessed a more positive attitude towards the physically handicapped than did the control group ($p < .01$). The group of students with a low level of moral development exhibited a less positive attitude than did the groups at the two higher levels ($p < .01$). The F statistics corresponding to the interaction between treatment and moral development indicate that there was no significant relationship between these two factors.

DISCUSSION

The results of the study provide equivocal support for the use of principle-testing discussion as a method for changing attitudes toward groups subjected to discrimination. Subjects who had participated in principle-testing discussions possessed significantly more positive attitudes towards the physically handicapped than did a comparable group of control subjects. Both treatments included discussion of discrimination towards the physically handicapped. In addition, one treatment included cases of discrimination towards women, while the second included discrimination cases involving East Indians. No differences were found among the

Table 2 / Means and Standard Deviations: Attitude Subscales

		Attitude towards					
		Wo		PH		EI	
Group		Mean	S.D.	Mean	S.D.	Mean	S.D.
PH-EI	LMD	56.1	12.6	56.8	12.2	57.9	13.1
	MMD	61.9	14.2	65.0	8.4	58.5	18.9
	HMD	64.0	12.8	67.3	8.6	59.7	18.5
PH-Wo	LMD	64.9	9.7	55.0	9.1	58.8	16.6
	MMD	64.8	12.9	60.2	8.4	55.1	14.5
	HMD	64.0	11.9	60.7	9.6	60.6	16.8
Control	LMD	52.9	8.9	44.2	5.0	57.0	6.7
	MMD	63.8	11.9	55.2	4.7	47.2	12.8
	HMD	60.8	8.8	53.9	10.8	52.6	12.7

Note: Wo = women; PH = physically handicapped; EI = East Indian.

Table 3 / Multivariate Analysis of Variance

Source	Multivariate Test <i>F</i> (df)		Univariate <i>df</i>	Univariate <i>F</i> Statistics		
				Wo	PH	EI
Treatment (T)	6.08*	(6,214)	2	1.35	13.09*	1.93
Moral Development (M)	3.15*	(6,214)	2	1.52	8.64*	.66
T × M	.42	(12,283)	4	.74	.41	.30
Within			109			

Note: Wo = women; PH = physically handicapped; EI = East Indian.

**p* < .01.

groups in their attitudes towards women and East Indians. It may be that the subjects did not change their attitudes towards women because the issue of discrimination against women had previously been extensively discussed in the press and in the school. They may not have changed their attitudes towards East Indians because of tension between the ethnic groups in the school. It may be that attitudes towards these two groups were already well established and the principle-testing discussions as used in the present study were not powerful enough to change those attitudes. In contrast, the cases of discrimination against the physically handicapped may have been more novel and attitudes towards the physically handicapped less well established. Further work is needed to more fully explain the apparent failure of principle testing in other than a novel situation.

There was a significant difference among students at different levels of moral development for the physically handicapped subscale, with students at higher levels exhibiting a more positive attitude. This finding, together

with the lack of interaction between treatment and moral development, lends support to the suggestion of Kohlberg (1971) that only subjects at higher levels of moral development are able to value others as equal to themselves. The failure of this finding to be replicated for the remaining two subscales is likely again attributable to the students' previous experience with these two groups, as described above.

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