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Aversive Racism and Intergroup Contact Theories: Cultural Competence in a Segregated World

Nancy A. Rodenburg and Laura A. Boisen

The United States remains highly segregated, and social work students are likely to live and work in segregated contexts. What implications does this have for their cultural competence? Does segregation affect social workers' ability to serve diverse clients without bias? This article reviews two social psychology theories, aversive racism and intergroup contact, for use by social work educators. Together, these theories suggest both the likelihood of social worker prejudice within a context of segregation and an evidence-based method for improvement. The article concludes by offering strategies for incorporating both theories in cultural competence education.

Racial and ethnic segregation is a fact of life in most areas of the United States. Data show that many people live in segregated neighborhoods (Carr & Kutty, 2008), send their children to segregated schools (McCoy & Vincent, 2008), and work and worship separately (Hellerstein & Neumark, 2008; Scheitle & Dougherty, 2010). Although segregation has recently declined in some regions (Carr & Kutty, 2008), in most of the United States, almost 60 years after *Brown vs. the Board of Education* (1954), segregation persists.

Social work students live and work in the same segregated context as everyone else and likely conform to the same segregated social patterns. What implications does this have for their cultural competence? Does segregation affect their ability to serve diverse clients without bias? Two theories from social psychology, aversive racism and intergroup contact (IGC), imply both the likelihood of bias among social work students and a theoretically sound way for social work educators to help them improve.

Cultural competence is a required part of social work education, and recent attention has moved beyond prescriptive overviews of minority group characteristics to include more social science theory (Marsiglia & Kulis, 2009; Sue, 2006, 2010). This article builds on recent theory by reviewing aversive racism and IGC theories for use in cultural competence education. Both have been extensively studied within social psychology, but neither has been reviewed for use in social work education. When used together, these theories offer faculty an empirically and theoretically sound framework to help students improve cultural competence.

The first theory, aversive racism, focuses specifically on race and ethnic discrimination. However, other forms of aversive discrimination exist. For example, aversive disablism (Deal,

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2007), sexism (Tracy & Rivera, 2010), and homophobia (Capezza, 2007) have been addressed in literature outside social work. It is beyond the scope of this article to review these other forms of aversive discrimination. However, instructors should be aware that aversive racism concepts can be applied broadly—not only to race and ethnicity. IGC theory has been studied across multiple social identities and applies across social work cultural competence areas.

We begin with a brief review of the use of theory in cultural competence pedagogy. We next present aversive racism theory and evidence, suggesting its potential to negatively affect students' cultural competence, and follow by offering IGC theory and evidence as a pedagogically sound way to address this problem. After highlighting theory limitations, we conclude with suggestions for cultural competence educators. Our intent is to urge faculty to explore both theories in the context of social work education.

THEORY IN CULTURAL COMPETENCE PEDAGOGY

A core competency of social work graduates under the 2008 Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (EPAS; Council on Social Work Education, 2008) is to

understand how diversity characterizes and shapes the human experience and is critical to the formation of identity . . . (and to) . . . appreciate that, as a consequence of difference, a person's life experiences may include oppression, poverty, marginalization and alienation as well as privilege, power and acclaim. (EPAS, 2.1.4)

These essential social work concepts are difficult to convey to students whose experience of “difference” is constricted by social segregation. Educators face a challenge to lead students in both conceptual and experiential learning of social difference when their routine lives may be homogeneous. How can we teach students to work with difference if they rarely encounter it?

Cultural competence pedagogy is limited by the lack of a broadly accepted conceptual framework (Van Soest & Garcia, 2008). Several authors have called for such a framework or proposed their own. For example, Fong (2008) called for a framework that did not rely on the Western paradigm, but instead adapted clients' values. Other authors have proposed adopting critical theory frameworks (Abrams & Moio, 2009; Ortiz & Jayshree, 2010) or a postmodern approach (Deweese, 2001). Williams (2006) proposed organizing cultural competence according to four paradigms: postpositivism, constructivism, critical theory, and postmodernism. Finn and Jacobson (2008) integrated cultural competence into their social justice practice framework that includes meaning, context, power, history, and possibility. Doman Lum's (2004) process-stage approach parallels the generalist social work practice stages of contact, problem identification, assessment, intervention, and termination. Derald Wing Sue's (2006) multicultural social work model outlines a three-dimensional model of cultural competence, including culturally specific attributes, component social worker attributes, and foci of cultural competence. Marsiglia and Kulis (2009) developed the culturally grounded model of social work as a higher order of social work practice than “competence.”

This conceptual work is welcome, but more attention to theory is needed. A review of 1,168 articles from 37 journals published in 2004 identified only three that included a well-developed theory discussion (Gentle-Genitty et al., 2007a). Articles often mentioned a theory but rarely reviewed the theory's component parts, empirical evidence offered in its support, or

information on the theory's future development. The authors called for more theory inclusion in practice and noted that diversity was an area particularly lacking in theory (Gentle-Genitty et al., 2007b).

Hutchison (2008) outlined five criteria for evaluating theory for use in social work: coherence and conceptual clarity, testability and evidence of empirical support, comprehensiveness, consistency with social work's emphasis on diversity and power arrangements, and usefulness to social work practice. Both aversive racism and IGC theories meet all these criteria. They were selected for joint review within one article because the first theory, aversive racism, describes an evidence-based form of modern racism that is very likely to affect social workers' cultural competence. The second theory, IGC, provides instructors a pedagogical framework to address this problem by helping students intentionally manipulate their social environments to achieve reduced prejudice. Together, the two theories provide pedagogical direction for instructors to help students reduce the discrimination they are likely to manifest in the ambiguous social work practice context. Increased understanding of both theories will improve cultural competence overall.

AVERSIVE RACISM THEORY

Aversive racism is a specific type of contemporary racism held by people who (a) endorse egalitarian values and beliefs, (b) believe themselves to be unprejudiced, but (c) unconsciously hold negative beliefs about Blacks and other out-groups, and (d) subtly discriminate in ways that are ambiguous and indirect and that can be rationalized as something other than racial discrimination (Dovidio & Gaertner, 2000). Out-groups are defined here as those groups of people against which one has prejudice. Out-groups are not limited to race and ethnic groups, but also include groups identified by their religious, sexual orientation, gender, national origin, age, disability, social class, or other categorical differences. Out-groups usually, but not always, correspond to groups not considered dominant in society.

Aversive racism is not considered pathological. Rather, people are predisposed through the normal psychological process of categorization—placing people into known and understandable groups or categories (Gaertner & Dovidio, 2005). These group identities are created and reinforced through interpersonal and macro-level social and cultural messages. Through social cues we categorize people as belonging to “our” group or to “other” groups; race is a frequent form of categorization in the United States. Social cues for aversive racism surround us daily within our routine daily lives. Though overt racism has declined, aversive racism is estimated to affect a “substantial portion of well-educated and liberal whites in the United States” (Dovidio & Gaertner, 2000, p. 315).

Stempler (1975) raised the possibility of aversive racism in social work long ago. Now dated in both language and its description of racism as pathological, the article appears to be the first mention of aversive racism in social service. Our literature search found only one other examination of aversive racism in a social service context. Whaley (1998) used an aversive racism framework to review literature for evidence of stereotyping and bias in mental health service. Among other observations, he concluded that the power difference between professional and client compounded aversive racial bias among White mental health professionals. This was especially likely if the Black client was of lower socioeconomic status and exhibited behavior seen as violent or that conformed to other common racial stereotypes.

The demographic characteristics of social service point to aversive racism's large potential effect on social workers and students. Though clients are disproportionately people of color (e.g., Barnes, 2008; Smith & Devore, 2004), social workers are mostly White (Hodge, 2004). Social workers are required by professional ethics to hold egalitarian values (National Association of Social Work, 2008) and are more likely to identify as politically liberal than conservative (Rosenwald, 2006). These characteristics match descriptors of aversive racism. Due to segregation, many White workers have infrequent, irregular, and circumscribed contact with people of color. Assumptions that conform to aversive racism are unlikely to be challenged by routine interaction with diverse others. Because so many workers are White, the impact on the profession as a whole may be large.

Social work students are unlikely to be aware of how aversive racism may relate to them without their explicit attention. Though widespread and essentially "normal," aversive racism results in a type of discrimination that is difficult to identify because it is indirect and subtle, occurring only when the discriminatory action can be rationalized as something else, and usually in ambiguous situations (Dovidio & Gaertner, 2000). For example, in two studies separated by 10 years, research subjects were asked to recommend which applicants should be hired for an ostensible peer counselor position. Subjects read applicant files that presented candidates portrayed as highly or marginally qualified, or clearly unqualified, and who were identified as either Black or White. As predicted by aversive racism theory, subjects did not discriminate when applicants were clearly qualified or clearly unqualified, recommending candidates of both races equally often. But candidates in the middle were subject to discrimination: marginally qualified Black candidates were more often rated as unqualified while marginally qualified White candidates were more often rated as highly qualified (Dovidio & Gaertner, 2000). In the ambiguous middle situation, White subjects appeared to assume the best about applicants similar to themselves and the worst about those differing by race.

Had the above study been an actual hiring situation, both the applicant and job recruiter could miss the underlying race-related basis for decision. According to aversive racism theory, White job recruiters would be motivated to maintain an unbiased and egalitarian self-image and therefore unlikely to discriminate overtly. However, the covert act described above would be acceptable (Gaertner & Dovidio, 2005). The above scenario could easily occur within social service contexts with social workers unaware of any discrimination.

To avoid anxiety and threats to egalitarian self-image, aversive racism also predicts that Whites will avoid Black people and other out-groups as much as possible for fear of discriminating unintentionally (Gaertner & Dovidio, 2005). The extent to which White social workers or students avoid people of color for this reason does not appear to have been explored. However, when the external barrier posed by societal segregation is coupled with the internal barrier posed by anxiety over unintentional discrimination, it is clear that Whites are likely to experience significant barriers to interracial contact. Due to inexperience, White social work students may be particularly prone to anxiety during internship and classroom situations, further decreasing comfort with interracial contact.

Aversive racism may curtail White students' effectiveness with Black clients as evidenced by studies examining both explicit (conscious, deliberate, and controllable) and implicit (unconscious, unintentional, and uncontrollable) measures of prejudice. Explicit prejudice is assessed in the research setting through questionnaire responses. Implicit prejudice is automatic, provoked by visual or other stimuli, and measured in the laboratory by physiological responses, indirect

measures or memory tasks (Dovidio, 2001). Studies of both implicit and explicit prejudice demonstrate how aversive racism may disrupt mutual understanding and cooperation between people who differ by race.

In a study of college-age subjects, Dovidio, Kawakami, and Gaertner (2002) videotaped and coded Black and White subjects who were assigned to converse about a simple topic—to decide which belongings students should bring to college—and to evaluate the conversation's friendliness. Results showed that White subjects reported higher levels of both friendliness and conversational satisfaction than did their Black peers. While Black students' conversational friendliness assessments corresponded to their White partners' implicit (or unconscious) level of prejudice, White student evaluations matched their own explicit (or conscious) prejudice level. When White partners held high implicit prejudice, Black partners saw the conversation as less friendly. Black partners preferred highly prejudiced Whites (high levels of explicit and implicit prejudice) over those with low explicit and high implicit prejudice as occurs with aversive racism.

This research suggests that a Black client is likely to judge a White worker according to the latter's unconscious conversational cues. Unknown to the worker, the client may decide the conversation is "unfriendly," placing the helping relationship in jeopardy. This provides an unsettling and serious challenge to cultural competence educators. How do we help students uncover unconscious racial bias? How should students of color be assisted in identifying, voicing and responding to victimization due to the unconscious bias of others in both classroom and internship settings? In what ways can educators help all students develop practice skills in working with clients of color who along with their other service needs may be experiencing ambiguous racial discrimination? These questions will be addressed later but are important to raise here to remind the reader of aversive racism's direct implications for social work education.

A final measure in this study (Dovidio, Kawakami, et al., 2002) explored how efficiently each pair agreed on which belongings to bring to college. The most efficient conversations occurred in those involving low-prejudice Whites (low explicit and implicit measures), followed by those with very high-prejudice Whites (high explicit and implicit measures). Conversations with Whites whose prejudice corresponded to aversive racism (low explicit and high implicit prejudice) were the least efficient at solving the problem. This implies that the goals addressed by White workers and clients of color may be less effectively accomplished in a context of aversive racism. White student interns may be unhelpful to clients of color if their unconscious bias is coupled with anxiety about developing practice skills. Field instructors need to be aware that students may engage in ambiguous discrimination when interacting with clients of color.

This research complements emerging neurobiology research suggesting the strong role of unconscious factors in forming perception and behavior. Developmental psychology scholars have long focused on the early infant–caretaker relationship and its implications for how subsequent relationships establish and unfold with maturity. It is believed that the early infant–caretaker relationship enduringly affects how the neural system develops in terms of accepting and processing information (Siegel, 1999). This relationship is believed to be affected also by other early relationships (Applegate & Shapiro, 2005). Thus, early transactions form an unconscious pattern of beliefs and behaviors that create an inner working model (Bowlby, 1973, 1980) and an "enduring neural network" (Applegate & Shapiro, 2005, p. 6) that influences a person's interactions and perceptions unconsciously. This suggests that a person's response to others is influenced, in part, by early primary relationships and that impressions of and communications with others occur at

an unconscious level. These findings provide support for aversive racism theory's contention that unconscious factors can contribute to prejudice.

Aversive racism theory also predicts a contrasting form of discrimination in which White liberal people actually favor Black people when social cues suggest that to do otherwise would appear discriminatory. For example, Aberson and Ettlin (2004) cite evidence that African Americans received positively biased treatment when norms were clear but negatively biased treatment when norms were ambiguous, corresponding to aversive racism theory. This suggests that White liberal social workers may sometimes be biased in favor of clients of color, which can work against clients' interests by inhibiting effective therapeutic confrontation—a vital social work skill.

Finally, we note that aversive racism literature primarily addresses White racism against people of color, not how racism may function between different ethnic minority groups. Data addressing this question may be lacking because lead aversive racism theorists have not seen inter-ethnic racism as most pressing in their research agenda. For example, Dovidio, Gaertner, Kawakami, and Hodson (2002) explained:

Although we also acknowledge that minority groups may also hold negative attitudes toward majority groups and to other racial or ethnic groups, we have focused on the attitudes of Whites because they have traditionally held a disproportionate amount of political, social, and economic power in the United States. Thus, addressing and improving Whites' attitudes can potentially have a significant effect on social change. (p. 90)

Thus, inter-ethnic racism is not yet fully examined in the literature.

However, aversive racism literature includes evidence that individuals who are minority in one social identity area (e.g., ethnicity or race) but part of the dominant majority in another (e.g., gender or religion) may discriminate in subtle, ambiguous ways against members of other out-groups. Social psychologist Marilyn Brewer (2010) describes the concept of "social identity complexity," which refers to the fact that all individuals belong to multiple social identity groups simultaneously. In any one person, some identities may be dominant (e.g., white, male, heterosexual), whereas others are nondominant (e.g., person of color, transgender). The social psychology concept of "social identity complexity" parallels social work's concept of "intersectionality" (Murphy, Hunt, Zajicek, Norris, & Hamilton, 2009). Both concepts recognize multiple intersecting social identities within all individuals and suggest that members of any dominant group may be susceptible to aversive forms of discrimination; that is, they may discriminate subtly, in ambiguous situations in ways that can be rationalized as something else. Thus, ethnic minorities who are themselves the targets of aversive racism may also perpetrate aversively against other targeted groups (e.g., women and girls, LGBTQ populations).

Aversive racism theory has received widespread empirical support outside social work. For example, discrimination of the type predicted by aversive racism (i.e., in ambiguous situations; when a nonracial rationale is available) has been found in legal contexts (e.g., Hodson, Hooper, Dovidio, & Gaertner, 2005), health care (e.g., Murphy-Berman, Berman, & Campbell, 1998), and media presentations (Mastro, Behm-Morawitz, & Kopacz, 2008), among other areas. Aversive racism evidence has been globally documented for decades (Dovidio & Gaertner, 2008). Despite its large body of evidence the theory's application to social work cultural competence has not yet been examined.

In summary, aversive racism suggests that White social work students may find it difficult to deliver high-quality service to clients of color. It further suggests that White students may be unaware of their bias due to its subtlety, and that depending on circumstances they may discriminate in favor of, instead of against, clients of color. Evidence also suggests that discrimination may impede the efficiency, and therefore effectiveness, of social work between White students and their clients of color. The effect of aversive racism on students of color in educational and intern settings has not been examined. Apart from Whaley's (1998) review in the mental health context, the question of aversive racism's effect on social service outcomes has not been addressed empirically, theoretically, or pedagogically within recent social work literature. After reviewing evidence of bias in health care delivery, Dovidio, Penner, Albrecht, Norton, Gaertner, and Shelton (2008) make a strong case for aversive racism's likely role in health care disparities. Given continued race and ethnic disparities in many service areas, a similar case for examining aversive racism's effect on social work practice and cultural competence education can be made.

INTERGROUP CONTACT THEORY

The implications of aversive racism present pedagogical challenges to social work educators. Since the prejudice associated with aversive racism is unconscious and the resulting discrimination subtle, students need ways to bring their implicit assumptions, values, and behaviors to consciousness. IGC theory offers a framework for this pedagogy. It has broad empirical support, is theoretically sound, and holds promise to change out-group members from "them" to "us" (Gaertner & Dovidio, 2005). It includes expansive data applicable to students of any race or ethnicity and regarding various forms of discrimination (e.g., heterosexism, sexism). We review IGC evidence below and conclude with suggestions for how to use directed IGC to help students identify and reduce aversive racism and subtle discrimination.

Introduced by Gordon Allport in 1954 IGC theory predicts that prejudice will be reduced if people have contact with out-group members under specific conditions ("contact conditions"), including equal status, common goals, shared cooperation, and mutually shared adherence to the same custom, law, or authorities. In addition, Pettigrew's (1998) suggestion of "friendship potential" as a facilitating condition is often added as a fifth contact condition. Sports teams are an example of good contact conditions since athletes are members of the same team, play under the auspices of the same league, must rely on each other to achieve common goals, and are likely to see each other as potential or even actual friends. Through the years, additional contact conditions have been added, but the above five remain primary.

For over 50 years, hundreds of laboratory and field studies have tested this theory. Based on a meta-analysis of 515 studies dating from 1940, Pettigrew and Tropp (2006) concluded that IGC clearly reduced prejudice; that its effect was slightly larger for nonvoluntary participants than voluntary; typically generalized beyond the immediate contact situation to the entire out-group; was successful with out-groups based on sexual orientation, religion, and other factors as well as race and ethnicity; was applicable across a variety of groups, geographical regions, and contexts; and reduced prejudice even when the contact conditions were not ideal (e.g., without equal status, shared auspices).

In their updated 2011 summary of the IGC literature, Pettigrew and Tropp reported results from numerous studies strengthening their 2006 meta-analysis evidence. Particularly compelling was evidence from numerous studies documenting that prejudice reduction generalized beyond the contact situation in three specific ways. First, after reanalyzing their 2006 meta-analysis data, Pettigrew and Tropp (2011) affirmed that reduced prejudice toward individuals in the initial IGC experience did “in fact typically generalize to more positive attitudes to the out-group as a whole” (p. 32). Second, evidence showed that IGC reduced prejudice generalized across varied situations and contexts and that this “situational generalization” can persist over time. For example, in a laboratory study of highly prejudiced White female students in the U.S. South, Cook (1984) found that IGC reduced White students’ prejudice against Black students. The reduced prejudice remained when retested several months later outside the laboratory; prejudice reduction thus transcended the original contact context.

Third, evidence showed that IGC reduced prejudice against other out-groups different from those in the original contact setting, a phenomenon termed a “secondary transfer effect.” Pettigrew and Tropp (2011) report that secondary transfer effect has been found in numerous studies. For example, in a study of White respondents from Texas, researchers found that those who had Latino friends were more positive not only toward Latinos, but also toward Vietnamese and East Indian immigrants (Tausch et al., 2010). In a 1988 European study of 3,800 respondents, those with immigrant friends were more favorable toward a wide range of ethnic out-groups beyond those represented by their immediate immigrant friends (Pettigrew, 1997). In a longitudinal study of UCLA college students, researchers found that students who had either Black or Latino roommates reduced their prejudice toward both groups (Van Laar, Levin, Sinclair, & Sidanius, 2005).

Studies suggest that a secondary transfer effect may be strongest for out-groups that seem more similar to those in the IGC situation. For example, in a study of German respondents who had positive contact with foreign residents, reduced prejudice against Muslims in general was more consistently found than against Jews. Since many foreign residents in Germany are Turkish immigrants and Muslim, IGC with foreigners apparently led to reduced prejudice against Muslims as a group far more than against Jews as a group (Pettigrew, Wagner, & Christ, 2007).

Finally, Pettigrew and Tropp (2011) also reported compelling data from a German longitudinal panel survey during 2002, 2003, and 2004 in which IGC with foreigners reduced prejudice not only against foreigners but also against homeless people and those identifying as homosexual. The reduced prejudice against the latter two groups persisted over a full year and when results were controlled for respondents’ prior prejudice. That is, IGC with foreigners not only reduced prejudice secondarily against gays, lesbians, and homeless people among already tolerant people—it also reduced prejudice among people with prior prejudice. Though IGC clearly appears to reduce prejudice generalized across many situations and groups, how it might be used to guide cultural competence education has not been explored.

In order to consider IGC’s application to cultural competence education, the mechanisms through which social contact reduces prejudice become important. Pettigrew and Tropp (2008) concluded that reduced anxiety, increased knowledge about the out-group, and an increased ability to take the out-group perspective mediated the prejudice reduction obtained through contact. Other authors have affirmed lowered anxiety (e.g., Page-Gould, Mendoza-Denton, & Tropp, 2008) and increased knowledge about the out-group (e.g., Eller & Abrams, 2004) as important for reducing prejudice through IGC. Thus, to help students become aware of and reduce prejudice

against out-groups, instructors should seek ways to reduce student's overall course-based anxiety. Safe learning environments are frequently cited as essential to cultural competence education (e.g., Van Soest & Garcia, 2008), and IGC theory affirms their importance.

Evidence related to IGC theory suggests that out-group knowledge is less important to prejudice reduction than emotional learning (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2008). Affective engagement is needed to really change attitudes. Thus, courses that remain mostly at a cognitive level are less likely to help students reduce prejudice. Immersion, dialogue, or other experiential methods that force affective involvement are also needed.

Individuals' attitudes also affect how successfully IGC reduces prejudice, and attitude and IGC can be mutually reinforcing (Eller & Abrams, 2003). For example, children's attitudes about out-group members appeared to improve in conjunction with IGC (Crystal, Killen, & Ruck, 2008). Parental attitudes about out-groups transferred to their children and affected their children's interactions with out-groups (Edmonds & Killen, 2009). This research suggests that individual attitude is important for prejudice reduction through IGC. Some students' negative attitudes may lead to negative relationships with out-group members and vice versa.

Surprisingly, vicarious, indirect, or mediated contact with out-groups appears to reduce prejudice even without direct contact. For example, vicarious contact during a sporting event lowered prejudice and changed stereotypes in a Spanish study (Gomez & Huici, 2008). Simply imagining contact reduced prejudice against ethnic out-groups in the United Kingdom and Mexico (Stathi & Crisp, 2008) and against gay men and older adults in two British studies (Turner, Crisp, & Lambert, 2007). Finally, Ortiz and Harwood (2007) found that watching positive television accounts of gay-straight and Black-White interactions reduced prejudice even without direct contact. These studies suggest that students who live in segregated areas can begin to reduce their prejudice if instruction includes exercises requiring intentional imaginary, vicarious, or media-based IGC.

Neurobiology research supports the contention that IGC may reduce prejudice. Though early neural functioning is formed during infancy and early childhood, the brain is dynamic. It is able to generate new neuronal pathways in response to new stimuli and experiences (Mundkur, 2005). Even into adulthood, the brain has shown its ability to construct new neural pathways that rewire the way we think or behave (Applegate & Shapiro, 2005; Schwartz & Begley, 2002). This rewiring of the brain is dependent on repeated thoughts and actions; the more use, the more likely the experience or thought will be sustained (Schwartz & Begley, 2002). Garland and Howard (2009) summarized results from several studies suggesting that cognitive-behavioral strategies have ameliorated symptoms and altered neural activity in mental health disorders such as depression, obsessive-compulsive disorder, and panic disorder (Goldapple et al., 2004; Schwartz & Begley, 2002). This research suggests that through exposure to new experiences and thoughts, attitudes and perceptions may change and become hardwired. Indeed, Garland and Howard (2009) assert that neuronal development is not unlike using physical exercise to build stronger muscle tissue; challenging social experiences can result in alteration of the brain tissue and brain activity.

Given these examples of brain changes related to mental health disorders, it is plausible that similar processes could apply to areas such as prejudice and stereotypes. This implies that prejudicial attitudes toward out-groups may be changed at the neural level through contact. It provides an evidence-based source of hope that students can change deeply engrained bias, prejudice, and negative out-group attitudes through well-designed social contact exercises.

IGC theory is thus a useful framework within which instructors can help their students reduce bias against out-group members. However, it is not a panacea, and at least four cautions are mentioned. First, although personal friendship with out-group members may reduce the sense of threat posed by difference (Page-Gould, Mendoza-Denton, & Tropp, 2008), some individuals' threat level may be so high that they never give IGC a chance in the first place. This is a type of vicious circle for instructors. For example, individuals who have low incomes or who were raised in poverty may feel greater threat from out-groups at a personal and group-based level (Pettigrew et al., 2008). IGC may cause students who feel deprived due to their own backgrounds and experiences to feel a greater sense of threat, and instructors must help them take their personal history into account.

Second, even though IGC reduces prejudice, it does not necessarily lead to social justice action as is required of social workers. Tropp (2009) noted that although trust is needed for prejudice reduction, such trust is sometimes misplaced, and contact may produce false expectations for equality. For example, in a cleverly designed classroom study, IGC failed to induce those students who were arbitrarily granted real power (course credit) to share with those who were given no power (worthless marbles). Students who received marbles were disappointed and surprised that their peers refused to share course credits even after mutual conversation designed to reveal shared group interests (Saguy, Tausch, Dovidio, & Pratto, 2009). The same report describes an Israeli study in which Arab Israelis had positive IGC with Jewish Israelis but, despite contact, failed to support social justice change actions.

In contrast to these studies, a national study of intergroup dialogue (IGD) found that participants expressed greater intent to be involved in social justice actions than did comparison groups with no IGD (Nagda, Gurin, Sorenson, Gurin-Sands, & Osuna, 2009). IGD's success in motivating participants to take social action was likely due to its intentional learning design. IGD is a stage-based, nontherapeutic, and facilitated group process designed to reduce prejudice and improve understanding among people of differing social identities. It is confidential and focused, and it occurs over a period of multiple sessions (Schoem & Hurtado, 2001) and requires participants to involve cognitive, affective, and experiential learning processes. Dessel, Rogger, and Garlington (2006) describe its use in social work.

For years, learning theorists have suggested that the most effective learning models are those that include cognitions, concrete experiences, and reflection (Kolb, 1984; Nagda et al., 2009), such as are provided by this type of dialogue. Bain (2004) suggested that we have constructed mental models throughout our life and that they are slow to change even in the face of overwhelming proof. Nagda et al. (2009) argue that for students to understand oppression, inequality, and disparity, they must have multicultural lab experiences analogous to lab work for the natural sciences. Therefore, instructors should explicitly include social justice activity as a required part of any classroom assignment designed to help students reduce prejudice through shared, equal status IGC. IGC alone may not lead to social justice advocacy, which is a required component of social work education.

Third, IGC does not appear to work similarly for minority versus majority individuals—an important point for educators. Pettigrew and Tropp (2011) reviewed their IGC meta-analysis data and explored differential prejudice-reduction effects for minority versus majority status participants. They noted that the issue has been underexamined so far; only 20% (142 samples) of their meta-analysis samples included minority–majority status effects. In this subsample, all participants experienced significant prejudice reduction with IGC. But, the effects were larger

for majority than minority participants. This was true for all minority status groups, including race/ethnicity, age, sexual orientation, disability, or mental illness.

Pettigrew and Tropp (2011) then considered other studies of minority–majority differences in IGC outcomes. They concluded that, indeed, minority–majority status did affect IGC’s ability to reduce prejudice and that this effect may be mediated by the minority participant’s perception of prior discrimination on entering the contact situation. For example, in a study of Black and White participants, Shelton and Richeson (2006) found that Black participants who reported significant prior discrimination were less likely to view IGC as positive than were Black participants who reported less prior discrimination. Thus, prior experiences and their resulting attitudes affect how positively minority status individuals may view IGC. Pettigrew and Tropp (2011) stated that minority group members “are likely to be tainted by histories of and experiences with prejudice and discrimination. Such prior intergroup experiences obviously can fuel negative expectations . . . and poison the intergroup relationship with continued suspicion and distrust” (p. 138).

We believe the potential for less IGC benefit for minority students can be reduced by careful attention to the design of classroom-based contact experiences. IGD was already mentioned as an ideal learning format. It is noteworthy that in an evaluation of IGD in higher education, Nagda, Kim, and Truelove (2004) found no differential effects in how minority and majority students benefited from the experience. This is likely because IGD intentionally recognizes and acknowledges minority group members’ prior discrimination as part of the process. IGD also recognizes minority dual identity perceptions and subgroup identities and is designed to increase cross-group friendship potential. Pettigrew and Tropp (2011) note the above points as important for achieving equal IGC benefit for majority and minority participants. Also, instructors should be mindful that the evidence generated by IGC research applies beyond race/ethnicity and should include intersecting social identities (intersectionality) in IGC assignments. Social work students of any social identity can seek a range of intergroup contexts to reduce personal prejudice against various out-groups (e.g., LGBTQ populations, immigrants, girls and women).

Finally, it is possible that people who harbor aversive racism may be particularly difficult to reach. Vorauer (2008) found that higher prejudice people (with both high explicit and high implicit prejudice) successfully generalized their contact experience and changed behavior toward out-group members as a result. But people with lower explicit prejudice coupled with higher implicit prejudice—who more likely resemble social workers—did not. These individuals left the IGC with greater self-insight but did not change behaviors toward out-group members.

PEDAGOGICAL AND RESEARCH SUGGESTIONS

Based on the above literature reviews, we conclude by summarizing six key strategies to help students reduce prejudice and discrimination and include a few key research suggestions.

First, IGC evidence posits that in order for prejudice to be reduced, anxiety must be lowered. Challenging and emotionally difficult learning of this nature cannot be accomplished in a classroom atmosphere of mistrust and student worry. The importance of safe learning environments has been noted in social work literature (e.g., Van Soest & Garcia, 2008). For prejudice reduction to occur, instructors must establish classrooms in which mutual respect, confidentiality, and an atmosphere of critical inquiry and dialogue are the norm.

Second, prejudice is most effectively lowered with combined cognitive and affective learning methods. In our classes, we introduce aversive racism and IGC didactically through lecture and required reading, inviting students to critically examine both theory and evidence. Intersectionality is introduced early in the course to acknowledge multiple intersecting identities. Students are required to engage intellectually with the material and are held accountable for theory knowledge in course exams and assignments. They are encouraged to examine their own prejudice with a reminder that aversive racism is considered normal human behavior—part of how we are all wired through social conditioning. When presented in a classroom in which emotional safety and mutual respect have been established, both dominant and minority status students are able to place their own experiences within the theory frame. White students admit to worrying about saying the wrong thing in interracial situations or being seen as racist unintentionally. Students of color are relieved to learn that their experiences of subtle racism have been validated through empirical research. Students identify media and personal examples of ambiguous discrimination in their daily lives, explore how segregation affects their routine daily lives, and share experiences together in small group discussions. Both theories are presented in the context of the NASW Code of Ethics (NASW, 2008), which requires cultural competence as part of ethical practice. Both BSW and MSW students quickly grasp the threat unconscious prejudice and subtle discrimination pose to their developing cultural competence. IGC is presented as one way to help reduce this threat.

Third, cognitive learning strategies should be coupled with experiential activities that engage students emotionally. If prejudice reduction is a learning goal, instructors should design experiential assignments that adhere to the contact conditions put forth by IGC theory as much as possible (e.g., equal status, common goals, shared cooperation, mutually shared adherence to the same custom, law or authorities, and friendship potential). For example, students could be presented a range of experiential learning choices, such as joining in the activities of diverse student groups on campus, engaging with diverse community or faith-based groups in social justice activities, or joining in political action with diverse others.

Directed IGC activities designed to reduce prejudice are especially important in geographic areas where high macro-level segregation reduces routine interracial contacts. In fact, many White students in our classes report that they rarely interact with people of color except as their clients in social service settings. This presents a serious problem in terms of prejudice reduction since client interactions are neither friendship producing nor equal status. In fact, in involuntary service contexts, none of the contact conditions is likely. Thus, the worker–client interaction is particularly unlikely to reduce prejudice per IGC theory.

IGC research has not addressed what occurs if individuals' only IGC occurs in social situations that flagrantly violate the contact conditions, such as students' repeated contact with lower-status clients. If equal status contact helps reduce prejudice, does routine unequal, nonfriendship potential and noncollaborative contact serve to reinforce and increase prejudice, especially when such contact is sanctioned by the social service employment agency? This question appears not to have been addressed in the IGC literature. Its theoretical possibility should challenge instructors of students who lead segregated lives with little equal-status interracial contact. At the very least, students should be advised that contact with diverse clients definitely does not qualify as a prejudice reduction activity, according to IGC theory. Students should be encouraged to seek routine, equal-status IGC in the context of their daily lives. We strongly recommend that social work education researchers begin empirical examination of this missing area of IGC research

since the structure of social service delivery sets up such unhealthy, unequal social worker–client IGC contact situations routinely.

Fourth, although IGC reduces prejudice and increases comfort with people viewed as different, it is less likely to lead to behavior change unless coupled with social justice activities. As mentioned earlier, IGD is a stage-based group work method that includes social justice action as part of its process (Rodenborg & Bosch, 2009). In our classes, students are required to share a personal cultural competence plan at the closure of IGD and in a written paper; it includes social justice action. Instructors can include social justice planning in many typical assignments, such as group presentation, final papers, or small group discussion.

Fifth, instructors in geographic regions with racially homogenous populations can make use of media and social networking methods to enhance the diversity of their students' indirect contacts. Research suggests that this may be as effective as direct intergroup contact.

Finally, it is essential that instructors be actively engaged in their own work. Instructors are just as susceptible to the conditions that create aversive racism as their students. Instructors must be aware of the influences of their personal individual histories and constantly vigilant in identifying and recognizing their own stereotypes and bias. Once recognized, instructors can use cognitive behavioral techniques as effectively on themselves as with their students. Applying social contact theory to their own lives suggests that instructors should proactively create a network of friends and family that hold differing social identity categories. This work will not only enhance the instructor's personal life but should create a more authentic learning environment in the classroom and model responsible and ethical lifelong learning for students.

SUMMARY

This article presented aversive racism and IGC theories as a pedagogical resource for social work educators. Together, they present a large body of empirical data from which instructors can draw to improve cultural competence learning. The theories guide instructors to create learning activities that help students identify and reduce discrimination and prejudice. The theories take into account the segregated macro-level social context in which many students live and contribute to students' overall cultural competence learning.

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