Is it possible to enhance positive attitudes towards people with disability? A training with Italian university students

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Abstract

Attitudes towards disability could influence behaviours, social interactions and inclusion of people with disabilities. Researchers have demonstrated that contact experiences and educational trainings improve positive attitudes towards disability and enhance the representation of the disabled person. The present study explored the effects of a training based on virtual contact with disabled people and experiences of disabled conditions in order to enhance positive attitudes and representation of disabled people in a sample of 131 Italian university students (115 females) aged between 21 and 30 years. A questionnaire concerning social attitudes towards disability and a Semantic Differential about the disabled person was used. Results revealed that, after the training, university students expressed more positive attitudes towards disabled people and showed a more positive representation of the disabled person.

Keywords: Representation of disability; training; virtual contact; attitudes towards disability.

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1. Introduction

Attitudes towards disability constitute a relevant issue in educational psychology, as attitudes influence behaviours, social interactions and inclusion of people with disabilities (Dunn, 2015; Hutzler, Meier, Reuker & Zitomer, 2019; Taylor & Yun, 2012). Negative attitudes and representations can create substantial barriers for people with disabilities (Antonak & Livneh, 2000); in this sense, scholars have reported that negative attitudes reduce expectations to disabled people and decrease their learning opportunities (Cook, Cameron & Tankersley 2007; Forlin, Tait, Carroll& Jobling, 1999). Furthermore, as underlined by Abbott and McConkey (2006), individuals with disabilities are aware of negative attitudes towards them and this awareness could contribute to promoting negative self-evaluations, feelings of powerlessness and frustration (Jahoda & Markova, 2004). On the contrary, positive attitudes could facilitate the integration of disabled persons (Bacon & Schultz, 1991; Findler, Vilchinsky & Werner, 2007). Siperstein, Parker, Norins and Widaman (2007) found that only when youths perceived that students with intellectual disability were competent in academic tasks, they were willing to interact with them and support their inclusion in the school system.

Several studies have analysed social attitudes towards disability and showed conflicting data in relation to attitudes and social representations. In reference to studies involving teachers, for example, a discrepancy between positive declarations expressed towards disabled persons and a negative representation of them was noted (De Caroli & Sagone, 2008; De Caroli, Sagone & Falanga, 2007); moreover, Deng (2008) displayed that teachers showed positive attitudes towards the inclusion of disabled students in special schools, but, at the same time, they were in favour of the mainstream education.

The relevance of the study about attitudes towards disability and its representation has focused scientific attention on the topic of best strategies functional to change social attitudes towards disabled people, especially through contact in reference to All port's model (1954). Researchers found that an intense contact with individuals with disabilities promoted favourable attitudes towards these individuals (Hunt & Hunt, 2000; Hutchinson et al., 2014; Kalyva & Agaliotis, 2009; McDougall, DeWit, King, Miller & Killip, 2004; Seo & Chen 2009).

Eichinger, Rizzo and Sirotnik (1991) noted that, compared with the control group, college students, exposed for 10 weeks to an intervention consisting of information, contact and persuasive messages, significantly improved their attitudes towards disabilities. Forlin et al. (1999) pointed out that teachers attending training courses and who had daily contact with disabled people perceived less discomfort with such interactions than those who had contact less than every 3 months. More recently, in a study on pre-service teachers from Australia, Canada, Hong Kong and Singapore, Sharma, Forlin and Loreman (2008) reported positive effects of trainings in inclusive education based on contact with disabled people in relation to attitudes towards inclusion, their sentiments about people with a disability and their concerns about inclusion. Fichten, Schipper, and Cutler (2005) found a reduction in social distance perceived towards disabled adults in a group of volunteers who worked with disabled children. Similarly, Li and Wang (2013) observed that a 1-week voluntary exposure to special Olympic Games can enhance positive attitudes towards the inclusion of people with intellectual disabilities.

Campbell, Gilmore and Cuskelly (2003) reported positive effects of training of one semester addressed to pre-service teacher education students, and focused on formal instruction with structured fieldwork experiences, revealing more positive attitudes towards the inclusive education of children with Down syndrome and a great comfort when interacting with people with disabilities. So, in a sample of Italian college students, Falanga, De Caroli, and Sagone (2011) explored the effects of congress activities, focused on deepening the knowledge of intellectual disabilities and methods to approach them, realised into a rehabilitation centre that houses people with intellectual disabilities and attended activities of ergo-therapy. The congress activities provided direct contact with disabled people living in the centre who engaged in daily activities indicated in the programmes of rehabilitation. The authors showed that, after contact, students in the experimental group increased

their perception of a disabled person to a resourceful and sociable person from a burden to the society, limitation to the family, unintelligible subject and a different person; they improved their evaluation of integration as useful strategy to facilitate positive contact and of rehabilitative services; they also assessed the disabled person as a competent and appreciable subject, but even more problematic.

In a recent meta-analysis carried out with data of college students, Case, Schram, Jung, Leung and Yun (2020) found that different service-learning programmes have different effects, and the factors of requirement status and type of involvement may lead to significant changes in attitudes towards disability.

Although these results support the effectiveness of contact, we can find studies that did not support it. For example, Salih and Al-Kandari (2007) noted that prospective educators who completed a 16-weeks course about social work, based on the lecture and fieldwork in social, health or educational sites, maintained their negative attitudes towards individuals with mental retardation after the course. A possible explanation of different results could be due to the 'quality of contact' linked to institutional support, long and extensive interaction, equal status, cooperative and interdependent relationships, as underlined by All port's model (1954). In this direction, other studies confirmed that the quality of contact was a dominant factor in the reduction of negative attitudes towards people with disability (Au & Man, 2006; McManus, Feyes & Saucier, 2010). Furthermore, Wong (2008) found that, when inclusion of disabled people was realised in a competitive and achievement setting, strong barriers to the adoption of effective inclusive practices were developed.

In light of these considerations, the present study explored the effects of a training based on virtual contact with disabled people and the experience to find out for oneself the conditions of disability, to enhance positive attitudes towards a disabled person and representation of disabled people.

2. Purpose of the study

The main purpose of the current study was to analyse changes after training in relation to attitudes towards disability and representation of disabled people. In detail, we expected that after training:

- H_1 university students will express more positive attitudes towards disabled people;
- H_2 university students will show a more positive representation of the disabled person.

3. Methodology

3.1. Sample

The sample consisted of 131 Italian university students (115 females) aged between 21 and 30 years (*M* = 23, 77, *SD* = 1.98) attending the degree course of Psychology at the Department of Educational Science, University of Catania, Italy.

Researchers followed the ethical code for Italian psychologists (L. 18.02.1989, n. 56), the ethical code for psychological research (reviewed in March 27, 2015) by the Italian Psychologists Association, and the DL for data privacy (DLGS 196/2003).

3.2. Measures

We used the questionnaire on social attitudes towards disability (see Falanga et al., 2011) divided into three areas consisting of items evaluated on a 7-pointLikert-typescale (from 1 = totally disagree to 7 = totally agree) connected to:

- Achievable goals: seven items (it1 – to be accepted as he/she is; it2 – to be introduced into the world of work; it3 – to achieve personal autonomy; it4 – to go out of the condition of

disability; it5 – to contribute to greater awareness of disability; it6 – to get married and build own family; it7 – to take part in political life).

- Individual characteristics: nine items (it1 – a disabled person is a problematic element for the classroom; it2 – a resource for others; it3 – a person with difficulties in social integration; it4 – a special and sensitive person; it5 – a person like other people; it6 – a person who needs care and attention; it7 – a person socially excluded by others; it8 – an unfortunate person; it9 – a child who puts a strain on the skills of parents).
- Feelings: seven items (it1 – feelings towards disabled person are warmth and tenderness; it2 – sorrow; it3 – inadequacy and powerlessness; it4 – suffering; it5 – protection against external difficulties; it6 – anger for their condition of disability; it7 – personal professional realisation for the improvements achieved by disabled people.

The Semantic Differential (Falanga et al., 2011; Osgood, Tannenbaum & Suci, 1957) with 36 pairs of opposite adjectives was evaluated on a 7-pointLikert-typescale (with the intermediate value equal to 4) to assess the representation of 'the disabled person'.

The measures were administered to university students before and after the training was attended.

3.3. Training

The training was realised in a group setting during a laboratory session on psychology of prejudice and it was articulated in two main areas:

- virtual contact (see De Caroli et al., 2005); and
- experiences of disabled conditions.

In relation to the first area, movies referring to stories of people with intellectual disability and visual impairment were proposed. After movies showing, university students were involved in a group discussion concerning the social and prejudicial attitudes towards disability. In addition, university students attended a presentation of video interviews with disabled people and they were then was asked to write a presentation letter putting oneself in the disabled person's shoes.

In reference to experience of disabled conditions, three situations referring to visual impairment were structured:

- blindfolded students who explored classrooms and common areas of the departmental building with a seeing student as a guide;
- seeing students who guided blindfolded ones;
- seeing students who observed relational dynamics between blindfolded and seeing students.

After the activities, the university students were asked to comment on their experiences. These activities took place twice a week and they lasted for 3 hours; all the activities ended after 1 month.

3.4. Data analysis

The examination of the statistical significance of results was carried out using the Statistical Package for Social Science 20.0 software, by means of the paired sample *t*-test. The participation at training was used as an independent variable (pre- and post-training).

4. Results

4.1. Attitudes towards disabled people

Comparing the results obtained in pre- and post-training, the university students shared the idea that disabled people could achieve personal autonomy ($t = −3.528$, $p < 0.001$),take part in political life ($t = −3.366$, $p < 0.001$), thought that disabled people before training were less than special and

sensitive (*t* = 2.332, *p* = 0.02) and unfortunate people (*t* = 2.846, *p* = 0.005) and need special attention (*t* = 7.221, *p* < 0.001); in relation to feelings, they felt less warmth and tenderness (*t* = 4.092, *p* < 0.001) in post-training.

Table 1. Attitudes towards a disabled person before and after the training – Total sample

Areas	Items	Pre-training M (SD)	Post-training M (SD)	*t*	*p*
Achievable goals	Achieve personal autonomy	5.13 (1.27)	5.50 (1.11)	−3.528	0.001
	Take part in political life	5.39 (1.40)	5.71 (1.17)	−3.366	0.001
Individual characteristics	Special and sensitive	5.43 (1.32)	5.17 (1.43)	2.332	0.02
	Unfortunate people	5.62 (1.01)	4.93 (1.04)	2.846	0.005
	Need special attention	3.66 (1.78)	3.27 (1.70)	7.221	0.001
Feelings	Warmth and tenderness	6.03 (1.04)	5.71 (1.10)	4.092	0.001

4.2. Representation of the disabled person

After training, the university students showed a more positive representation of the disabled person (*t* = −3.751, *p* < 0.001) (pre-training: *M* = 4.27; SD = .49 *vs.* post-training: *M* = 4.40; SD = 0.50).

From the comparison between results obtained in the pre- and post-training, significant differences in the analysis of pairs of opposite adjectives were found (Table 2). University students assessed the disabled person as less dependent (*t* = −5.943, *p* < 0.001), pacific (*t* = −2.199, *p* = 0.03), weak (*t* = −2.526, *p* = 0.01), insecure (*t* = −3.283, *p* = 0.001), slow (*t* = −3.911, *p* < 0.001), unsatisfied (*t* = −3.117, *p* = 0.002),more optimistic (*t* = −2.129, *p* = 0.03), active (*t* = −2.832, *p* = 0.005), capable (*t* = −3.258, *p* = 0.001), hard (*t* = 3.140, *p* = 0.002) and efficient (*t* = −3.267, *p* = 0.001).

Table 2. Opposite adjectives before and after training – total sample

Adjective	Pre-training M (SD)	Post-training M (SD)	Adjective
Dependent	2.64 (.98)	3.24 (1.09)	Independent
Pacific	3.44 (1.05)	3.68 (1.04)	Aggressive
Pessimistic	4.19 (1.18)	4.42 (1.16)	Optimistic
Weak	3.45 (1.51)	3.82 (1.46)	Resistant
Passive	4.12 (1.22)	4.47 (1.12)	Active
Insecure	3.28 (1.09)	3.61 (1.07)	Secure
Slow	3.16 (.86)	3.46 (.84)	Fast
Incapable	4.58 (1.19)	4.91 (1.10)	Capable
Inefficient	4.55 (1.04)	4.85 (.96)	Efficient
Unsatisfied	3.54 (1.12)	3.84 (1.02)	Satisfied
Soft	5.29 (1.07)	5.00 (1.09)	Hard

5. Discussion and conclusion

The results in relation to attitudes and representation seemed to provide a more positive image of the disabled person. Although university students already showed positive attitudes towards disabled people before the training, they believed to a greater extent that disabled people could achieve personal autonomy, take part in political life and to a lesser extent that disabled are special and sensitive and unfortunate people with special attention; these changes were registered after the training.

These findings define a new profile of disabled people, who are considered more able to reach important goals linked to autonomy and participation in political decision-making. Furthermore, the idea that people with disability are special, sensitive and unfortunate individuals is modified and made way for a portrait of disabled people more closed to 'normal' or typically developed people. In relation

to feelings, differences emerged for warmth and tenderness, feelings habitually linked to children and young people. More specifically, after training, the university students felt to a lesser extent warmth and tenderness towards disabled people, considering disabled people to be more adults than before training.

In pre-training, university students displayed a representation of the disabled person around the intermediate point, while in post-training they showed a general more positive representation of the disabled person. In detail, from the comparison between pre- and post-trainings, it emerged that university students assessed the disabled person as less dependent, pacific, weak, insecure, slow and unsatisfied. At same time, university students represented the disabled person as more optimistic, active, capable, hard and efficient. In this sense, they attributed negative traits to disabled person less than before training, especially in relation to dynamics characteristics; therefore, they represented the disabled person as an active individual and the main character of his/her life.

This study suggests that training positively affects the attitudes towards disability and the representation of disabled people. Future research could deepen the effectiveness of training in other age groups and training effects over time.

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