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Putting theory into peaceful practice: insights and reflections on the process of co-producing a school-based intergroup relations intervention with teachers

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Putting theory into peaceful practice: insights and reflections on the process of co-producing a school-based intergroup relations intervention with teachers

With the increasing ethnic diversity in school classrooms globally, understanding how best to harness intergroup contact and promote social cohesion is a timely challenge for science, policy, and practice alike. There is an urgent need, therefore, for applied social psychological research that bridges theory and practice in the pursuit of peace. The present paper reflects on the process of working with teachers in ethnically diverse secondary schools in England to co-produce an intervention that aimed to promote better intergroup relations amongst 11-year-old school students. Through a series of workshops, we co-created a theoretically informed intervention that was then implemented and evaluated in schools. In this paper we discuss our approach to the development of our intervention. We then conduct a strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats analysis of our research process and approach to co-production and offer recommendations for researchers aiming to carry out applied research in the pursuit of peace. The appropriateness of social psychological frameworks for promoting intergroup relations and in turn, peace in real-world contexts and implications for future research and practice are discussed.

Keywords: diversity, peace, education, teachers, schools

Public significance statement: the present paper offers a unique insight into the strengths,, weaknesses, opportunities and threats of working in co-production with educators to design peacebuilding initiatives. Lessons-learned from our intervention demonstrate the need to build strong working relationships, to be transparent, to agree roles and responsibilities, to be flexible and to recognise the strengths and limitations of applied research.

Putting theory into peaceful practice: insights and reflections on the process of co-producing a school-based intergroup relations intervention with teachers

Social psychology is awash with theoretical perspectives that have potential to make substantial contributions to policy and practice in the pursuit of peaceful intergroup relations. To date, however, social psychology researchers interested in promoting intergroup relations have not taken full advantage of this potential, traditionally conducting basic research, isolated from the field, under the premise that it is crucial to isolate cause and effect in our research designs (Paluck et al., 2019; Paluck et al., 2021). We argue that whilst this basic research is essential and has transformed our understanding of psychological processes, there is a danger that researchers will never truly ascertain if, how, and when our theoretical frameworks can be applied to promote peace if we remain detached from the field. This concern is not new. Indeed, social psychologists including Lewin (1946), Helmreich (1975) and more recently Giner-Sorolla (2018) have questioned the relevance of social psychological research for tackling real world issues. And, whilst many of the critiques raised by expert commentators still apply to modern social psychology, our view is that putting theory into practice (Bruneau, 2015) is an essential part of the research process for those who wish to promote intergroup relations and in turn, peace. This is because it is only through engaging with both basic and applied research that we can conduct a robust test of our theories and facilitate theory development.

The potential of bringing research into practice in the promotion of peace can be found in the growing body of field research in the social psychology of intergroup relations. Notable contributions include Acar et al.'s (2020) seminal book on *Researching Peace, Conflict and Power in the Field* where the promises and pitfalls of field research are discussed in depth across contexts and substantial reviews of field research on prejudice reduction (see Paluck & Green, 2009; Paluck et al., 2019 for examples) as well as applied intergroup contact theory (Vezzali & Stathi, 2020). Further contributions include careful reflections and recommendations on how researchers can make the most of applied research, given incentive structures that often prioritise laboratory-based research (see Giner-Sorolla, 2018 for an overview) as well as how we can make our research more relevant in a mutually beneficial way for academics, policymakers, and practitioners alike (see Schalaet et al. 2020). Whilst many advocate for action research (e.g., community based or practitioner-led research) and argue that this is an ideal, other approaches such as Schalaet et al.'s (2020) relational model of public engagement argues that as researchers, we do not need to choose between either being disseminators of knowledge or action researchers but rather we can create a relationship with beneficiaries that combines partnership and independence. Building on these important contributions, we argue that applied social psychological research may work best in promoting intergroup relations and in turn peace when researchers work closely with practitioners to co-create knowledge, implement research, and evaluate research and interventions. It is this process of co-creating knowledge, known as co-production, in the pursuit of peace that we focus on in the present paper.

Recognising the potential of social psychological theory for peaceful practice, we report on the process of collaborating with teachers from four secondary schools in the co-design of an intervention that aimed to promote better intergroup relations amongst 11-year-old young people attending ethnically diverse secondary schools in England as part of the Diversity Effect project. This is under the premise that by promoting intergroup relations, we also promote more peaceful relations in society. Focusing on categories of practice, we examined ethnic relations between adolescents who are UK born and self-identify with one of the three largest ethnic groups in the UK (ONS, 2018). That is, either White (British/English), Black/Black British or South Asian/South Asian British. Note that in the UK context, the term ethnicity is often used instead of race and as such, we use these categorisations. The broader project involved two components: (1) a longitudinal survey to examine the effects of intergroup contact on youth social attitudes and educational outcomes; and, (2) the design and evaluation of a co-produced intervention to examine how to best harness intergroup contact to promote intergroup relations and in turn, peace. It is the second part of the project that we focus on in this paper- specifically the process of designing the intervention (see intervention content for full details of the intervention).

Unlike typical empirical or theoretical contributions to the research base, we do not report qualitative or quantitative results in this paper; instead, we take a step back to reflect on the approach to co-production taken in our research including how we worked with teachers to design and implement our intervention. In doing so, we offer recommendations for researchers who wish to embark on such applied research in the pursuit of peace in social psychology. To our knowledge few studies in the social psychology of intergroup relations have used co-production to design an intervention with teachers. We hope that this paper contributes to the literature by detailing this process for those who wish to follow such an approach in the future. Whilst we recognise that substantial research has used co-production outside of psychology (and indeed in educational and developmental psychology) and much research on intergroup contact theory has been applied (see Vezzali & Stathi 2020 for an excellent overview) we believe that there are extra challenges when it comes to carrying out research in co-production on sensitive issues such as ethnic relations.

In the sections that follow, we introduce the importance of co-production in applied research, and then the process of co-production adopted in the co-design of our intervention. This includes detailing the theoretical premises for each component of the intervention and how the overall approach was shaped in collaboration with the teachers to implement in school classrooms, considering the socio-political environment in England at the time. We argue in favour of the importance of developing co-produced approaches to research, but also caution some of the challenges of working with teachers and young people to conduct research in the field. We end the paper with a strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (SWOT) analysis of our research process and our approach to co-production and put forward recommendations for researchers drawing on the lessons we have learned.

Co-production in Applied Social Psychological Research

Researchers in social psychology, and psychology more broadly, tend to divide research into what is known as basic research and what is known as applied research. Although some argue that this is a false dichotomy (Helmreich, 1975), basic research tends to be concerned with theory-driven hypothesis testing in the pursuit of objectivity and is often more incentivised (Giner-Sorolla, 2018), whilst applied research is concerned with taking theory into the field to make a difference in real-world settings. In line with Lewin (1946), our view is that these two forms of research should not be seen as mutually exclusive – basic research should inform applied research and vice-versa, because together they can inform a stronger understanding of social reality. We recognise, however, that this is an ideal that is not always or easily achieved in practice (Giner-Sorolla, 2018) and consequently researchers must consider whether and how their research can inform practice in line with incentive structures alongside any desires to challenge social injustice through their research in the pursuit of peace. For example, discerning the possibilities of publishing applied research, which often takes a long time to conduct, in high impact-factor journals, and the knock-on effects this can have for career development in terms of research assessment exercises and promotion if a consequence of conducting applied research is publishing less and/or in lower impact journals (of course, this is not always the case but is an important consideration). The present paper is concerned with reviewing and reflecting an approach to applied research in social psychology that involved co-production between researchers and teachers with the aim of informing research and influencing practice.

Co-production has become increasingly popular across disciplines (Facer & Pahl, 2017) and can be understood as a partnership between academics and non-academics in the pursuit of research; a partnership that goes beyond non-academics as simply users of a service or intervention, involving them instead as designers and/or evaluators. Co-production can have advantages for both academics and non-academics – through a process of knowledge-exchange and mutual understanding, researchers learn about the challenges and needs of those in the field, and organisations can gain further scientific understanding and work to co-create theory-informed solutions to practical problems. Whilst co-production has grown in popularity, the reasons behind its development and its effectiveness are contested (Durose et al. 2012) and there is currently no agreed model on what co-production should or does look like in practice. Despite this, effective co-production has found to have wide-reaching societal benefits not only for the organisations that have taken part directly but also for informing policy and/or practice at the local community or even national level (Rossi et al., 2017). Indeed, there is evidence of co-produced research transforming health, education, and policing services (Cherney, 2013).

Co-production between academics and non-academics, therefore, offers exciting opportunities for social psychologists who are working towards the goal of promoting peace, enabling the co-creation of knowledge in a way that can impact upon policy and practice in the field whilst at the same time feeding back into our theoretical understanding. Understood in this way, the premise of co-production broadly aligns with Schalaet et al.'s (2020) relational model of public engagement where the focus is on building strong relationships and partnering with key stakeholders in some domains (e.g., dissemination) whilst retaining independence in others (e.g. evaluation design) in a way that promotes positive outcomes for all involved. In the present research, we reflect on the process of working with teachers in the co-production of an intervention that aimed to promote intergroup relations between students from different ethnic groups in England. This goes beyond the traditional approaches of applied research in social psychology that involve users, for example teachers, as delivers of an intervention and instead actively involves them in the design of an intervention. Next, we present the theoretical approaches underlying the intervention, and then we review the process of co-production followed in the present research.

The Diversity Effect Project

The intervention we discuss in this paper was designed as part of the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) funded *Diversity Effect* project led by the first author. The broader project aimed to combine both basic (longitudinal survey) and applied (co-produced intervention development) approaches to social psychological research to understand the effects of intergroup contact and then, when intergroup contact is present how it can be best harnessed to promote intergroup relations. More specifically, the project involved conducting a series of surveys amongst 11-year-old young people attending ethnically diverse secondary schools in England, and the design of an intervention aiming to promote intergroup relations in collaboration with teachers, as well as an evaluation of the intervention. The aim of the intervention was to understand and evaluate whether we could promote better intergroup relations which is directly connected to positive peace; by addressing difference, challenging stereotypes, and promoting empathy.

The project was situated in an ethnically diverse city in the South of England where approximately 16% of the population identify as belonging to an ethnic minority group. Across England there has been increasing levels of ethnic diversity present in schools (UK Government, 2020) and tensions between different ethnic groups dominated the headlines in the run up to and during the project (Khomami, 2018; UK Home Office, 2018). For example, a report by the Metropolitan Police on hate crimes in or near English schools between the years 2014 and early 2019 indicated that the number of reported racial and ethnicity-related hate crimes was by far the highest in type (Metropolitan Police, 2019), with a 48% increase in these crimes between 2015 and 2017 (Khomami, 2018; Metropolitan Police, 2019). Promoting intergroup relations, therefore, was and continues to be central to UK policy, evidenced in the Integrated Communities Strategy (UK Government, 2018).

The Diversity Effect project aimed to collaborate with teachers to create research-informed teaching materials that could promote intergroup relations amongst students in their classrooms. The underlying premise of the project was that having students from different ethnic backgrounds co-located is important in reducing prejudice, but that more needs to be done to promote *meaningful* (*vs.* incidental, or trivial) interactions, and to challenge social injustice and promote peaceful intergroup relations. With that in mind, the project is informed by intergroup contact theory but also draws on how and why intergroup contact works best in promoting intergroup relations, and in turn peace, focusing specifically on the school context.

The contact hypothesis (Allport, 1954), often used as an approach to build peace, is premised on the notion that, under certain conditions, good quality contact with members of the outgroup will reduce prejudice and improve intergroup relations. It is now widely recognized that contact does lead to reduced prejudice, especially following the seminal meta-analysis of Pettigrew and Tropp (2006). Drawing on empirical literature that has highlighted the processes involved in the role of contact (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2008; Thijs & Verkuyten, 2014), we developed an intervention that aimed to: provide knowledge about diverse races and ethnicities; challenge negative stereotypes and celebrate difference; promote perspective-taking and empathy; and, finally, encourage a shared identity that promotes diverse friendships. At the same time, we aimed to address some of the areas that have been identified for development and further research, including moving beyond dyadic majority-minority testing, and conducting real world ‘on the ground’ research (McKeown & Dixon, 2017; Paluck et al., 2019). As such, we aimed to use the knowledge obtained through basic research to conduct a robust test of theory in the field through a process of co-production- moving beyond typical applications of contact theory in classroom settings.

Co-producing the intervention

Having established the key theoretical components that were important in promoting peaceful intergroup relations in diverse settings (where intergroup contact was already present) and as relevant to the school context, we sought to share these perspectives with teachers and through collaboration, develop intervention materials informed by these theoretical perspectives. Before embarking on this process, however, we carefully considered the approach to co-production we would follow to ensure mutual understanding and prevent conflict. We quickly realised, however, that there is no agreed model of co-production, and that co-production can work in many ways and can be context and project dependent. Martin (2010), for example argues that co-production can take many forms, with practitioners ranging from being informants, recipients, endorsers, commissioners, or co-researchers. One approach is whereby practitioners act as informants to a research agenda, for example through stakeholder groups, and are not actively involved in the process of engaging in sharing the research or pushing policy agendas. Another form is where practitioners are recipients such that results from research are published in a wide variety of ways to ensure that all relevant audiences are reached. This might include practice and policy articles, sharing findings at practice- or policy-focussed conferences, engaging in media interviews, and researchers delivering workshops and seminars to assist with knowledge transfer.

Whilst some frameworks of co-production are useful to consider, it is important to recognise that co-production as an approach grew out of concern with applied research often being conducted in the absence of the involvement of communities in the design and carrying out of the research (Durose et al. 2012). This, therefore, suggests that at a basic level, true co-production is that which aims to go beyond involving practitioners as mere informants or disseminators of knowledge in a research project.

In the Diversity Effect project, we wanted to work with teachers as co-producers of knowledge through the co-creation of intervention materials with us as researchers. As such, teachers were not merely informants or recipients but were actively involved in the project, although not to the extent of being co-researchers in terms of collecting and analysing the evaluation data. This contrasts with much of the applied research in the social psychology of intergroup relations where schools are typically used as sites of data collection and teachers as data gathers or intervention deliverers. We followed this approach under the premise that, although we know the research literature, we are not teachers ourselves, and that teachers would be best placed to support the design of materials that would be age- and context-appropriate for school classrooms. And that through engaging with established research, that teachers will develop their own practice and build capacity in terms of both intervention design and engaging in research-informed teaching. It is this richness of bringing together expertise that we sought in our project in designing the intervention, whilst enabling us to maintain some autonomy in terms of research evaluation design and implementation (see Schalet et al. 2020 for an overview of the advantages of this).

As a first step in developing relationships with schools, we shared our ideas and sought school leader support for the project at the funding application stage. All secondary schools within the city that the research took place and that had at least 30% of students from a minority ethnic background were invited to take part in the research via email. We then, discussed the project in more depth with those that were interested in participating. At this stage, three of the schools provided letters of support for the project to be included in the grant application. This enabled us to develop a relationship with the schools from the outset of the project and whilst this supported engagement, we recognise in hindsight that an even stronger approach would have been to involve teachers in the co-design of the grant application itself. We return to this point later in our SWOT analysis. Following obtaining the successful outcome of the grant application, the schools were contacted once again and at this stage, a fourth school agreed to participate in the research.

Once the project started, we held various meetings with senior leaders in each of the schools once the funding was awarded, to build a shared understanding of the project aims, the roles and responsibilities of the researchers, schools, and other stakeholders and how the project would be implemented. Commenters have argued for the importance of creating a strong partnership between researchers and teachers that enables the successful implementation of educational interventions (Parsons et al., 2013). Indeed, effective collaboration between researchers and teachers is said to be one in which there are mutual goals, a clear focus and ongoing evaluation where ideas and experiences on the research topic are implemented, evaluated, and developed for the mutual satisfaction of both sides. There can, however, be challenges associated with research of this nature. For example, schools may not be able to promise a strong commitment to co-production due to the school being a busy and complex working environment and, if involved in research, teachers may feel excluded or even exploited as some may perceive the collaboration as a one-way transmission of expertise from researchers to teachers (Bickel et al., 1995). This may be especially true if the research is not perceived to be closely aligned to the school's educational goals (e.g., around attainment) or if the topic proposed in the research is socially or politically sensitive, such as in our research on ethnic relations.

Following the initial project planning and survey data collection phase, we worked with teachers from different ethnic groups in each school to co-design the intervention. Senior leaders shared the details of the project and the expected time commitment to either Year 7 (age 11-12) tutors or Personal, Social, Health and Economic (PSHE) Education teachers in each of the schools. Teachers were not assigned to take part and were instead asked to volunteer if they wished to be involved; this approach was requested by the schools as it was felt that teachers should not be forced to take part in designing an intervention and rather, should be given a choice to participate. We speculate that this may because our research was addressing a sensitive topic and that we may have had a different response regarding randomisation to conditions if our research was on a more salient education-related topic such as language development. Working with our schools and teachers in this way had the advantage of building collaboration rather than being imposed top-down, but it did mean that there was a confound in terms of which classes were in the intervention group and which were in the control group, with the former likely disproportionately consisting of teachers particularly interested in promoting intergroup relations and as a consequence, teachers not involved were less familiar with the research when we carried out the surveys. This is one of the reasons why having pre and post-tests for all classes can be particularly important in applied research of this nature, alongside using robust statistical methods (e.g., multi-level modelling) to determine any potential class level effects. We return to this limitation of our research in our later SWOT analysis.

In each school, up to four Year 7 tutors or PSHE teachers volunteered to take part in designing and delivering the intervention. The research team included one Black researcher and one White researcher at the intervention design stage and two White researchers at intervention evaluation stage. At least one teacher involved in the intervention delivery in each school was from an ethnic minority group. Teachers were either compensated for their time with a small monetary incentive if they participated after school or the school was given funds to pay for teacher cover where the intervention design sessions took place during school hours. Workshops to develop the intervention materials were held with teachers at a time of their convenience, either during or after school, during March 2017- April 2018. All meetings were audio-recorded for record keeping purposes, and permission to record the sessions was sought from teachers. The structure of the workshops was as follows:

Workshop 1: Sharing ideas

The first workshop was designed to inform teachers of the research (including full details of the methods), provide background to relevant theory, and to share intervention design ideas. We presented the main theoretical principals relevant to the intervention, and then we engaged in rich discussion with the teachers about how we could implement these principles in practice, for example, how we could teach perspective-taking. The teachers were highly engaged in the process and discussions, making suggestions for how to ensure that the materials were both teacher- and student-friendly by detailing learning outcomes, including a handbook as well as slides and materials, and offering some flexibility for teachers to make sessions their own. One school also suggested it would be useful to have both shorter and longer versions of the intervention; shorter versions for classes of around 20 minutes and longer versions for classes of around 40 minutes.

Workshop 2: Receiving feedback

The second workshop was designed to review and get feedback on a draft of the intervention materials developed from the first meeting. We presented our designed intervention materials based on our previous discussions. We then went through each session and teachers noted which areas required more work and how to generally strengthen the content. For example, teachers in one workshop stressed the importance of ensuring that language was accessible to a range of abilities, whilst teachers in another were keen that the materials enabled opportunities for reflection by adding “Food for Thought” points at the end of each session. The differences between the shorter and longer sessions were also discussed to ensure that the longer versions allowed for more in-depth discussion.

Workshop 3: Training

The final workshop involved the handover of intervention materials and a Q&A opportunity. In each school, we shared the final materials that had been revised based on the previous workshop. We then discussed with teachers when and how the intervention would be implemented and evaluated in their school. In our evaluation of the intervention three schools used the short version of the intervention and one school used the longer version.

Intervention content

The final intervention comprised four sessions that were designed to relate directly to the theoretical principals established in the literature review as being important in promoting intergroup relations in the presence of intergroup contact**.** That is**:** promoting multiculturalism and shared norms, challenging stereotypes, promoting perspective taking and embracing a shared identity**.** Whilst we asked students to think about ethnicity and ethnic difference as well as to examine cases of stereotyping and ethnic discrimination in the UK and internationally, we did not explicitly ask students to delve into what it means to be Asian, White, or Black or ask teachers to students to discuss White privilege or Whitenesss. We acknowledge this as a limitation of our work and that these topics should be incorporated into future iterations of the intervention.

The structure of the co-designed intervention sessions is presented below. Each session comprised some information-giving by the teacher as well as class tasks that involved both individual and group work. All intervention materials are freely available on the project website: https://diversityeffect.wordpress.com/intervention-materials/. Below we introduce each session and explain how it relates directly to established research and theory. Each session was designed with teachers as detailed above, and includes an opening session where the aims of the session are introduced and a closing session where students are asked to silently reflect on the things they have learned in the session and whether there is anything they would like to find out more about.

Session 1: Understanding Difference

Drawing on multiculturalism literature (Banks, 2004; Moghaddam, 2008), Session 1 highlights and celebrates ethnic and cultural diversity, aiming to build understanding about diverse ethnic group through knowledge and awareness in the pursuit of peacebuilding. It is based on research which demonstrates that multicultural education has several benefits, mainly in reducing prejudice and promoting social cohesion (Verkuyten 2005), but also in its link to higher academic achievement (Celeste et al., 2019). For example, consistent with Pettigrew's (1998) notions of the 'deprovincialising' impact of intergroup contact, empirical research has shown that direct contact is associated with a supportive view of multiculturalism in diverse settings by adjusting people's views of their own cultural norms (Celebi et al., 2016; Verkuyten & Thijs, 2013). Based on this aim, the intended learning outcomes are that by the end of the session, the students will be able to: (1) explain things that make us the same and different to others, (2) define 'race' and 'ethnicity', (3) state the school rules regarding diversity (4) explain why the tutor thinks that diversity is a positive thing.

The teaching session begins with an interactive discussion where students are asked to share ideas on what they think makes us, as humans, the same and different. The teacher then provides definitions of race and ethnicity and is asked to lead a discussion on 'How school allows us to be different', drawing on examples and focusing in on why they themselves think that diversity is a good thing. Students taking part in the longer session are also asked to engage with a task sheet that asks them to critically reflect on whether they agree with example definitions of race and ethnicity and how they might be improved. The shorter session ends with students being asked to think about the question 'Does where I come from define who I am?', whilst the longer session introduces a task where students use a world map to show their personal and unique diversity through family mobility.

Session 2: What It Means to be Different

Building on the role of multiculturalism in its focus on learning, increased tolerance and understanding, Session 2 aimed to start breaking down and challenging harmful stereotypes and developing positive stereotypes about outgroups as part of the process of reducing prejudice (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2008; Vezzali et al., 2010). The session draws specifically on research showing that direct contact is associated with support for celebrating differences and challenging existing stereotypes, as well as perspectives we hold about our own group (Verkuyten et al., 2010). Learning outcomes for this session are that students will be able to: (1) define stereotyping and discrimination, (2) recognise some of the stereotypes applied to their own social groups, (3) explain that stereotypes are not good.

The session starts with the teacher leading a discussion to define discrimination, explaining the different groups that can suffer from discrimination and drawing on examples published in the UK Government’s Commission for Racial Equality report. In the longer session, the teacher discusses a case of discrimination. Following this, students are introduced to the concept of stereotypes – it's definition, and positive and negative impacts. Students are then asked to engage with a ‘stereotype challenge’ activity where they can discuss whether they think that the stereotypes presented are true, and during which the teacher encourages them to challenge those stereotypes. For example, “All women work at home” and “All men go to work”. The teacher then explains how we are all individuals and unique, belonging to different social groups. To wrap up, the teacher then explains that stereotypes are not only often incorrect but usually not helpful and that there can be differences both within and between social groups. Challenging stereotypes in this way is key to peaceful intergroup relations. The students in the longer session are asked to engage with a ‘Character Research Sheet’ which describes famous cases of discrimination (e.g., Nelson Mandela, Malala Yousafzai, Guy Bailey) and are asked to research to gather more information on what these cases were about before the next class.

Session 3: Standing in Someone Else’s Shoes

Given that one of the ways that contact reduces prejudice is through perspective-taking and empathy (Aberson & Haag, 2007; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2008; Thijs & Verkuyten, 2014), Session 3 aims to support students to be able to see things from another person's point of view. The session draws on research which has shown that perspective-taking and empathy play indirect roles in improving intergroup outcomes in racially diverse groups (Hayward et al., 2017). The learning outcomes are that by the end of this session, students will be able to: (1) define empathy, (2) relate a famous discrimination case, (3) relate the discrimination case in the first person, (3) describe how it would have felt to experience the famous case of discrimination.

The session starts with teachers asking students to engage in a worksheet task where they first read about several famous cases of discrimination that they have researched about in advance of the session (e.g., Nelson Mandela: a leader of armed resistance against White minority; Malala Yousafzai: who fought for girls to have the right to go to school). Students answer questions about the case (e.g., *Would you do the same thing?* or *How would you feel?*). Teachers may take different approaches to this task. For example, the different cases could be covered by splitting the class into groups or the class could focus on 1 or 2 characters. In the longer version of this session, a role-play task is recommended where students could interview one another pretending to be one of the individuals on the character sheet. The session then ends with the teacher putting a strong emphasis on how important empathy is. In preparation for the final session, students taking part in the long version are asked to bring their own personal diversity map with them to the next session. Alternatively, if the teacher decides to use a large classroom map, students are reminded to complete it before the next session.

Session 4 Embracing our Differences

Session 4 focuses on embracing and celebrating ethnic differences with the aim of promoting multiculturalism and the idea of a shared identity. The session draws on research on multiculturalism and that which demonstrates the importance of developing a shared group identity for social cohesion, which fosters cooperation and helps to build cross-group friendships (Gaertner & Dovidio, 2000). Creating such shared identities have been found to be important in long-term interventions like the Shared Education Program in Northern Ireland (Hughes et al., 2012). The learning outcomes are that by the end of the session students will be able to: (1) identify some of the positive things they receive in, and contribute to, a multicultural society, (2) state the proportion of their peers that have positive norms of diversity (e.g., that have an outgroup friend based on survey data from the previous year in the same schools with different young people), (3) explain how they are part of a shared local tapestry of diverse backgrounds.

At the start of the session, students are asked by the teacher whether there is anything about their culture they would like to share with the class – this aims to showcase and embrace diversity and the need for rich perspectives. Students are then asked what their friends think about diversity, whether they think it is a good thing to have friends from other ethnicities. In the longer session, students are asked to look at a statistic of the proportion of children who have friends from a different racial group and then compare it to what they expected or have even encountered themselves. Next, teachers share the large, completed map or individual maps that display the stories of individuals in the class. Students are encouraged to engage in discussions to show others what they have done throughout the course. The session then ends with the teacher reiterating the important message of how we are all unique and that differences can be shared, which makes places more enjoyable to live in.

Implementing and evaluating the intervention

Teachers implemented the four sessions detailed above in the absence of the researchers over consecutive weeks in tutor groups (15-20 minute) or in PSHE classes (40-minute sessions[1]) of approximately 25-30 children per class. In three of the schools, approximately half of the Year 7 (age 11-12 years) tutor classes took part in the intervention and completed the short version of the intervention. In these schools, only teachers who had taken part in the intervention design delivered the intervention. In one school, all PSHE classes took part in the intervention and completed the long version of the intervention. Some of the teachers in this school were not involved in the intervention design**.** Teachers were given hard and electronic copies of an intervention pack containing the intervention handbook, PowerPoint slides and class task sheets to support implementation of the intervention**.** Prior to and following the intervention, participants (i.e., students) completed a series of survey measures examining their intergroup contact experiences for the broader project aim, to examine the effects of contact on social and educational outcomes over time, as well as measures expected to be impacted by the intervention, including educational aspirations and academic self-efficacy, their social attitudes, and perceived equality norms. These measures were related directly to the content of the intervention and expected to be impacted by the intervention. For example, it was expected that because all intervention sessions talked positively about ethnic difference that youth engaging with the intervention would report more positive outgroup attitudes, be more supportive of multiculturalism and feel like they could achieve better in school, compared to youth in the control classes. Similarly, it was expected that by challenging stereotypes in one domain (gender) that this would translate to another domain (ethnicity) and youth would report lower levels of stereotype perceptions in the intervention compared to control as well as higher levels of empathy due to the embedded perspective taking task. These intergroup outcomes relate directly to indicators of peaceful relations.

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[1] Whilst School 4 engaged in longer sessions and did not have control classes, it was decided to retain this school within the larger sample for analyses as the materials utilised were the same, even if over a longer class time.

A total of 651 young people aged 11-12 (129 Black, 317 White, 115 Asian, 83 Mixed Race) completed the post-intervention survey. The full survey is available on the UK Data Service website (http://reshare.ukdataservice.ac.uk/853986/). Whereas we ensured that informed consent was in place for participants, levels of engagement were variable – this was expected in this type of field research. As such, there was missing data in the surveys and one school did not complete all survey measures post-intervention due to concerns raised regarding discussions of race and ethnicity. Whilst this is not ideal, it is not uncommon in applied research and can be dealt with using robust statistical methods for missing data such as multiple imputation or maximum likelihood estimation. We discuss more about how to prevent large amounts of missing data in the “Lessons learned” section below. Full details of the results are reported in *authors et al. (in preparation).*

Lessons learned

In this section, we reflect on the lessons learned during our project in terms of designing our intervention and conducting research in the field and in co-production with schools and teachers. We frame this in terms of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats to putting theory into practice in the pursuit of peace in social psychological research in schools. We then draw on these reflections to make recommendations for future research that aims to use co-production.

Strengths

A key strength of our research is that through the process of co-production, we developed contextually relevant and user-friendly intervention materials that are informed both by theory and by practice. This has important implications for the potential re-use of our materials in the field. It is more likely, for example, that teachers will use materials co-designed with teachers than those removed from the realities of the school classroom (see Williams et al. 2019). Indeed, our materials are now freely available online and can be adapted and used by anyone, free of charge. We could not have achieved this level of practical relevance in our research without having worked directly with teachers in designing the intervention materials. A second strength of our research is that, through working with teachers and schools, we have created and established relationships that will continue to grow in the pursuit of shared research and practice interests – these professional relationships are themselves a beneficial outcome of the co-production process and are crucial in making a difference with research (Schalet et al., 2020).

Further strengths of the project more broadly relate directly to our design. For example, our research allowed for a *real-world* test of theory, conducted in the messiness of the field, and considered within the rich, complex context of a social environment that includes multiple ethnic groups (i.e., moving beyond the two-group paradigm). We also implemented approaches to our evaluation that enabled us to be more confident in our findings. For example, we included pre-intervention measures to deal with the lack of randomisation to conditions, and we conducted our post-intervention testing more than one day after end of intervention, thus allowing for better understanding of possible long-term effects – something that Paluck and colleagues (2019) have noted is missing in the literature.

Weaknesses

Despite these clear strengths in our research, there are some weaknesses that should be acknowledged. First, although we co-produced our intervention, we entered the research relationship with existing ideas of theoretical approaches that were most relevant and what we should measure in our evaluation. If we had dedicated more time to the development of the intervention, we may have been able to consider theories more widely and have truly co-created both the intervention and the survey through ideas generation and then, made connections back to theory. As such, by including teachers at an earlier, formative stage of the project, we might have included them as co-researchers in our project in line with Martin's (2010) conceptualisation. A second weakness is directly related to our intervention design. As our goal was to create an intervention that would be practically relevant, we decided to introduce a wide range of relevant theories into our intervention design. This resulted in a rich intervention, but a consequence is that we could not determine which parts of the intervention were most and least effective. For example, the perspective-taking task might have affected stronger shifts in attitudes compared to other tasks. A third weakness relates to the nature of conducting research on sensitive topics in school contexts. Although we worked well with most schools and teachers, we encountered several situations where teachers were concerned about the content of our survey and the intervention. What this meant, therefore, was that some schools and teachers were more invested than others in the process and further, that there was a certain level of fear and hesitation from some schools and teachers. This had consequences for research design – reducing the level of control in the field – and resulted in missing data, for example when a school did not wish for certain questions to be asked.

Opportunities

There are clear opportunities associated with conducting applied research in the field and working in co-production with teachers. For our Diversity Effect project, we see these opportunities within four main areas. First, our experiences working on this project may help to inform or develop a model of co-production for social psychological research in the field. We hope that this paper offers a first step in working towards this goal although we recognise that more work is needed in this area to understood which models of co-production may work best depending on the focus of the research project. Second, in line with the Lewinian (1946) ideals of bringing together basic and applied research, our goal is to use the findings of our research to feed back into theory development in social psychology, having provided a robust test of theory in the field. We intend to do this through the publication of our findings in academic outlets, presenting at conferences and by sharing our research beyond the academic domain (e.g., via user-summaries, blogs, and policy briefs), as well as by working towards a theoretical positioning piece. Third, we have developed relationships with teachers and schools that have granted us a better understanding of how-to co-produce research, and this will directly inform our future research. Fourth, due to the nature of our research, there are opportunities for our work to not only be published in academic journals and inform science, but to also inform practice. In this case, it mainly informs the practice of teachers in schools and teacher development. Our intention is that our freely-available intervention materials offer an important first step to achieving this wider-scale impact from our research. These opportunities will exist for much applied research.

Threats

Whilst we have advocated for the importance of conducting research in the field and the strengths and opportunities of this in our Diversity Effect project, there are threats associated with conducting such research. We discuss these in relation to our project and social psychology more widely. For our project, a key threat was the potential fall-out or disagreement between us, as researchers, and the schools. For the most part we were able to mitigate this. However, it is important to consider how to maintain these relationships as disagreements can lead to tensions and, in the worst-case scenario, the inability to fulfil the aims of the project. Another threat of our research was that there was potential to worsen relations between students in schools, and specifically, that it might worsen relations between students across racial or ethnic boundaries. This was a worry given the extent of ethnic tensions in schools in England. We tried to mitigate this by working closely with schools and teachers, but we did observe tensions in some schools, and this was managed differently depending on the school and teachers involved. For example, by holding discussions with students about the research when they raised questions about ethnicity and holding meetings with schools when there were personnel changes to ensure that the research could continue. This highlights the crucial role that teachers play in co-production of interventions and research materials, coming as they do from an experiential and informed position of being directly in the field. From a research design perspective, a key threat in conducting applied research such as our is that it can be difficult to publish research in high-impact journals when the research design is not as controlled, and the data are somewhat messy compared to more traditional basic research. Notwithstanding broader debate about the importance of impact factors, we suspect that research published in higher-impact journals continues to reach a larger audience. As such, applied research might be less attractive some researchers (e.g., early-career researchers) whose performance might be monitored on the basis of where they publish, and applied research might have a smaller actual impact within academic circles (see Giner-Sorolla, 2018 for an overview of incentive structures).Relatedly, a further threat is that some researchers do not take such research as seriously due to concerns about robustness in design.

We now reflect on this SWOT analysis and bring together a series of key recommendations for researchers in working in co-production with practitioners in the field. Here we draw on the specific observations from our research.

Recommendations for researchers

Drawing directly on our experiences with the Diversity Effect project, we offer recommendations for researchers. These recommendations relate directly to conducting co-produced psychology-based research in the field but may be relevant to others forms of applied or field research.

Recommendation 1: Build strong working relationships

Building strong working relationships with personnel is key to successful co-production and to ensuring the relevance of research for society (see Schalet et al. 2020 for an overview of the importance of relationship building). In the school context this includes working with personnel at each level in the school (e.g., teachers for direct co-production planning and development; department heads for support). Building these relationships can be facilitated by holding initial meetings to discuss and create shared ideas, involving teachers and school leaders in the research design process to ensure that the needs of both researchers and the schools are met and maintaining relationships with teachers and school leaders throughout the research process- for example, by holding regular stakeholder group meetings and creating bespoke reports for the schools, once data collection has completed. This is particularly important given concerns that schools often have if they have previously experienced being used as a site for data collection by researchers but not been later informed of the research findings. Creating these relationships at the project planning stage can have real benefits in terms of working together to create a shared vision of the research and should not sit with a single person, to provide resilience against staffing changes, for example. We also note that researchers should ensure to use accessible language to help build these relationships.

Recommendation 2: Be transparent

Successful co-production in psychological research into sensitive topics (such as intergroup relations) requires transparency. Ideally, ideas should be shared and co-generated between researchers and practitioners but at the very least, practitioners should be fully informed about the research- this can be achieved by asking schools to read and feedback on draft research implementation plans, to contribute to stakeholder meetings to inform design and by requesting feedback on data collection; for example, by sharing a draft version of a planned survey in advance. A relationship can easily break down where practitioners have not been fully informed about the aims of the research, and decide they no longer wish to be involved due to later finding out the true intentions of the researcher. This is especially salient when the research is of a sensitive nature, such as asking students to report on or discuss ethnic relations. This risk may be further exacerbated if the relationship rests with a single person as this person may not have fully- informed other relevant staff who later raise concerns or, if that person leaves the organisation then the research may not be able to continue.

Recommendation 3: Agree roles and responsibilities

Conducting research with partners requires careful consideration of roles and responsibilities. These should be agreed upfront, and their creation should be a shared process. It is crucial to keep records of such agreements, for example, through creating a memorandum of understanding. This may seem over-the-top to begin with but can save a lot of time and stress later if there is misunderstanding about who is responsible for what or if there are staffing changes which result in information not being passed along.

Recommendation 4: Be flexible

Carrying out research in the field requires a certain level of flexibility and it is crucial to be open to changes that may need to take place throughout the project. The same applies to co-produced psychology research in the field. It may be necessary, for example, to work with a wide range of practitioners and across multiple sites should partners be unable to continue with the research at any stage during the process. It is essential to always have a back-up plan should the worst happen and to be willing to change and adapt approaches used, for example, survey questions if they raise concerns within the schools or students.

Recommendation 5: Recognise the strengths and limitations of applied research

Before entering any piece of co-produced research, it is important to consider the strengths and limitations of applied research, and what this means for co-producing research. This requires a certain level of ‘letting-go’ of control in terms of design but at the same time, ensuring that the research is robust. For example, applied research shouldn’t mean the research is not robust, as many of the same principals of what makes good research applies. This includes pilot testing materials, using theory-informed designs, encouraging consistent implementation of interventions, and ensuring evaluation of interventions when they are implemented (see Burns et al. (2020) for further insight into conducting research in the field with schools and young people).

Conclusion

In this paper we have presented and reflected on the process of conducting co-produced research in the field in the pursuit of building peace amongst young people of different ethnicities in England. We have discussed how we created an intervention in collaboration with teachers, and considered the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats associated with this research. We have also put forward suggestions on how researchers may wish to develop approaches to co-production in the future in research that aims to promote peaceful intergroup relations. In conclusion, we argue that applied research in the field has lots to offer researchers who wish to build peace, and that working in co-production is one way that we could work towards truly making a difference with our psychological research.

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