

Understanding, attitudes and dehumanisation towards autistic people

Eilidh Cage, Jessica Di Monaco and Victoria Newell

Autistic people sometimes report that they feel like non-autistic people do not accept them or that others have negative, dehumanising attitudes towards them. Dehumanisation is when someone, or a group of people, are seen as 'less human' and dehumanisation indicates stigmatising attitudes. In this research, an online survey was used to look at 361 non-autistic people's knowledge of autism, openness towards autism (i.e. how accepting they claimed to be towards an autistic person) and dehumanising attitudes. Dehumanisation was measured by adapting an experiment used in social psychology. Here, participants rated how much they thought different personality traits described autistic and non-autistic people. These personality traits map onto two key aspects of 'being human' – human nature traits (e.g. features typical of all humans such as helpfulness or jealousy) and human uniqueness traits (e.g. features unique in the human species such as being humble or ignorant). If autistic people were rated as having less of these traits, this indicated dehumanisation. We found that autistic people were specifically rated as having fewer human uniqueness traits. This finding may mean that the participants saw autistic people as 'child-like', which could relate to stereotypes about autism being a childhood condition. Although participants had good knowledge of autism and reported being open towards autism, we found that people who were more open tended to be less dehumanising. Together, these findings are important because by understanding the attitudes non-autistic people hold towards autistic people, we can then attempt to target and change these attitudes for the better.