

## **Attitudes Toward Disabled and Able-bodied Students' Requests for Extra Credit**

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### **Abstract**

Past research has shown that non-disabled individuals hold negative attitudes toward persons with physical disabilities. One negative attribute associated with physically disabled persons is that they are deserving of special aid and consideration. The gender of the disabled person also appears to influence attributions made toward them. Seventy-five participants from the general psychology human subjects pool at the UW-La Crosse read one of four scenarios depicting an interaction between a professor and a student inquiring about extra credit. The gender and disabled status of the student were varied. Following this, participants completed a questionnaire pertaining to the interaction and filled out a social desirability scale. Although disabled status did not appear to effect ratings, statistical analyses of the female participants' responses revealed an interaction indicating that disabled females were viewed as acting the "least appropriate" when asking for extra credit. This result may be indicative of respondents' likelihood to respond negatively to individuals who cross stereotypical boundaries. In this case, a disabled female maybe seen to cross both a gender and disability norm by acting assertive. Future research needs to continue to experimental explore responses to disabled persons and attend to the influence of social desirability on participant responses.

Limited research has been done in the area concerning the attitudes non-disabled individuals hold toward persons with disabilities. However, the available research on attitudes toward persons with physical disabilities has shown that non-disabled persons tend to view individuals with disabilities negatively. Persons with disabilities are often described as overly sensitive, self-pitying, helpless, dependent, easily discouraged, non-ambitious, and expecting special treatment from others (Amsel & Fichten, 1986; Yunker, 1970). Negative attitudes and stereotypes tend to limit opportunities for persons with disabilities for advancement in our society. Sometimes the limitations imposed on individuals with disabilities by the general public are worse than the disability itself (Yunker, 1970). It has been reported that persons who are physically different are often considered to be deserving of special aid and consideration (Siller, Ferguson, Vann & Holland, 1967). These attitudes have contributed to the discrimination faced by individuals with disabilities in finding employment, housing, and transportation (Yunker, 1970).

As more civil rights laws for persons with disabilities are being enacted, the number of persons with disabilities enrolling in college and pursuing independence is increasing (Amsel & Fichten, 1986). These changes force non-disabled people to interact with individuals with disabilities more often and at a higher level. Consequently, individuals across society will

need to become more comfortable interacting with people who have disabilities. Previous studies have found that, in general, college students tend to have more liberal attitudes concerning most minority groups (Ryan, 1981). Therefore, because college students are more likely to interact with persons with disabilities, and are more likely to have liberal attitudes, the proposed study will focus on college students as participants.

More recent research indicates a shift toward more positive attitudes towards persons with disabilities (Furnham & Thompson, 1994). However, this change may be reflective of socially desirable answers rather than actual change. The theory of social desirability suggests that participants are inclined to respond favorably to items expressing what is deemed socially proper (Wright, 1983). In other words, attitudes toward persons with disabilities may not have changed significantly, instead, individuals may be less willing to convey their true feelings of negativity because they know it is less acceptable now to express prejudices and stereotypes in our society.

Gender has also been introduced as a factor that can determine the stereotypes non-disabled persons hold toward individuals with disabilities (Amsel & Fichten, 1986). For instance, Amsel and Fichten (1986) were interested in examining the socially desirable and undesirable traits attributed to male and female college students, both with and without physical disabilities. Socially desirable traits attributed to the non-disabled students included ambition, dominance, companionability, and extroversion. Socially undesirable traits attributed to students with physical disabilities include laziness, submissiveness, inapproachability, and introversion. They found that more socially desirable traits were attributed to students without disabilities, and more socially undesirable traits were associated with students who had disabilities. Furthermore, the socially undesirable traits given to the females were similar, regardless of whether or not they had a disability. However, the undesirable traits given to male students with disabilities tended to be the undesirable female traits. The socially undesirable traits attributed to females and to disabled males were that they cried easily and were overly dependent.

In the current study two factors were manipulated in order to explore participants' trait attribution: disabled/able-bodied status and gender. I predicted that non-disabled persons attitudes toward individuals with disabilities would be more negative than attitudes toward non-disabled persons. Furthermore, I expected that the gender of the person with a disability would affect attributes made toward the person with a disability. For example, I predicted that more socially desirable traits would be associated with male and female non-disabled persons than with individuals who have disabilities. And, I further predicted that more socially undesirable traits would be attributed to males with disabilities compared to females with disabilities. In addition, I predicted that persons with disabilities would be seen as more deserving of special aid and consideration than non-disabled individuals. I expected that this tendency would be stronger for females with disabilities.

## **METHOD**

### **Participants**

Seventy-five students (77 % female, 23% male) were solicited from the General Psychology Human Participants Pool at the University of Wisconsin – La Crosse and they received course credit for their participation. They were predominately European American (96%) and only students aged 18-26 were solicited to ensure a traditional college population sample (mean age = 19).

### Materials/Procedure

Four variations of a scenario depicting an interaction between a college professor and a student were randomly distributed to the participants by an able-bodied experimenter. The scenarios included a picture of a male professor, with either

- 1) A female student standing (see Figure 1).
- 2) The same female student in a wheelchair (see Figure 2).
- 3) A male student standing (see Figure 3).
- 4) The same male student in a wheelchair (see Figure 4).



Figure 1



Figure 2



Figure 3



Figure 4

The following scenario describing the interaction between the professor and the student accompanied the picture:

*Dave/Lisa* is in Professor Martin's Sociology class. *He/she* has just received a poor grade on the midterm exam, and, consequently, goes to Dr. Martin's office to inquire about doing extra credit work to make up some lost points from the exam. Dr. Martin explains to *Dave/Lisa* that he doesn't grant extra credit work for his students under any circumstances. *Dave/Lisa* insists on an extra credit opportunity.

A scenario between a professor and a student inquiring about extra credit was developed because it would be salient to the participation pool and it allowed for a situation where a non-passive trait

could be explored. In order to partially disguise the intent of the study, participants rated both the student and the professor using bipolar trait pairs (e.g. assertive/passive, extroverted/introverted) on a 6-point scale. Additionally, participants were asked to assess the reasonableness of the student's request to explore the notion of special consideration for persons with disabilities. Finally, participants completed the Marlowe-Crowne Social Desirability Scale (1960), so that this tendency could be statistically controlled for.

## RESULTS

Overall, no major differences on ability status were found. General gender differences regarding the student’s passivity or assertiveness were taken into account and no interactions were found (see Table 1). Female students, regardless of ability status were characterized as being more passive than the male students ( $M = 2.00, SD = 1.12; M = 5.05, SD = 1.10; F(1, 74) = 1.46, p < .05$ ). The means of all conditions for appropriateness of student regarding the request for extra credit, the passivity/assertiveness of the student, and participants’ agreement regarding whether or not the student should be granted extra credit can be seen in Table 2.

**Table 1: Mean ratings of assertiveness of student.**

		Ability/Disability Status of Student		
		Able-bodied	Disabled	
Gender of Student	Male	1.95 (n = 19)	2.05 (n = 19)	2.00
	Female	4.67 (n = 18)	5.42 (n = 19)	5.05*
		3.74	3.74	

Note: The higher the rating the more assertive the student is regarded.  
 \* = Significant at  $p < .001$

**Table 2: Mean ratings for appropriateness of student’s request, assertiveness/passivity of student, and agreement to granting of extra credit.**

	Male		Female	
	Able-bodied (n = 19)	Disabled (n = 19)	Able-bodied (n = 18)	Disabled (n = 19)
Appropriateness of student	3.71	3.12	3.11	3.22
Assertiveness of Student	1.95	2.05	4.67	5.42
Agree to Granting of Extra Credit	3.21	3.32	3.00	3.11

Note: The higher the rating for appropriateness of student the less appropriate, the higher the rating for assertiveness, the more assertive the student, and the higher the rating for agreeing to granting of extra credit, the more likely it is for extra credit to be granted. Ratings are on a 6-point scale.

In post hoc analyses, given past research indicating differences in the gender of participants, only the female participants were evaluated (N = 58). Under these conditions, an interaction was found between gender of student and ability status such that female participants were most likely to view a female disabled student as acting “inappropriately”(F (1, 26) = 1.44) as shown in Table 3.

In all analyses, social desirability was controlled for statistically. Mean social desirability ratings can be seen in Table 4.

Eighty-four percent of the participants would not grant extra credit to the student regardless of gender and ability status. Of the 16% of the students to whom the participants would grant extra credit, 70% were male, and only 30% were disabled students. Various reasons why extra credit should or should not be granted can be seen in Appendix A. The most frequent reasons cited as to why extra credit should not be granted included: that it would not be fair to the rest of the class, Dr. Martin needs to follow his rules, and the student should have studied harder.

**Table 3: Female participants’ mean ratings of appropriateness of student requesting extra credit.**

		Ability/Disability Status of Student		
		Able-bodied	Disabled	
Gender of Student	Male	3.68 (n = 17)	2.83 (n = 12)	3.33
	Female	2.87 (n = 15)	3.79 (n = 14)	3.31
		3.33	3.35	

Note: The higher the rating the less appropriate the request.

**Table 4: Mean scores and standard deviations of social desirability ratings for group of participants in each scenario.**

Scenario	Mean	St. Dev.
Male/Able-bodied	13.28	4.28
Male/Disabled	13.11	3.83
Female/Able-bodied	15.33	4.86
Female/Disabled	11.53	4.39
Total	13.28	4.47

Note: The national average social desirability score for youth according to the Marlowe-Crowne Social Desirability Scale is 15.5.

## DISCUSSION

In the current study, disability status did not affect the ratings of students asking for extra credit. Although a traditional gender finding was supported wherein female students were seen as more passive than male students, the addition of disability status did not alter the outcomes. However, analyses involving the female participants yielded a significant interaction between gender and disability status. There were no main effects for either gender or disability status, but disabled female students were seen as acting the least appropriate when inquiring about extra credit. Given that society expects someone with a disability to behave in a passive manner, and women to behave in passive manners, it is difficult to disentangle the effects. In this case, the disabled female may have been acting the most “inappropriately” because she was crossing two boundaries. Her behavior was inappropriate because it did not fit with the assumption that she should be passive because she was a female and because she had a disability.

Although past research has shown that many people view individuals with disabilities as deserving of special aid and consideration, the results from this study indicate more mixed responses to actual requests for special aid. Future research may wish to explore several variations in request for aid including the “size” of the request, and/or whether or not a person with a disability uses the disability as a reason for the need.

Another concern in this study is the potential role of social desirability in the responses. Do college students have such liberal attitudes that commonly held stereotypes and prejudices regarding disabilities are just not there? Or, do college students have such strong desires to be socially appropriate that commonly held stereotypes and prejudices regarding disabilities did not surface? Although the sample in this study still yielded traditional gender findings in regards to assertiveness, perhaps the sample was more in tune to disability related expectations and monitored their responses more carefully. For instance, the participants who responded to the disabled female scenario had the lowest average social desirability score as a group and may have been more likely to express their “true” feelings. While this was a trend and not a statistically significant finding, future research should definitely explore the role of socially desirability. For instance, researchers could explore ways to help encourage truthful responses (e.g. “the bogus pipeline”). Another interesting variation could be the use of older participants who should yield lower social desirability scores.

I might have not gotten the expected results because my scenario was not exaggerated enough to tap into people’s gender and disability stereotypes. How exaggerated the disabled/able-bodied differences would have to be before differences in reactions could be found, needs to be addressed in the future. In particular, future research should continue to explore perceptions of the disabled with experimental designs that allow the researchers to systematically manipulate the relationships between variables. Given the small number of studies that address the perceptions toward the disabled, and the growing number of disabled persons living independently, further research in this area would yield valuable information for social science and for society.

## REFERENCES

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