

The Role of Disability Status on Perceived Roommate Compatibility

Carrie L. Dunn

Faculty Sponsor: Matthew Taylor, Department of Psychology

ABSTRACT

The problem of social stigma toward others viewed as “different” has been accompanied by limited research when pertaining to persons with disabilities. The present study attempts to determine how college students will respond to a potential roommate with disability status (e.g. use a wheelchair). To control for socially desirable responses, two scales were imbedded in the survey to measure the extent to which participants feel a need for approval as well as their overall acceptance of others. Participants who possess a high need for approval presented more favorable attitudes when the wheelchair was not pictured. Comparatively speaking, participants who did not have a high need for approval presented a more favorable assessment when the wheelchair was pictured. Results suggest that individuals who excessively seek approval from others may be less willing to interact with those deemed as “different” from the norm.

INTRODUCTION

While there has been much research conducted concerning stereotypical attitudes about the gender, race, and sexual orientation of individuals, there is limited research pertaining to the stereotypical and often negative views toward persons with disabilities. The standard definition of a person with a disability, as stated by the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), is “anyone who has a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activity” (Dattilo, 1994, p.3). These major life activities can range from an inability to breathe to an inability to walk. Approximately 19.2% of the United States’ non-institutionalized population, between the ages of 21-64, has some type of disability (United States Census Bureau, 2000). Due to the prevalence of person’s with disabilities in the United States, the problem of social stigma and discrimination towards them is an issue that demands more attention.

Social stigma can best be defined as an undesired characteristic that separates a person from others in society (Goffman, 1963). According to Dattilo (1994), individuals with disabilities have been historically isolated from society due to these stigmas. Some examples of such discrimination include: inaccessible buildings, lack of transportation opportunities, and exclusion to less prestigious services, benefits, jobs, and activities. Dattilo (1994) also states that due to these discriminatory measures, “people with disabilities, as a group, occupy an inferior status in our society, and are severely disadvantaged socially, vocationally, economically, and educationally” (p. 8).

The relative disadvantage of individuals with disabilities led to the Americans with Disabilities Act, which was signed into law in 1990. The ADA prohibits discrimination against qualified individuals with disabilities in the area of employment, government services (i.e. education, public transportation), public accommodations (i.e. accessibility in restaurants, theaters), and telecommunications (Smith, et al., 1996). With the increase of persons with disabilities attending college and seeking an independent lifestyle, able-bodied people will have increased contact with people with disabilities. Although persons with disabilities may be legally ensured that they will have equal opportunities, there is still alienation in aspects of the social world. Therefore the issue of social stigma on a personal level is a serious problem.

Physical disabilities are the most visible of the many types of disabilities. Of individuals with a physical disability, those who use a wheelchair are the most obvious. In fact, one out of every 250 person uses a wheelchair (Cornucopia of Disability Information, 2003). Although someone with a physical disability (i.e. use a wheelchair) will have relatively the same interests, same level of intelligence, and similar personalities to that of their peers, their physical difference can shape people’s attitudes about them for a lifetime. For example, persons with disabilities are oftentimes characterized as overly sensitive, self-pitying, helpless, and dependent (Amsel & Fichten, 1986). Additionally, in a study focusing on the attitudes of able-bodied children, in a mainstream school, towards their peers both with and without disabilities, the children rated able-bodied classmates much more favorably than the classmates with disabilities (Maras & Brown, 2000). Many of these children also reported that they were uncomfortable about meeting their disabled peers.

Since children were uncomfortable about meeting their peers with disabilities, one is forced to think how this would affect a person who uses a wheelchair and their capability to make new friends. Past research by Wieserbs and Gottlieb (1995) has shown that children, ranging from eight to nineteen years of age, will rarely befriend someone with a physical disability. This is mainly due to the fear of jeopardizing their social standing by acquiring a friendship with someone who doesn't fit into the social norm.

Yet, previous studies have found that students who attend college are apt to have liberal attitudes about most minority groups (Ryan, 1981). Although college students are said to have liberal attitudes, they may also be trying to fit into the realm of socially acceptable behavior. For instance, it is no longer acceptable to be a racist, a sexist, or dislike someone because they are in a wheelchair. Consequently, even on anonymous surveys people oftentimes answer questions in a way that will make them look good, regardless of their true beliefs. Individuals' tendency to make their answers appear more acceptable than they might really be is known as the social desirability bias. The current study will measure this tendency in order to statistically control for its effects. It is predicted that people with a higher need for social approval will rate the roommate in the wheelchair more favorably than those with a lower need for social approval.

Given the limited research regarding the attitudes about persons with disabilities, the present study will attempt to go beyond this basic level of contact (i. e. the business or classroom environment) to determine how a college student behaves on an interpersonal level. The present study will manipulate the disabled/non-disabled status of a potential roommate and assess participants' responses to a roommate compatibility survey in relation to social desirability (a need for approval) and overall acceptance of others. It is predicted that the participants will rate the persons without disabilities more desirable as roommates than the persons with disabilities. Additionally, it is predicted that the participants will ascribe more positive attributes to the persons without disabilities when compared to the roommate with disabilities. Also, it is predicted that persons who are more accepting of others will rate the roommate in the wheelchair more favorably than who are less accepting of others. If these hypotheses are supported, it could signify that although people tend to profess socially liberal attitudes, they hold more negative beliefs about persons with disabilities than they claim. These findings may help explain the social isolation often felt by people with disabilities when making friends, finding roommates, or going to social gatherings. The findings could hold implications for college programming that attempts to respond to the needs of students who have disabilities.

METHOD

Participants

Eighty-three undergraduate students from the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse participated in this study. Each participant was enrolled in a general psychology class and participated on a voluntary basis. College students were used because they tend to have the most liberal attitudes towards persons in minority groups (Ryan, 1981). The mean age was 20.99 years, with a standard deviation of 2.29. Additionally, all of the participants were female in order to control for possible gender effects.

Materials/ Procedure

The participants were told that they were filling out a survey to test for roommate compatibility. This scenario was chosen to approximate a realistic situation that applies to college students. The participants then read and signed an informed consent form. The participants began the experiment by filling out a self-inventory addressing a variety of attitudes and interests. Two scales of interest were imbedded in the inventory. The Marlowe-Crowne Social Desirability Scale (MCSD) was used to control for the bias of responding in a socially desirable manner (Crowne & Marlowe, 1960). Paulhus (1991) summarizes that this scale measures a person's need for approval/avoidance of disapproval, and has an alpha reliability coefficient that ranges from .73-.88. The responses were true/false with a sample item being "I never hesitate to go out of my way to help someone in trouble." Additionally, an "Acceptance of Others" scale was included (Fey, 1955). This scale measures a person's level of acceptance towards others and has a split-half reliability of .90 (Wrightsmann, 1991). Response categories ranged from almost always to very rarely on a 5-point scale with a sample item being "I can be comfortable with nearly all kinds of people." At the end of the inventory a demographics page was included, where the participants were asked their age, year in school, major, and size of hometown.

After the participants completed the self-inventory, an able-bodied experimenter provided the participants with three different descriptions of three potential roommates. The picture of the potential roommate was stapled to the upper left-hand corner of each inventory. Three different college-aged female pictures were used (a, b, c) and pictures (a) and (c) remained constant throughout the experiment. However, half of the participants were randomly

assigned to condition where the individual in picture (b1) was seated in a wheelchair. The other half of the sample viewed picture (b2) where the same woman was seated in a chair. Along with each picture was a description of the female (i.e. friendly...caring...good student). All three descriptions were favorable and only slightly different from one another. The description was the same for both (b) pictures in order to control for extraneous variables. In addition, all of the females pictured were sitting in the same position, with the same facial expressions and same body language to control for responses to these attributes rather than the manipulation of ability/disability.

Once they had read each description, the participants were directed to rate how much they would like this person to be their new roommate on four items with response categories that range from disagree to agree on a 5-point scale. A sample item is "This person represents a good "match" for me as a roommate." The participants were also asked to ascribe different attributes to the potential roommates on four, nine-point Likert-type bipolar word pairs. Two sample items include: "intelligent-not intelligent" or "fun-boring." Once the inventory and evaluations were completed, the participants filled out a demographics page, where they were asked their age, year in school, major, and size of hometown. After the surveys were turned in, the participants were debriefed about the actual intent of the research.

RESULTS

An analysis of variance (ANOVA) was used to analyze the data. For the purpose of controlling gender effects, only data from the female participants was analyzed. Additionally, the only ratings evaluated were that of the roommate with the disability status manipulated. The two constant pictures/descriptions were only present to partially disguise the intent of the research and therefore, those ratings were not evaluated.

Hypothesis 1: Disability status did not have a significant effect over the manner in which each participant rated their overall feelings about living with the "potential roommates" (\underline{M} Chair = 15.62, \underline{SD} = 2.25; \underline{M} NoChair = 15.89, \underline{SD} = 2.28; $F(1, 83) = 0.27, p = .60$).

Hypothesis 2: Disability status did not have a significant effect over the manner in which each participant ascribed attributes to the "potential roommate." See Table 1.

Table 1. Mean Numbers and Standard Deviations of Ratings about the Potential Roommate With and Without the Wheelchair Pictured

Trait	Status	Rating
Intelligent	Chair	$\underline{M}=6.93, \underline{SD}=.25$
	No chair	$\underline{M}=7.00, \underline{SD}=.25$
Kind	Chair	$\underline{M}=7.74, \underline{SD}=.16$
	No Chair	$\underline{M}=7.45, \underline{SD}=.16$
Likable	Chair	$\underline{M}=7.19, \underline{SD}=.26$
	No Chair	$\underline{M}=7.07, \underline{SD}=.25$
Fun	Chair	$\underline{M}=6.91, \underline{SD}=.23$
	No Chair	$\underline{M}=7.04, \underline{SD}=.22$

Note: The higher the rating, the more favorable the opinion about the "potential roommate." Ratings are on a 9-point scale.

High-Low Categorical Analyses

In order to run analyses for hypotheses three and four, the participants' scores were divided into high and low categories for each scale. Those participants who accumulated the highest scores (the top third) were classified as being either high in their need for approval or high in their acceptance of others. Whereas, the participants who accumulated the lowest scores (the bottom third) were classified as either low in their need for approval or low in their acceptance of others.

Hypothesis 3: The results indicated that there was not a significant difference between participants who received higher scores on the "Acceptance of Others" scale and the participants who received lower scores on the

scale, when rating their overall feelings about the potential roommates ($M_{\text{Chair,Low}} = 15.20$, $SD = 2.01$; $M_{\text{Chair,High}} = 15.85$, $SD = 1.57$; $M_{\text{NoChair,Low}} = 15.31$, $SD = 2.53$; $M_{\text{NoChair,High}} = 16.73$, $SD = 1.83$; $F(1,56) = .524$, $p = .472$).

Hypothesis 4: The results indicated that there was a significant interaction between the persons who had a high need for approval (higher scores on the social desirability scale) and those who had a low need for approval, when rating their overall feeling about the potential roommate. The ANOVA suggests that participants who had a low need for approval rated the roommate in wheelchair higher than those who had a high need for approval ($M_{\text{Chair,Low}} = 16.00$, $SD = 1.81$; $M_{\text{Chair,High}} = 15.25$, $SD = 2.35$). However, when the roommate was not in the wheelchair, those who had a higher need for approval rated her higher ($M_{\text{NoChair,Low}} = 15.00$, $SD = 2.17$; $M_{\text{NoChair,High}} = 16.65$, $SD = 2.40$; $F(1, 63) = 4.64$, $p < .05$). See Figure 1.

Overall Feelings About Roommate by Need for Approval

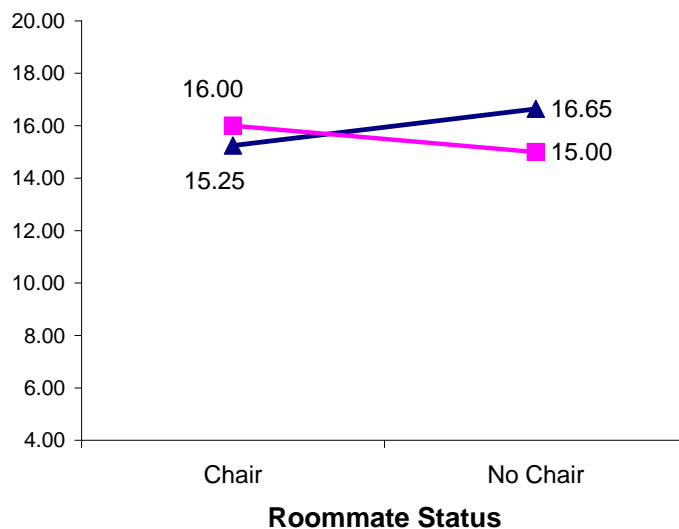


Figure 1

Secondary Analysis

For the secondary analyses, the scores on the Social Desirability scale and the scores on the Acceptance of Others scale were merged together forming four new groups. These groups consisted of high acceptance of others and low social desirability, high acceptance of others and high social desirability, low acceptance of others and low social desirability, and low acceptance of others and high social desirability. The descriptive statistics are shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics as Related to the Secondary Analysis of the Roommate With and Without the Wheelchair Picture

SDACC	Status	Mean/ SD
High acceptance - Low social desirability	Chair	<u>M</u> =16.00, <u>SD</u> =0.00
	No Chair	<u>M</u> =16.75, <u>SD</u> =2.36
High acceptance - High social desirability	Chair	<u>M</u> =16.43, <u>SD</u> =1.62
	No Chair	<u>M</u> =17.67, <u>SD</u> =1.75
Low acceptance - Low social desirability	Chair	<u>M</u> =15.88, <u>SD</u> =1.96
	No Chair	<u>M</u> =14.44, <u>SD</u> =1.74
Low acceptance - High social desirability	Chair	<u>M</u> =14.00, <u>SD</u> =1.87
	No Chair	<u>M</u> =17.25, <u>SD</u> =3.20

Note: The higher the rating, the more favorable the opinion about the “potential roommate.” The possible range of ratings was from 4-20.

The ANOVA indicates that there was a significant interaction between the participants whom scored both high on the acceptance of others scale and high on the social desirability scale, and those whom scored low on the acceptance of others scale and low on the social desirability scale ($M_{High,High,NoChair} = 17.67$, $SD = 1.75$; $M_{Low,Low,NoChair} = 14.44$, $SD = 1.74$; $M_{High,High,Chair} = 16.43$, $SD = 1.62$; $M_{Low,Low,Chair} = 15.88$, $SD = 1.96$), $F(3,47) = 3.12$, $p < .05$. See Figure 2.

Overall Feelings About Roommate by Acceptability & Need for Approval

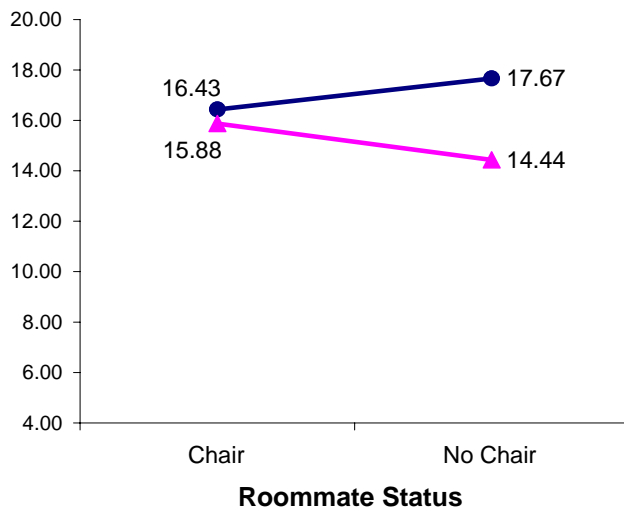


Figure 2

DISCUSSION

In the current study, disability status alone did not significantly affect the participants' ratings of the potential roommate. However, when statistically controlling for social desirability, or a person's need for approval, a significant interaction was found between disability status and high vs. low social desirability. Participants who had lower scores on the social desirability scale rated the roommate more favorably when she was pictured in the wheelchair than the persons who had higher scores. This was contradictory to the expected results. Instead of responding in a politically correct manner, as expected, the participants who had a high need for approval actually rated the roommate lower when she was pictured in the wheelchair and higher when she was pictured without it.

A logical explanation for this tendency may be that persons who have a high need for approval do not want to be known as having a roommate whom is different from the norm group. They may feel that a roommate who uses a wheelchair will jeopardize their social status, a finding that is consistent with research by Weiserbs and Gottlieb (1995). Additionally, when one is concerned about his/her social survival, taking the time to form a friendship with someone who is visibly "different" may be perceived as involving too much time and effort. This aspect is consistent with the work of Roberts and Smith (1999), which states that although students may have positive opinions about their peers with disabilities, they may express fewer intentions to interact with them. This tendency can be explained because the interaction may appear to be difficult or requiring great amounts of effort.

On the other hand, persons who had a low need for approval may have rated the roommate more favorably when pictured in the wheelchair, because they are not concerned with how society views them. These individuals would, in turn, be more open to interacting with many different groups of people. Therefore, they may have been rating the individuals based on their own opinions, instead of being influenced by societal expectations. Accordingly, this group also rated the roommate higher when she was pictured in wheelchair than when she wasn't. This aspect could possibly be explained by the fact that these individuals choose to rebel against societal norms in hopes to show others that they do not require societal approval.

Another interesting finding within this study took place during the secondary analyses. When the results of the acceptance of others scale were merged together with the scores on the social desirability scale, significant results were discovered. Persons who scored high on the acceptance of others scale as well as high on the social desirability scale, are thought to have a high need for approval and they claim to be accepting of all people. However, these participants rated the roommate significantly lower when she was pictured in the wheelchair. This is consistent with Merton (1976) and his description of a fair weather liberal. A fair weather liberal is a person who is not prejudiced, yet takes part in discriminatory actions (i.e. not wanting someone as a roommate) due to societal pressure. Therefore, although they may personally not mind living with someone who uses a wheelchair, their need for approval causes them to do things that may contradict their personal beliefs.

On the other hand, participant's who scored low on the acceptance of others scale as well as low on the social desirability scale, seem to have a low need for approval and do not claim to be accepting of others. These two aspects appear to be consistent with Merton (1976) and his description of an all-weather bigot, or someone who is prejudiced (not accepting) and more likely to discriminate (not concerned with how others view them). However Merton's theory states that an all-weather bigot will actively express his/her beliefs and act on them. This is contradictory to the results of the present study, because the low acceptance of others and the low need for approval group actually rated the roommate higher when pictured in the wheelchair. The reason this occurred could be because it is not acceptable to blatantly discriminate against individuals. These people may be extrinsically motivated by societal pressures to behave more politically correct than they actually feel.

This research has shown that social stigma still exists. Although disability status alone did not reveal significant results, when each participant's need for approval and his/her acceptance of others was controlled for, more negative opinions were discovered. This could signify that although people try to profess socially liberal attitudes on the front end, they might hold more negative beliefs about persons with disabilities than they claim. This may explain some of the social isolation that person's with disabilities face in everyday life. This information holds practical implications and suggests that more programming should be offered that attempts to respond to the need of person's who have disabilities. Programs should be offered which help increase understanding and reduce prejudices. Amsel & Fitchen (1988) suggest that one of the most important assets in programming is the facilitation of interactions between people with and without disabilities. With interaction, people have a better opportunity to establish an equal status basis. Likewise, interaction and contact with persons with disabilities will also help people challenge their preconceived stereotypes and misconceptions.

Future research should focus on the impact of contact when looking at opinions about persons with disabilities. More research should be focused on determining if contact really does impact a person's perception of people who have disabilities. Also, concentrating on this aspect may help explain trends in responses on a survey. For instance, if all of the participants have had a lot of contact with persons who have disabilities their responses may be more

open-minded and favorable, and the opposite may be true for those who have had little contact. Additionally, parental opinions could be addressed in future work. For instance, do people have views consistent to that of their parents? Or, if a person was exposed to diversity at a young age, do they truly tend to be more open-minded? Questions such as these can not only help explain trends in results, but also serve as guides in discovering more useful ways to tackle the problem of stigma towards people viewed as “different.”

REFERENCES

- Amsel, R. & Fichten, C. S. (1988). Effects of contact on thoughts about interaction with students who have a physical disability. *Journal of Rehabilitation*, January/February/March, 61-65.
- Amsel, R. & Fichten, C. (1986). Trait attributions about college students with a physical disability: Circumplex analyses and methodological issues. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, 16, 410-427.
- Cornucopia of Disability Information. (2003). Wheelchair users. Retrieved April 2, 2003, from http://codi.buffalo.edu/graph_based/demographics/statistics
- Crowne, D.P. & Marlowe, D. (1960). A new scale of social desirability independent of psychopathology. *Journal of Consulting Psychology*, 24, 349-354.
- Dattilo, J. (1994). *Inclusive leisure services: Responding to the rights of people with disabilities*. State College: Venture Publishing.
- Fey, W.F. (1955). Acceptance by others and its relation to acceptance of self and others: A reevaluation. In J.P. Robinson, P.R. Shaver, & L.S. Wrightsman (Eds.), *Measures of personality and social psychological attitudes* (pp. 17-59). San Diego, CA: Academic Press.
- Goffman, E. (1963). *Stigma: Notes on the management of spoiled identity*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- Maras, P. & Brown, R. (2000). Effects of different forms of school contact on children's attitudes toward disabled and non-disabled peers. *British Journal of Educational Psychology*, 70, 337-351.
- Merton, R. (1976). Sociological ambivalence and other essays. In R.T. Schaefer (2nd Ed.), *Race and ethnicity in the United States* (pp. 45-46). Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall.
- Paulhus, D.L. (1991). Measurement and control of response bias. In J.P. Robinson, P.R. Shaver, & L.S. Wrightsman (Eds.), *Measures of personality and social psychological attitudes* (pp. 17-59). San Diego, CA: Academic Press.
- Roberts, C.M. & Smith, P.R. (1999). Attitudes and behaviour of children toward peers with disabilities. *International Journal of Disability*, 46(1), 35-50.
- Ryan, K.M. (1981). Developmental difference in reactions to the physically disabled. *Human Development*, 24, 240-256.
- Smith, R.W., Austin, D.R., & Kennedy, DW. (1996). *Inclusive and special recreation: Opportunities for persons with disabilities* (3rd ed.). Dubuque: Brown & Benchmark.
- United States Census Bureau. (2000). *Profile of selected social characteristics: 2000*. Retrieved April 2, 2003 from <http://www.census.gov>.
- Weiserbs, B. & Gottlieb, J. (1995). The perception of risk over time as a factor influencing attitudes toward children with physical disabilities. *Journal of Psychology*, 129(6), 689-700.
- Wrightsman, L.S. (1991). Interpersonal trust and attitudes toward human nature. In J.P. Robinson, P.R. Shaver, & L.S. Wrightsman (Eds.), *Measures of personality and social psychological attitudes* (pp. 373-412). San Diego, CA: Academic Press.