

Correlates of College Students' Attitudes Toward Disabilities

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ABSTRACT

One out of every seven people in the United States has a disabling condition that interferes with their lives (Pope & Tarlov, 1991). A variety of research has shown that the more contact a person has with a disability, the more likely that person will have a more positive attitude toward others with disabilities. Another contributor to attitudes about others and interactions with them may relate to social abilities and concerns about how the peer group views you. The current study is exploring the link between the attitudes of people without disabilities towards people with disabilities, how much contact the person has with someone with a disability, and the amount of social anxiety the person has. Results show that the more contact a person has with a disability, the more positive their attitude will be. Results also indicate that the more social anxiety a person has, the less positive their attitude will be. A third significant analysis is that the more a person understands the issues related to those with disabilities, the more positive their attitude will be. The last significant result indicates that the more contact a person has with disabilities, the more he/she will understand the issues. Implications of this study include exposure to and normalizing disabilities, consistent or genuine contact with disabilities to increase positive attitudes, and general education about the various types of disabilities.

INTRODUCTION

One out of every seven people in the United States has a disabling condition that interferes with their lives (Pope & Tarlov, 1991). People with disabilities have to learn to adjust their lives to accommodate their disability, and in the process, many times are often stereotyped (Li & Moore, 1998). Disability is defined as a condition that substantially limits one or more basic physical activities like walking or climbing stairs (U. S. Census Bureau, 2000). Mental disabilities are problems with learning, remembering, or concentrating. Sensory disabilities are blindness, deafness, or a severe vision or hearing impairment. Previous research has found that people who have friends, who are disabled, have more positive attitudes toward disabilities (Rosenbaum, Armstrong, & King, 1988). This would suggest that the more contact children have with disabilities early on may actually influence their attitudes later in life. Rosenbaum et al. (1988) also found that students in schools that integrated children with disabilities in their curricula, held more positive attitudes.

Royal and Roberts (1987) have shown that perceptions of disabilities can alter the social relationships between a person with a disability and a person without a disability. Using participants, grades 3, 6, 9, 12, and college, it was found that the older the student, the more contact with the various conditions of disabilities they had, which lead to higher levels of acceptance. This suggests that the more familiar a person is with a disability, the more accepting he/she may be of those with them. For those with disabilities, there are implications for their self esteem, psychological well-being, and social development, especially in the early years.

People's views of disabilities may be influenced by a variety of factors. One such factor may be the policies of the school districts regarding class placement of students with disabilities: combined in all classes (inclusive/integrated) or having their own (exclusive/segregated). A variety of research has shown that the more contact a person has with a disability, the more likely that person will have a more positive attitude toward others with disabilities. Fichten, Amsel, Robillard, Sabourin, and Wright (1997) suggest even the presence of people with disabilities in everyday life with help with the interactions. Thus it follows that schools that an inclusive of students with disabilities may foster these attitudes (Tripp, French, & Sherril, 1995). Tripp et al. (1995) found that students who were in integrated classes tended to view their peers with disabilities more positively than students in segregated ones.

Another contributor to attitudes about others and interactions with them may relate to social abilities and concerns about how the peer group views you. A significant component of socially-based anxiety is shyness, which

is characterized by social discomfort, concerns about what others may think of you and the fear of not living up to their expectations (Cheek & Buss, 1981; Colino, 2002). A segment of shy individuals appear to be perfectionists about their behavior in social situations, analyzing what they should have done or what went wrong (Colino, 2002). This analysis may actually create more anxiety about future interactions and prevent a person from participating in them. Lesure-Lester (2001) suggests that lower levels of social anxiety relate to competence in social situations, which would in turn be indicative of fewer worries about the appraisals of others. There are implications within this framework of how willing an individual is to accept a person with a disability. Fichten et al. (1997) found social competent people are truer in how they behave in relationship to their feelings and thoughts. The socially non-competent person may have a conflict between how they behave and what they are actually thinking and feeling. The social competent person, who has little concern about the perceptions and appraisals of others, may not have apprehension about association with persons with disabilities, a group frequently viewed unfavorable and subsequently socially ostracized. An implication of the study is that to actually change someone's behavior, his/her attitude needs to change first. Most times our behaviors reflect our attitudes if we are true to ourselves. People are always able to justify their behavior to what they may believe is acceptable behavior in a particular situation, but feelings are able to change.

The current study is exploring the link between the attitudes of people without disabilities towards people with disabilities, how much contact the person has with someone with a disability, and the amount of social anxiety the person has. It is expected that contact with individuals with disabilities will be positively correlated with attitudes toward disabilities. It is also hypothesized that social anxiety will be negatively correlated with attitudes. This research is important because programs may be developed that schools will be able to implement at younger ages to start building positive attitudes earlier. Implementing programs at early ages may be a way to reduce the amount of social anxiety and help build more positive attitudes towards individuals with disabilities.

METHODS

Participants

A sample of 163 undergraduates was solicited from a mid-sized, Midwestern university. Fifty-two males (31.7%) and 111 females (67.7%) ($M_{\text{age}} = 20.04$, $SD = 1.791$) participated in the study. The sample consisted of thirty-seven freshmen (22.6%), forty-three sophomores (26.2%), forty-four juniors (26.8%), and forty seniors (24.4%). For their participation in this study, each person placed their name on a raffle ticket and three names were drawn for a \$25 gift certificate for Best Buy.

Materials and Measure

Pencil and paper surveys were used to assess the variables of the study. To measure the attitude portion of this study, the Chedoke-McMaster Attitudes Towards Children with Handicaps (CATCH) scale (Rosenbaum et al., 1985) was used. For validity purposes, the CATCH was modified for the college student population. Sample items include, "I wouldn't worry if a disabled person sat next to me in class," and "I feel sorry for disabled people." Social anxiety will be measure by using the Revised Shyness Scale (Cheek, 1983). Sample items include, "I feel tense when I'm with new people I don't know well" and "It is hard for me to act natural when I am meeting with new people." Questions were added to measure the amount of experiences of the participant with disabilities. Sample items include, "Does your immediate family include someone with a disability," "In general, how much contact have you had with people who have disabilities," and "In general, how much do you understand the issues associated with people who have disabilities."

The participants filled out an informed consent. Then, participants completed the questionnaires that include the three major measures.

Procedure

A non-experimental approach was utilized for this study through the use of a survey. There were five classes that took the survey. The participants came to their regular scheduled class and were immediately given a written consent form. After the consent forms were collected, the surveys were passed out to each participant. The participants were told they had as much time to fill out the survey as needed. When the participants were finished, they handed their surveys in and waited until everyone finished. After all the surveys were collected, the subjects were then debriefed.

RESULTS

Primary Analyses

To find out if the amount of contact affected how positive a person's attitude is towards those with disabilities, the scores on the CATCH were correlated with the scores on each of the questions about experience. The first correlation was found between the question, "In general, how much contact have you had with people who have disabilities," and the CATCH; $r(150) = .37, p < .01$. This suggests that, in general, the more contact a person has with a person with a disability, the more positive his/her attitude will be.

To analyze whether people with low social anxiety had more positive attitudes toward people with disabilities than those with high anxiety, a one-way analysis of variance was utilized. First, a frequency table was conducted to rule out the participants who had more of a middle amount of social anxiety. The frequency was broken up into thirds to determine the high scores for the social anxiety, and the low scores and the middle scores could be taken out. The participants who had low social anxiety had significantly higher scores on the CATCH ($M_{\text{low social anxiety}} = 87.89, SD = 7.73$), indicating more positive attitudes, than those with high social anxiety ($M_{\text{high social anxiety}} = 83.00, SD = 8.64$), $F(3, 148) = 9.72, p < .01$.

A significant correlation was found between the question, "In general, how much do you understand the issues associated with people who have disabilities?" and the CATCH; $r(150) = .41, p < .01$. This suggests that, in general, the more a person understands the issues, the more positive his/her attitude will be towards people with disabilities.

Another significant correlation was between the two experience questions, one related to the amount of contact and the other related to issues associated with people who have disabilities; $r(162) = .61, p < .01$. This correlation is strong, significant, and positive suggesting that the more contact a person has with a person with a disability, the more he/she will understand the issues associated with people with disabilities. When correlating the question, "Have you ever taken a diversity course?" and the issues associated with people with disabilities, there was not a significant correlation. This suggesting that a person may need more than a diversity course to understand the issues associated with those with disabilities.

Secondary Analyses

A secondary analysis that was conducted to investigate if there was a difference in gender and how positive a person's attitude was towards others with disabilities. For males, $M_{\text{males}} = 82.48, SD = 7.37$. For females, $M_{\text{females}} = 85.28, SD = 8.84$. An ANOVA was utilized, $F(1, 149) = 3.67, p = .057$. This analysis is suggesting, that although the analysis was not significant, a trend is present in gender. Females seem to have a more positive attitude toward people with disabilities than males do.

Another secondary analysis that was conducted to look into to see if diversity courses have an impact on how positive a person's attitude toward disabilities. The ANOVA shows, $F(1, 147) = 1.29, p = .26$. This analysis was not significant and suggests that there is not significant relationship between the impact of a diversity course and improving a person's attitudes toward those with disabilities. It may actually take more than just a diversity class to increase a person's attitude toward others with disabilities.

DISCUSSION

The more contact a person has with another person with a disability, the more positive his/her attitude will be towards disabilities. A significant relationship was found suggesting that the more contact a person has with a disability, the more positive their attitude will be towards those with disabilities. Previous research also supports the findings. The more contact a person has with a disability, the more likely that that person will have a more positive attitude toward others with disabilities (Tripp et al., 1995). Royal et al. (1987) also found similar results. Their results suggest more familiar a person with a disability, the more accepting he/she may be of people with disabilities.

The second hypothesis was that people with a lower amount of social anxiety will have a more positive attitude towards those with disabilities. A significant analysis using ANOVA was found indicating that people with a lower amount of social anxiety do have a more positive attitude toward others with disabilities. The people with a lower amount of social anxiety may not have apprehension about associating with persons with disabilities (Fichten et al., 1997). People with a higher amount of social anxiety often make analyses about the situation they are in about what went wrong or what they should have done better (Colino, 2002). The result suggests that people with a higher amount of social anxiety have a more negative attitude than those with a lower amount of social anxiety and this may be because they are too worried about what others may think of them.

How much a person understands the issues associated with people who have disabilities and how positive his/her attitude was towards those with disabilities? A significant positive correlation was found suggesting that the more someone understands the issues surrounding those with disabilities, the more positive their attitude will be. Understanding the various issues that go along with those with disabilities can be difficult. If someone truly understands what a person with a disability has to go through, then maybe their attitude will improve. The last significant correlation that was found was that the more contact a person has with a disability, the more he/she will understand the issues associated with disabilities. The more time that someone spends with a person with a disability, the more he/she will see what people with disabilities go through on a daily basis, including normal daily routines and the scrutiny of other people in public settings. These two correlations help support the idea that the more contact a person has with an individual with disabilities, the more positive his/her attitude will be. Knowledge and understanding reduce ignorance, in all settings, not just with disabilities.

One secondary analysis that was conducted was to examine if there were gender differences in how positive a person's attitude was. Although the analysis was not significant, a trend was seen. Females seem to have more of a positive attitude towards those with disabilities than males do. This analysis could have been not significant because there truly is a trend and not a relationship, or the number of females to males was not equal. Royal et al. (1987) found that females have a more positive attitude towards persons with disabilities than males, but there was no significant relationship found, it was close to the statistical significance level though. This is similar to what was found in this study.

There was no significant correlation suggesting that just taking a diversity course will not necessarily cause people's attitudes towards those with disabilities to become more positive. It takes more than just a course on the information about those with disabilities, there needs to be real contact, like face to face contact, in order for people's attitudes to become more positive.

One implication this study presents is that by just taking a diversity class does not lead to a more positive attitude toward those with disabilities. Mere exposure to individuals with disabilities may be a better idea in order for more positive attitudes toward individuals with disabilities. Tripp et al. (1995) found that students who had other students with disabilities integrated into their classroom had more positive attitudes than their peers with a segregated classroom setting. Royal and Roberts (1987) found similar results in their study. They found that the more opportunities a child has to meet and interact with individuals with disabilities, the greater amount of acceptance and higher ratings of the individual with disability's abilities.

By normalizing the experience of disabilities to those without disabilities is important as well. The results of this study show that the more a person understands issues related to those with disabilities, the more positive their attitude will be. In order to understand the issues related to disabilities, the more contact a person should have with an individual with a disability. People with disabilities are like the rest of us, they just have more limitations than most of the population. The more familiar a child becomes with disabilities earlier in life, the more accepting they may be later in life.

The last question assessed asked "When you think of people with disabilities, you think of which disability the most?" The possible answers were physical, mental, or sensory and the participants were asked to circle one. A physical disability was answered most frequently with 123 participants (76.9%). A mental disability was answered second most frequent, but not nearly as close as the physical disability, with thirty-five participants (21.9%). Two participants clearly indicating that people do not think of sensory disability the most only answered a sensory disability. This creates an implication because not every person with a disability has a physical disability. Since most diversity courses only cover disability very minimally, or they don't cover it at all because they focus on racial/ethnic diversity. There needs to be general education about disability, but specifically, the subgroups.

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