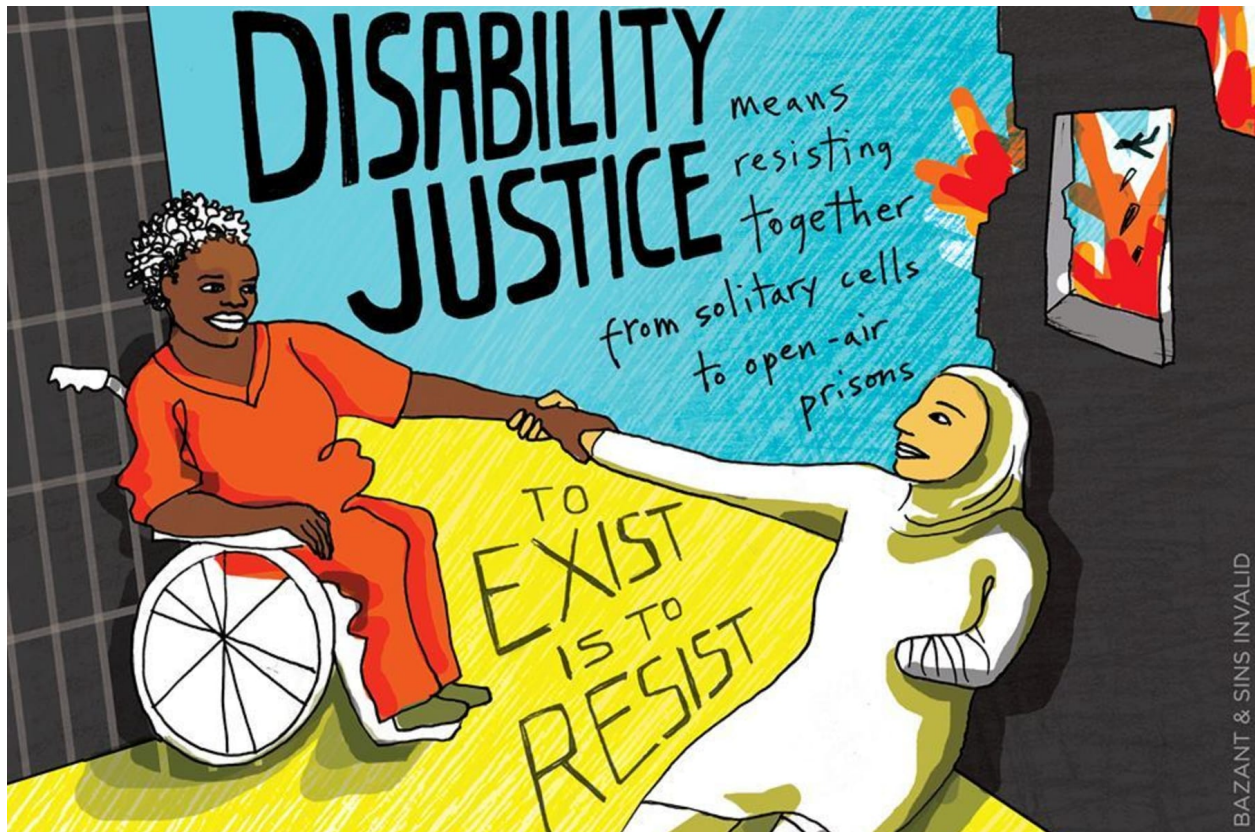


Adaptable: Challenging Perceptions of People with Disabilities

Introduction



Imagine you are leaving the grocery store and a vehicle pulls into a handicapped space in front of you. You see the individual get out of their vehicle and walk into the store. Would this surprise you? Would you conclude that the individual does not look disabled or that they are using the handicapped space illegally? This leads to the question, what does someone with disabilities look like? Better yet, what assumptions do people make about a person's disability status and what judgements and attitudes do non-disabled individuals have toward people with disabilities?

Background



Photo Caption: "Capitol Crawl" — Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990

- The Americans with Disabilities act of 1990 defines a person with disabilities as someone who has difficulty performing specific tasks or activities related to daily living or with various social roles (ADA, 1990).
- Specific tasks included under the definition of disabilities include difficulties related to vision, hearing, mobility, and cognitive or psychological impairments (ADA,1990).
- The United Nations reported in 2016 that more than 1 Billion people worldwide live with a disability and approximately 1 out of 7 people in the world have a disability.
- According to Brault (2012) in the United States alone disabilities affect one-fifth of all Americans and disabled people make up the largest minority group (approximately 19% of the population).
- According to the Humboldt State University Student Disability Resource Center (SDRC, 2018) 1 in 10 students utilizes disability related accommodations.
- Currently there is a lack of data and statistical analyses regarding disabilities which contributes to the invisibility of people with disabilities and creates obstacles for accessibility in development planning and implementation of people with disabilities in the workplace and other institutional settings (UN, 2016).

One size does not fit all



Photo Caption: ADAPT protest arrest, Tom Olin, From the collection of: [American Association of People with Disabilities \(AAPD\)](#)

What are the cognitive processes at the heart of social interactions regarding our judgements of ability toward persons with disabilities? Social cognition refers to the cognitive process used in social interaction (i.e. judgements or evaluations). Social cognition and knowledge and attitudes regarding disabilities are related because our judgements of disabilities can be altered by things like education and exposure. Social cognition and our judgments of what disabilities look like is related to well-being because the willingness or ability to be seen as disabled can greatly affect an individual's quality of life, availability of resources and accommodations, and access to treatment.

One complicating factor in researching the specific population of people who have disabilities is that there are so many types of disabilities and related conditions and the needs of individuals are particularly diverse depending on a number of factors. Rosa et al. (2016) found that the only disability category that was covered by all universities was the category of psychiatric disability. Until education surrounding people with all types of disabilities is more prevalent, we must continue to research the current state of attitudes and perceptions regarding people with disabilities in order to understand where more education is needed. To get a better understanding

of attitudes toward people with disabilities, attitudes are assessed by measuring explicit attitudes, implicit attitudes, or both.

- Explicit attitude measures can include such things as self-reported surveys or questionnaires and, though useful measures of attitudes, explicit measures may not be the most accurate measure of an individual's attitudes because of the impact that social desirability has on self-reported attitudes.
- Implicit attitude measures can be useful in gauging attitudes by measuring an individual's response time associating positive or negative words with particular stimuli that one is seeking to measure attitudes toward (i.e. a picture of a person with disabilities).

It is important that attitudes toward people with disabilities be studied using multiple measures in order to gain a more accurate understanding. Charlesworth and Banaji (2019) used implicit and explicit measures to examine attitudes towards six social groups (age, disability, body weight, race, skin tone, and sexual orientation). They found that explicit attitudes (self-reported prejudice) decreased over time and implicit attitudes with respect to race, skin-tone, and sexuality became more neutral over time whereas attitudes with respect to age and disability remained stable and body-weight attitudes became more negative over time.

Eye of the beholder



Perceptions of people with disabilities can vary based on the particular behaviors or actions they exhibit. Dionne et al. (2013) used two Implicit Association Tests (IATs) to measure attitudes of able-bodied people towards people when active compared to inactive and found significant negative attitudes towards images of people with a disability and positive attitudes towards people with physical disabilities who were active. If behaviors of people with disabilities affect attitudes towards people with disabilities, what are the potential consequences for people with disabilities? The normative social expectations placed on people with disabilities might contribute self-perceptions of people with disabilities.

Another aspect of perception that is important with respect to people with disabilities is the perception of pain. De Boer et. al (2014) explored how mindfulness and acceptance influenced the experience of pain and found that while mindfulness was not predictive of how pain was experienced, that acceptance was a significant predictor independent of age,

gender, or the intensity of pain. When we think about the normative expectations associated with ableism (discrimination towards people with disabilities and preferences for able-bodiedness), we can potentially apply the concept of acceptance to that of one's identity as a person with disability. Other research has found that accepting and identifying as a disabled person can have positive impacts on individual wellbeing (Nario-Redmond, 2019).

Like finding or accepting one's social identity, interventions that incorporate cognitive and behavioral methods are useful for reducing pain and in turn increasing quality of life and well-being. Kennet et al. (2008) found that learned resourcefulness can empower individuals with disabilities and increase the use of social support. Given that social support and resources are vital for people with disabilities, we must attempt to understand how people with disabilities process and apply information from social interactions with able-bodied individuals. More specifically, what are the cognitive processes at the core of social interactions between those with disabilities and those without?

To believe or not to believe



Attitudes and knowledge of people with disabilities can differ with respect to a number of factors such as:

- Whether or not the individual is disabled
- Whether they know people with disabilities,
- Level of education
- Gender
- Exposure to differing perspectives of what disabilities may look like

Friend or Foe



Photo Caption: Disability rights movement protest calling for the Rehabilitation Act of 1973.

In order to better understand these concepts, we must look at how people with disabilities might experience interactions with able-bodied individuals and how identification as a person with disabilities might affect these interactions. Kattari et al. (2018) investigated and developed themes regarding how and whether ableism is experienced by people with invisible physical disabilities. Results revealed themes of individuals with "invisible" physical disabilities having their actions and bodies policed by both non-disabled people as well as other persons with disabilities, and tension with social identity as a disabled person and role in educating others about disabilities. Nario-Redmond and Oleson (2015) found that those with disabilities were more "other focused", showed more political conviction, and were twice as likely to be involved in groups that advocated for disability rights. As social animals, the quality of relationships and ability to feel as though one belongs to a group are major contributors to well-being.

Adaptable



What if instead of focusing on the disabilities that people live with we find a way to enhance the abilities of all people by discontinuing the practice of segregating and silencing people with disabilities? I propose that a group be created on campus to give Humboldt State University students a way to connect, educate, and advocate for people with disabilities regardless of their ability. The proposed group will be called ADAPTABLE and will be a group organized by people with disabilities for students of all abilities. There is a dire need for education regarding people with disabilities, acceptance of people with disabilities, and attitudinal shifts toward the differing abilities of people with disabilities in order to increase the wellbeing of all people. By giving students a chance to connect and learn about disabilities, the wellbeing of all individuals who participate in the group will increase and especially the wellbeing of participants with disabilities. The mission of ADAPTABLE will be to advocate for people with disabilities, educate each other and the public about disabilities, and to create a space for students to adapt to a social environment that is accessible to and accommodates all people through openness, compassion, and willingness to adapt.

References

Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, Pub L No 101-336 § 3(2), 104 Stat 327, 330 (1990).

Brault, M. W. (2012). Americans with disabilities: 2010 (pp. 1-23). Washington, DC: US Department of Commerce, Economics and Statistics Administration, US Census Bureau.

Charlesworth, T. E., & Banaji, M. R. (2019). Patterns of implicit and explicit attitudes: I. Long-term change and stability from 2007 to 2016. *Psychological science*, 30(2), 174-192.

de Boer, M.,J., Steinhagen, H. E., Versteegen, G. J., Michel, M. R. F. S., & Sanderman, R. (2014). Mindfulness, acceptance and catastrophizing in chronic pain. *PLoS One*, 9(1) doi:<http://dx.doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0087445>

Dionne, C. D., Gainforth, H. L., Deborah A O'Malley, & Latimer-Cheung, A. (2013). Examining Implicit Attitudes towards Exercisers with a Physical Disability. *The Scientific World Journal*, 2013<http://dx.doi.org/10.1155/2013/621596>

Kattari, S. K., Miranda, O., & Hanna, M. D. (2018). "You look fine!". *Affilia*, 33(4), 477-492. doi:<http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0886109918778073>

Kennett, D. J., O'Hagan, F. T., & Cezer, D. (2008). Learned resourcefulness and the long-term benefits of a chronic pain management program. *Journal of Mixed Methods Research*, 2(4), 317-339.

Nario-Redmond, M. R. (2019). *Ableism: The causes and consequences of disability prejudice*. John Wiley & Sons.

Nario-Redmond, M. R., & Oleson, K. C. (2016). Disability group identification and disability-rights advocacy contingencies among emerging and other adults. *Emerging Adulthood*, 4, 207–218. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/2167696815579830>

Rosa, Nicole M, Bogart, Kathleen R, Bonnett, Amy K, Estill, Mariah C, & Colton, Cassandra E. (2016). Teaching About Disability in Psychology. *Teaching of Psychology*, 43(1), 59–62. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0098628315620885>

World Health Organization. (2007). International Classification of Functioning, Disability, and Health: Children & Youth Version: ICF-CY. World Health Organization.