
Brief Research Report

**Imagined Empathy and Attributions
Concerning Activity Preferences of
Physically Disabled College Students**

Catherine S. Fichten and Vicky Compton

Dawson College

Rhonda Amsel

McGill University

ABSTRACT: The unwarranted imputation of functional limitations to physically disabled college students can severely curtail their opportunities to become fully integrated into college life. The present study investigated able-bodied college students' attributions about the activity preferences of able-bodied versus physically disabled peers and evaluated the effects of imagined empathy on attributional patterns and attitudes toward disabled people. The results indicate that there is considerable variability in able-bodied students' attributions about disabled peers' activity preferences. Asking students to imagine empathy for a disabled peer was not found to be an effective technique to change either attributional patterns or attitudes toward disabled people.

Able-bodied people frequently impute functional limitations to physically disabled individuals (cf. Siller, 1976); in many cases, these assumptions are erroneous. It has long been known that for many physically disabled young adults, a most frustrating experience is not being asked to participate in certain activities because their able-bodied peers assume not only that they are unable to participate in the activity (e.g., Ladieu-Leviton, Adler, & Dembo, 1948), but also that they are not interested in doing so. In the case of college students, the academic milieu can provide many rich and rewarding experiences. But if disabled students, like disabled adults, are seen as being both unable to participate and uninterested in participating, opportunities for them to partake in these activities will be severely curtailed. This can result in lonely and isolating experiences, and may discourage disabled students from continuing with their studies.

In the present investigation, able-bodied college students' attributions about the activity preferences of physically disabled (wheelchair-user) and able-bodied peers were studied. It was predicted that disabled students, relative to able-bodied ones, would be seen as preferring to engage in non-gregarious and passive activities. Such attribution patterns can hamper the

integration of disabled students. Since asking people to empathize with another person has been shown to alter attributional patterns (e.g., Regan & Totten, 1975), the effects of instructing able-bodied students to imagine empathizing with a disabled peer were also evaluated.

METHOD

Subjects were 89 college students (45 males and 43 females) enrolled in four sections of a general psychology course; they ranged in age from 17 to 20. Most subjects were Caucasian; approximately one-third were Protestant, one-third were Catholic, and one-third were Jewish. Subjects, tested during class time, were asked to predict the responses of either a male or a female able-bodied or wheelchair-user college student. Half of the subjects in each experimental condition (i.e., in two class sections) were administered instructions to imagine empathizing with the stimulus person; half were not. In each class section, subjects were randomly assigned to the wheelchair-user and able-bodied experimental conditions. The stimulus person in each condition was described in a brief written statement; this indicated that the person was an 18-year-old male or female first-year college student. In the disabled conditions, the description also specified that a physical problem had confined the person to a wheelchair most of his or her life. Imagining instructions were administered by one of the researchers and consisted of Barber's (1969) well-known "task motivation instructions," which present the empathy task as a test of participants' ability to imagine themselves in another person's situation.

Subjects predicted the responses of one of the four stimulus persons on a 20-item forced-choice questionnaire, which asked subjects to choose between equally pleasant gregarious and nongregarious activities (e.g., designing posters for a bazaar or bake sale with friends vs. writing articles at home in one's spare time for the school newspaper) and between active and passive activities (e.g., going shopping vs. watching a soap opera on television). To select the 20 pairs of activities, 80 activities were rated for "pleasantness" on 5-point scales by 18 college students in a preliminary study. Activities presented in the forced-choice questionnaire consisted of pairs of equally pleasant activities. Information on previous contact with physically disabled people (family members or close friends) was obtained, and subjects in the wheelchair-user conditions also completed Yaker, Block, and Young's (1970) Attitude Toward Disabled Persons (ATDP) scale.

RESULTS

Surprisingly, 2 (empathy imagining vs. no empathy) \times 2 (wheelchair user vs. able-bodied) \times 2 (gender of stimulus person) \times 2 (gender of subject) analysis-of-variance comparisons on means for the gregarious-nongregarious and for the active-passive activity preference variables revealed no significant main effects or interactions. However, F_{max} tests showed that the variability of scores in the wheelchair-user condition was significantly greater for both gregarious-nongregarious, $F_{max}(39, 46) = 2.247, p < .05$, and active-passive, $F_{max}(38, 45) = 2.023, p < .05$, activity preferences. Empathy instructions did not reduce this difference in variability, nor did these instructions affect ATDP

scores. Of the subjects, 21% had experienced previous contact with disabled people; previous contact, however, had no effect on attributions concerning activity preferences of wheelchair-user students or on ATDP scores.

DISCUSSION

The results show (1) that contact with disabled people had no effects on attitudes or on attributions concerning activity preferences of wheelchair-user students; (2) that while there were no overall differences in activity preferences attributed to disabled and to able-bodied students, there was considerable variability in how able-bodied students perceived the activity preferences of wheelchair-user peers; and (3) that instructions to imagine empathizing with a disabled student did not affect activity preference attributions and did not eliminate the variability in ratings concerning disabled students.

The greater variability in activity preferences attributed to wheelchair-user students suggests that there is considerable ambiguity concerning the "normal" activity preferences for disabled students. Given this ambiguity, the fact that empathy instructions had no effects on attributions could be explained in the following way: If one does not know what is normative, or even possible, behavior for wheelchair-user students, it may be especially difficult to imagine what one would do in a wheelchair user's situation. Further, when a nondisabled person attempts to project himself or herself into a disabled person's situation, the position as an "outsider" tends to interfere with accurate perceptions and frequently results in expectation discrepancies. According to Wright (1983), "Not having had experience with the disability, not having to learn and discover new ways of meeting the problems, the outsider may regard the problems as frightfully frustrating and even insurmountable, thereby leading to exaggerated negative expectations" (p. 86). Likewise, it is possible that in predicting responses of persons with disabilities, people typically "imagine themselves in the other person's situation," and that this very process interferes with empathic understanding, resulting in inaccurate expectations (Berven, personal communication, 1985).

The ambiguity concerning attributions about activity preferences of wheelchair-user students could be due to a variety of factors, including greater actual variability in the activity preferences of wheelchair-user students. The variability could also be explained by ignorance on the part of able-bodied students, due to lack of exposure to wheelchair-user peers. On one hand, some of the participants may have responded in accordance with socially desirable beliefs (i.e., "Disabled people are just as active and gregarious as anyone else, perhaps even more so"; cf. Gibbons, Stephan, Stephenson, & Petty, 1980; Scheier, Carver, Schultz, Glass, & Katz, 1978). On the other hand, some students may have responded in accordance with the stereotypes of wheelchair-user students, which include characteristics such as "introverted," "passive" (Fichten & Amsel, 1984), and "socially anxious" (Robillard & Fichten,

1984). Thus, the variability can probably be best explained by a tendency to respond in accordance with one of the two prevailing social norms (i.e., socially desirable beliefs or stereotypes).

That previous contact with physically disabled people was unrelated either to attitudes toward disabled people or to activity preference attributions was not surprising, given the conflicting nature of the available evidence (cf. Antonak, 1981; English, 1971; Fichten, Hines & Amsel, in press; Robillard & Fichten, 1984). It appears as though it is not the mere existence of contact, but the nature of the contact, whether it is on a basis of equal status or not (Anthony, 1972; Bender, 1981; Rowlett, 1982), that affects attitudes toward disabled people. While opportunities for contact on terms of equal status are numerous in institutions of higher education, the problem of how best to instigate such contacts remains (Wright, 1983). Unfortunately, the simple potential solution of asking people to empathize with a disabled student does not appear to be a powerful technique for doing so.

REFERENCES

- Anthony, W. A. (1972). Societal rehabilitation: Changing society's attitudes toward the physically and mentally disabled. *Rehabilitation Psychology, 19*, 117-126.
- Antonak, R. F. (1981). Prediction of attitudes toward disabled persons: A multivariate analysis. *Journal of General Psychology, 104*, 119-123.
- Barber, T. X. (1969). *Hypnosis: A scientific approach*. New York: Van Nostrand.
- Bender, L. F. (1981). 1980 Presidential Address to the American Academy for Cerebral Palsy and Developmental Medicine. *Developmental Medicine and Child Neurology, 23*, 103-108.
- English, R. W. (1971). Correlates of stigma toward physically disabled persons. *Rehabilitation Research and Practice Review, 2*, 1-17.
- Fichten, C. S., & Amsel, R. (1984). *Trait attributions about physically disabled students: Circumplex analyses and methodological issues*. Manuscript submitted for publication.
- Fichten, C. S., Hines, J., & Amsel, R. (In press). Public awareness of physically disabled people. *International Journal of Rehabilitation Research*.
- Gibbons, F. X., Stephan, W. G., Stephenson, B., & Petty, C. R. (1980). Reactions to stigmatized others: Response amplification versus sympathy. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology, 16*, 591-605.
- Ladieu-Leviton, G., Adler, D. L., & Dembo, T. (1948). *Journal of Social Issues, 4*, 55-61.
- Regan, T. R., & Totten, G. (1975). Empathy and attribution: Turning observers into actors. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 32*, 850-856.
- Robillard, K., & Fichten, C. S. (1984). *Attributions about sexuality and romantic involvement of physically disabled college students: An empirical study*. Manuscript submitted for publication.
- Rowlett, J. D. (1982). Attitudes of peers toward physically limited students in university resident halls. *Dissertation Abstracts International, 42*, 4740A.
- Scheier, M. F., Carver, C. S., Schultz, R., Glass, D. C., & Katz, I. (1978). Sympathy, self-consciousness and reactions to the stigmatized. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology, 8*, 270-282.
- Siller, J. (1976). Attitudes toward disability. In H. Rusalem & D. Malikin (Eds.), *Contemporary vocational rehabilitation* (pp. 000-000). New York: New York University Press.
- Wright, B. (1983). *Physical disability—a psychosocial approach* (2nd ed.). New York: Harper & Row.
- Yuker, H., Block, J., & Young, J. (1970). *The measurement of attitudes toward disabled persons*. Albertson, NY: Human Resources Center.

Acknowledgments: This research was funded by a grant from Fonds F.C.A.C. pour l'Aide et le Soutien à la Recherche.

Reprints: Requests for reprints should be directed to Catherine S. Fichten, Dawson College, 350 Selby St., Montreal, Quebec, Canada H3Z 1W7.

Submitted: July 1984

Revised: December 1984

Accepted: March 1985