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# Interaction Between College Students Who Have a Physical Disability and Their Able-Bodied Professors and Peers

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**ABSTRACT.** A brief description of the findings of studies on interaction between people who have a physical disability and those who do not, research, carried out at Dawson College with a grant from FCAR's ACSAIR program, is provided.

For the past three years I've been doing research with Claudia Bourdon of the PSBGM on the integration of students with a physical disability into institutions of higher education. The research was funded by FCAR's ACSAIR program. Our research will continue for another three years with a grant we recently received from FCAR's Actions Spontanées program.

During the past three years we have carried out approximately 16 studies which have explored a variety of factors which facilitate or hamper interaction between students who have a physical disability and professors and students who do not. We have studied the role of ignorance, attitudes and stereotyping. We have examined social skills and knowledge of appropriate behavior by both groups and we have explored the effects of thoughts, beliefs and social anxiety on comfort during interaction. Participants in our studies have involved able-bodied and physically disabled college and university students as well as the professors who have taught them.

## **Interaction between students who have a physical disability and those who do not**

Our findings show that able-bodied college students have negative feelings about disabled students which might lead to problems in interaction. For example, we found that people know less about the nature of disabling medical conditions than they do about non-disabling conditions and that knowledge about disabilities is related, although only marginally, to favorable attitudes to people with disability

(Fichten, Hines & Ansel, in press). Ignorance about a group does not, of course, preclude prejudice or firmly held stereotypes (Hartley, 1969). This was evident from the results of two of our studies in which we found that able-bodied students attributed to disabled students characteristics that are both different from those of able-bodied students (Robillard & Fichten, in press) and also less socially desirable (Fichten & Ansel, in press). Such preconceptions can influence interaction if it does take place (Cohen, 1981); for example, we found that comfort experienced during interaction with disabled students and stereotyping are strongly and negatively related. In one of our ongoing studies we are investigating a technique designed to modify such erroneous preconceptions.

**Lack of social skills.** Not only attitudes, but inadequate social skills can also contribute to problematic or infrequent interaction between able-bodied and disabled people. The literature indicates that inadequate social performance is usually accompanied by social anxiety and by avoidance of the problematic social situation (Hersen & Eisler, 1976). Inadequate social behavior can be caused by lack of knowledge about what to say or do [the skill deficit model (McFall & Twentyman, 1973)] or by failure to enact the appropriate behavior in spite of knowledge about what constitutes adequate behavior [the response inhibition model (Schwartz & Gottman, 1976)]. As there has been no prior study of what are commonly occurring situations involving physically disabled and able-bodied students, one of the tasks our research has addressed was the identification of such situations. Once such situations were identified, we determined

## INTERACTION ENTRE ÉTUDIANTS HANDICAPÉS PHYSIQUEMENT ET LEURS COLLÈGUES ET PROFESSEURS QUI NE LE SONT PAS

Mme Catherine S. Fichten, professeur de psychologie au Collège Dawson, et une collègue de la Commission des écoles protestantes du grand Montréal, Madame Claudia Bourdon, poursuivent depuis trois ans à l'aide d'une subvention versée en vertu du programme ACSAIR du FCAR, des recherches sur l'intégration des étudiants handicapés physiquement au collège et à l'université.

Jusqu'ici, on s'est penché sur l'influence que pouvaient avoir certains facteurs personnels d'ordre cognitif et affectif sur la qualité des rapports entre les étudiants handicapés physiquement et leurs collègues et professeurs qui ne le sont pas. Dans son article, Mme Fichten livre certains résultats de ces travaux.

Ainsi, il appert que, par ignorance ou préjugé, les étudiants sans handicap physique ont tendance à voir leurs collègues handicapés à travers une image stéréotypée et, en général, plutôt négative. Une attitude susceptible de nuire, souligne l'auteur, à la qualité générale des rapports.

On a voulu savoir ensuite si la difficulté des rapports pouvait tenir à un manque de savoir-faire des uns face aux autres dans des situations courantes. Des situations qu'on a, d'ailleurs, définies avec précision. Or, vérification faite, il ne semble pas que ce facteur puisse être invoqué, du moins à titre de cause principale. En effet, tant chez les étudiants handicapés que chez les autres, on affirme savoir quoi faire et quoi dire dans les situations de la vie quotidienne.

Si on sait quoi faire et qu'on ne le fait pas, c'est qu'il y a blocage, s'est-on dit, et qu'il faut donc chercher du côté des facteurs inhibiteurs. Et, de fait, il y a lieu de croire, à la lumière des études faites, que la gêne et une certaine forme d'anxiété puissent être mises en cause. On a trouvé, par exemple, que c'est face à soi-même que, des deux côtés, on était le plus sévère. Les non handicapés jugent le comportement de leurs semblables plus durement que celui des personnes

handicapées et réciproquement. De chaque côté, on s'inquiète de ce que « l'autre » pense et de la convenance de son comportement.

Enfin, on a aussi voulu savoir ce qu'il en était des rapports entre les professeurs et leurs étudiants handicapés physiquement. C'est ainsi que dans un contexte de rencontres informelles, certains professeurs et certains étudiants handicapés ont pu d'abord faire état de leurs convictions respectives face au besoin de rapports positifs entre les personnes handicapées et ceux qui leur enseignent.

Mais on s'est aussi penché sur le « comment faire ». Professeurs et étudiants ont alors pu identifier des conditions facilitantes à la fois pour l'enseignement et pour l'apprentissage et évaluer tant la fréquence que la convenance de certains comportements qu'ils ont les uns face aux autres dans certaines situations courantes. Ce qui a permis, notamment, de définir de façon plus opérationnelle ce qu'on entend par « traiter les personnes handicapées comme les autres, en tenant compte de leurs limites ».

C'est là qu'en est actuellement cette recherche qui pourra bénéficier, au cours des trois prochaines années, d'une subvention du FCAR en vertu, cette fois, du programme Actions spontanées. On s'appliquera, entre autres objectifs, à chercher réponses à des questions comme les suivantes : « Les bons et mauvais comportements à l'endroit des handicapés sont-ils différents de ceux qu'il faut avoir ou ne pas avoir à l'endroit de n'importe quel étudiant ? », ou encore « sait-on comment s'y prendre dans certaines situations ? » Et, si oui, « qu'est-ce qui empêche d'appliquer ce qu'on fait ? » Des questions, par conséquent, qui renvoient à l'affectif mais aussi au cognitif.

(Note : On trouvera ailleurs dans ce numéro les réflexions du même auteur sur la recherche en milieu collégial).

what are and what are not appropriate behaviors by able-bodied and disabled students in each situation and whether people know how to behave appropriately in specific situations.

Our results show (Fichten & Bourdon, 1984a, 1983) that : *a*) both able-bodied and disabled students know what the appropriate behavior is in frequently occurring interaction situations by each group and *b*) that able-bodied students know as much about appropriate behaviors with physically disabled peers as they do about appropriate behaviors with able-bodied classmates. The findings indicate that in interaction between able-bodied and disabled students lack of knowledge about what constitutes effective behavior is not the principal cause of social strain. Therefore, the skill deficit model alone is not likely to account for problematic social interaction and avoidance of people with a physical disability.

**Inhibitory thoughts and beliefs and social anxiety.** The response inhibition model of poor social performance proposes that people, while knowing what to say or do, are unable to perform the appropriate behavior. Appropriate responding can be inhibited by a variety of factors including social anxiety and expectancy of negative consequences.

While our previous studies showed that able-bodied people know the right thing to say or do when interacting with a disabled person, our results also suggested that self-consciousness and social anxiety are likely contributors to interaction difficulties. Each group was found to be its own worst critic : disabled participants evaluated behaviors by disabled students more negatively than did able-bodied people and able-bodied students evaluated behaviors by the able-bodied more harshly. These results suggest that worry about what the « other person » thinks and about the

adequacy of one's own behavior contribute to problematic interaction. This led us to an exploration of the role which cognitive variables play in influencing interaction between physically disabled and able-bodied people.

We have already carried out a number of studies on the role of thoughts in mediating interaction between able-bodied and disabled students (Fichten, in press ; Fichten & Bourdon, 1984b). The results have been exciting and during the next three years, with funding from FCAR's Actions Spontanées program, we plan to continue this line of investigation.

**Interaction between professors and students with a physical disability.** While our previous studies have shown that inhibitory thoughts are likely to be more important contributors to problematic interaction between able-bodied and disabled students than is lack of knowledge concerning appropriate behavior, we have little information concerning the nature of effective and ineffective behaviors between professors and their disabled students.

To find out about the components of interpersonal behaviors in academic settings, we first held informal discussions with professors and physically disabled students. Both groups agreed that higher education for people with a physical disability is vital for effective competition in the job market. Everyone felt that since it is more difficult for a student with

a physical disability to attend college and university, it is important to ensure that their experiences at these institutions are positive. But how to do this ? In a study of this topic we recently completed (Fichten, Amsel, Bourdon, Creti & Martos 1985 ; Fichten, Bourdon, Creti & Martos, in press, 1985) 38 students with a physical disability, 74 college and university professors who have taught disabled students and 17 professors who have not commented on what could be done to facilitate teaching and learning. They also rated the frequency and appropriateness of a variety of behaviors by both professors and students in common interaction situations.

A large number of professor and disabled student behaviors were evaluated in this study and our understanding of how to operationalize notions such as « treat them like other students, within their limitations » and « behave like any other student when ever possible » is now far advanced. Nevertheless, a number of important questions remain unanswered. These include : How do appropriate and inappropriate professor-disabled student behaviors differ, if at all, from appropriate and inappropriate professor-able-bodied student behaviors ? Do people know what is the best thing to do in specific situations ? If so, do they actually do the « best thing » or do they do something else ? If the latter, what are the cognitive and affective reasons for doing so and what can be done to improve things ? These are questions we plan to investigate during the next 3 years.

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