

Reactions Toward Dating Peers with Visual Impairments

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Examined 330 nondisabled young adults' thoughts, feelings and behavioral intentions concerning dating partially sighted and blind individuals and evaluated the impact of a "disabled" or an "able-bodied stereotype" on ratings. Results indicate that sighted young adults were seen more likely to date nondisabled individuals than partially sighted or blind peers and that sighted people think more negatively and feel less comfortable in dating contexts which involve someone with a visual impairment. Thoughts about reactions of friends to dating someone with a visual disability were particularly negative. Discomfort, negative thinking, and avoidance were not due to the stereotype manipulation. Implications for research on social integration and for counseling young adults with visual impairments concerning dating issues are discussed.

Socializing and establishing relationships with both same and opposite sex peers is an important developmental task for young adults both with and without visual impairments (cf. Hansen, Watson-Perczel, & Christopher, 1989; Tobin & Hill, 1988). Indeed, dating and forming romantic attachments are an integral part of adolescents' and young adults' social development. Thus, it is hardly surprising that unattached individuals of both sexes experience a variety of concerns about dating issues.

People with visual impairments have the same concerns about romantic relationships as do their nondisabled peers. Those integrated into the sighted community have concerns which relate to the impairment as well. These pertain to social isolation, opportunities for finding suitable partners, misconstrual of the nature of interest which is shown by opposite sex peers, and one's acceptance as a potential partner for sighted peers (Calek, 1973; Kent, 1983; Welbourne, Lifschitz, Selvin, & Green, 1983).

The literature shows that high school students in segregated residential schools for the blind are likely to date earlier and more frequently than do their peers who have been integrated into sighted schools (Crandell & Streeter, 1977). Although it is not clear whether the key variable in this study was residential vs. nonresidential or segregated vs. integrated school setting, it has been well documented that discomfort and avoidance of people with disabilities, including those with visual impairments, exist in many situations (Cohen, 1972; Eberly, Eberly, & Wright, 1981; Fichten, 1986; Rusalem, 1972; Snyder, Kleck, Strenta, & Mentzer, 1979) and that increasing personal relevance and decreasing social distance both exaggerate this tendency (Carver, Gibbons, Stephan, Glass, & Katz, 1979; Gibbons, Stephan, Stephenson, & Petty 1980; Grand, Bernier, & Strohmmer, 1982; Myerson, 1968). Moreover, studies of the effects of age generally show a U-shaped distribution of attitudes toward individuals with impairments, with high-school-aged individuals being least accepting of peers with disabilities (Eaglestein, 1975; Ryan, 1981).

But evidence concerning the question, "Do people with visual impairments actually have more difficulties in obtaining dates and in forming romantic attachments than do their sighted peers or do they merely believe that this is the case?" is not conclusive. Large surveys of individuals with visual impairments suggest that marriage rates are similar to those of sighted individuals (Brighthouse, cited in Wright, 1983, p. 256; Kirchner & Peterson, 1981). However, such data do not take into account either the visual status of the partners or whether the marriage occurred before or after the onset of the impairment. In contrast, first-person accounts (Criddle, 1953; Mangold & Mangold, 1983) and self-reports (Calek, 1973; Crandell & Streeter, 1977) stress difficulties with dating and marriage. Moreover, women with visual impairments have been found to have their first experience with sexual intercourse later than sighted women (Welbourne et al., 1983). The few studies which have compared dating experiences of individuals with and without disabilities have found contradictory results. Some show few differences in dating frequency or satisfaction (Fichten, Robillard, Judd, & Amsel, 1989). Others show earlier dating by blind than by nondisabled students, although with fewer serious relationships (Crandell & Streeter, 1977). However, these studies used small and nonrepresentative samples, employed different criteria for evaluating dating relationships, and assessed individuals from both high school and college.

Some have argued that while there are numerous factors which result in social isolation of adolescents with disabilities (cf. Ammerman, Van Hasselt, & Hersen, 1987), people with visual impairments also have "privileges of association" which are "prompted by emotions which range from pity to guilt and include mutual respect and friendship" (MacFarland, 1966, p.32). It is, however, by no means clear that such contacts materialize in romantic relationships. There are several reasons why relationships which start out on an unequal basis may not evolve into romantic attachments. First, acceptance, in the form of positive attitudes, does not necessarily imply willingness to engage in an intimate relationship. Second, many individuals with disabilities reject the "sympathy" and the

norm of "be kind to those less fortunate" approach (Makas, 1988; Scott, 1969). Also, opposite sex peers with disabilities may seem to be particularly desirable to nondisabled adolescents and young adults as Platonic friends, confidants, and buddies. Opposite sex peers with disabilities may be considered "safe," presumably because of beliefs about people with impairments [e.g., they are very understanding, have good judgment about others and are not preoccupied by sexual concerns (Hahn, 1981; Haring & Meyerson, 1979; Fichten, Judd, Tagalakis, Amsel, & Robillard, in press; Scott, 1969; Zola, 1982)]. Moreover, the "quality" of the dating partner may not be as high as the individual with an impairment might desire (cf. Hahn, 1981). For example, studies of friendships in integrated schools show that, often, the friends of students with disabilities tend to be loners or isolated themselves (Jones, Lavine, & Shell, 1972). Even in studies which have failed to show such effects, the data indicate that those with disabilities are less likely than nondisabled peers to have their friendship choices reciprocated (Kleck & Dejong, 1983).

It is also not known whether dating difficulties are due to the impairment *per se* or to stereotyped views about the personality characteristics of people with disabilities. For example, it has been argued that individuals with disabilities who do not fit stereotypic expectations but who, instead, are seen as similar to nondisabled individuals are likely to be viewed very favorably (Wright, 1983). In this regard, it should be noted that attitudes toward people with physical disabilities, including those with visual impairments, are by no means exclusively negative. The data indicate that both sympathy and aversion are commonplace (Bowman, 1979; Cohen, 1972; Katz & Glass, 1979; Weinberg, 1976), and numerous studies have shown more favorable evaluations of people with disabilities than of equivalent nondisabled individuals (Belgrave, 1985; Belgrave & Mills, 1981; Tagalakis, Amsel, & Fichten, 1988; Weinberg-Asher, 1973).

While it is possible that extremely favorable assessments of people with disabilities do, indeed, reflect favorable attitudes toward individuals who are seen as having overcome insurmountable odds (Wright, 1983), it is also possible that such evaluations reflect social desirability, sympathy, or self-presentation biases. To avoid such confounds, some researchers have employed a response prediction paradigm, where participants are asked to report the beliefs of others who are similar to themselves, rather than their own views. Studies using such instructional sets have found that individuals with disabilities are evaluated more negatively than their nondisabled peers (Babbitt, Burbach, & Iutovich, 1979; Fichten & Amsel, 1986; Fichten et al., 1989; Haring & Meyerson, 1979; Robillard & Fichten, 1983).

The goals of the present investigation were to (a) investigate whether college students with visual impairments are more likely than able-bodied students to encounter difficulties with dating nondisabled peers, (b) explore aspects of cognition and affect in nondisabled individuals which may contribute to difficulties, and (c) evaluate whether stereotypes moderate the impact of a disability on nondisabled students' thoughts, feelings and behavioral intentions concerning dating peers with visual impairments. We employed a response prediction

paradigm in order to avoid contamination of the results by the confounds and biases noted above. An additional reason for selecting this technique is that many young adults are already involved in romantic relationships. Thus, asking them about dating someone else may not provide valid information. Therefore, in the present study, nondisabled college students were asked to indicate male and female classmates' thoughts, feelings and behavioral intentions concerning dating peers with and without visual impairments who do and who do not fit a "disabled stereotype." To assess whether the sex of the person with a disability is a factor and to evaluate the impact of the severity of the impairment, data were collected concerning dating nondisabled, partially sighted, and blind male and female college students.

METHOD

Subjects

Three-hundred-and-thirty college students (143 males and 187 females) enrolled in an upper-level psychology course served as subjects. Mean age was 20 (range = 17-36). None of the students in the course had a visual impairment.

Measures

College Dating Self-Statement Test (CDSST). Developed for the present investigation, this measure lists 52 thoughts related to going out with an opposite sex peer. The measure has two dimensions: focus of attention (on the self, on the other person, on the situation, on friends' reactions) and valence (positive, negative). A brief description of a hypothetical situation between opposite sex students in the college context is provided. Subjects then rate, using a 5-point scale, how often each thought is experienced. While no psychometric data were collected for this test and subscales are based only on face validity, item content of the CDSST is based on other self-statement measures concerning social interaction (CISST: Fichten & Amsel, 1988; SISST: Glass, Merluzzi, Biever, & Larsen, 1982) and on the reported experiences and beliefs of young adults with visual impairments. The CDSST yields eight thought frequency mean scores: positive and negative self-focused, other-focused, situation-focused and friends-focused thoughts.¹

Procedure

Subjects were randomly assigned to experimental conditions. All read brief personality descriptions of two stimulus persons: a male and a female college student (Paul and Jane). Descriptions were presented in counterbalanced order. Each subject completed ratings about the stimulus persons in one of three conditions: partially sighted, blind, no mention of a disability. Stimulus persons

were depicted as 19 years old and enrolled in a social science program. For each stimulus person, the description fit either a "disabled stereotype" or an "able-bodied stereotype." Six positive and three negative characteristics were attributed to both "disabled stereotyped" and to "able-bodied stereotyped" stimulus persons; these are based on previous research (Fichten & Amsel, 1986; Fichten et al., 1989) and are listed in Table 1. In all cases, the description made clear that the stimulus person was interested in going out with one of the subject's (nondisabled) classmates.

Subjects rated how comfortable the nondisabled classmate was likely to feel in this situation (1 = very uncomfortable, 10 = very comfortable), how frequently he or she was likely to have each of the thoughts listed in the College Dating Self-Statement Test in such a situation, and how likely it was that the classmate would go out with the stimulus person (1 = very unlikely, 10 very likely).

RESULTS

Because preliminary analyses showed no significant differences between male and female subjects' responses on any of the variables, data from males and from females were pooled. Also, the results showed no significant differences between the blind and the partially sighted stimulus person conditions. Therefore, data concerning partially sighted and blind stimulus persons were combined.

Statistical analyses followed a three-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) design [2 Status (Nondisabled/Visually Impaired Stimulus Person) X 2 Stereotype (Able-bodied/Disabled) X 2 Sex (Male/Female Stimulus Person)]. Of interest are main effects for Status and for Stereotype and interactions which contain one or both of these variables.

Comfort in the Situation

Results on ratings of comfort show only a significant status main effect, $F(1,326) = 57.90, p < .001$. As the means in Table 2 show, comfort scores were

Table 1. Personality Characteristics Attributed to Stimulus Persons

Trait Valence	"Able-Bodied Stereotype"	"Disabled Stereotype"
+	Sociable	Quiet
+	Capable	Soft-hearted
+	Self-assured	Honest
+	Independent	Undemanding
+	(Self-disciplined)
+	(Hard-working)
-	Conceited	Shy
-	Overconfident	Insecure
-	Self-centered	Dependent

Table 2. Mean Comfort in the Dating Situation

Stimulus Person	"Disabled Stereotype"		"Able-Bodied Stereotype"	
	Male	Female	Male	Female
Nondisabled	6.62 (2.10)	5.48 (1.92)	5.65 (1.85)	5.77 (2.30)
Visually impaired	4.13 (2.25)	3.78 (2.10)	4.36 (1.81)	3.93 (1.85)

Note: The higher the score, the more comfortable; maximum score = 10. Values in parentheses are standard deviations.

higher in the nondisabled than in the visually impaired condition. None of the interactions was significant.

Behavioral Intentions

The means in Table 3 and ANOVA results show that subjects believed that it is more likely that a classmate would go out with the stimulus person if he/she were nondisabled than if he/she had a visual impairment, $F(1,326) = 59.70, p < .001$. The Stereotype main effect was not significant, nor were any of the interactions.

Thoughts

To evaluate differences in self, other, situation, and friends-focused thoughts, Schwartz and Garamoni's States-of-Mind (SOM; 1986, 1989) ratio was used. The SOM ratio reflects the balance between positive and negative thinking and is computed as follows: [Frequency of Positive Thoughts/(Frequency of Positive + Negative Thoughts)]. Scores vary from 0 to 1, with higher scores indicating more positive thinking. SOM ratios were used in a 4-way ANOVA comparison [2 Status X 2 Stereotype X 2 Sex X 4 Focus of Attention (Self/Other/Situation/Friends)].

Results indicate significant main effects for Status, $F(1,326) = 56.14, p < .001$, and for Focus of Attention, $F(3,978) = 30.28, p < .001$, and the following signifi-

Table 3. Mean Likelihood of the Classmate Going Out with the Stimulus Person

Stimulus Person	"Disabled Stereotype"		"Able-Bodied Stereotype"	
	Male	Female	Male	Female
Nondisabled	6.69 (2.31)	5.68 (2.06)	6.27 (2.31)	5.85 (2.43)
Visually impaired	4.09 (2.23)	3.82 (2.23)	4.70 (2.24)	3.77 (1.96)

Note: The higher the score, the more likely to date; maximum score = 10. Values in parentheses are standard deviations.

cant interactions: Status X Focus of Attention, $F(3,978) = 14.95, p < .001$, Stereotype X Focus of Attention, $F(3,978) = 2.85, p < .05$ (it should be noted, however, that the Stereotype X Focus of Attention interaction is not significant with Greenhouse-Geisser conservative degrees of freedom). Means presented in Table 4 and Tukey HSD post-hoc tests on these interactions show the following significant ($p < .05$ or better) differences: (a) SOM scores were higher in the nondisabled than in the visually impaired condition in all focus-of-attention groupings, (b) other-focused scores were higher than scores in all other attentional focus groupings, and (c) in the disabled stereotype condition, both self and other-focused scores were greater than friends-focused scores, although in the able-bodied stereotype condition self and friends-focused scores did not differ significantly.

To explore further the possibility that thoughts about friends is a key component of concerns about dating peers with visual impairments, SOM scores were recalculated to reflect only two attentional focus groupings: Friends-Focused/Non-Friends-Focused thoughts. ANOVA results (2 Status X 2 Stereotype X 2 Sex X 2 Focus of Attention) show significant main effects for Status, $F(1,326) = 68.45, p < .001$, Stereotype, $F(1,326) = 4.20, p < .05$, and Focus of Attention, $F(1,326) = 11.72, p < .001$. The following interactions were also significant: Status X Focus, $F(1,326) = 11.72, p < .001$, Stereotype X Focus, $F(1,326) = 5.87, p < .05$. Means in Table 5 and Tukey HSD post-hoc tests show that (a) friends-focused means in the visually impaired condition were significantly lower than friends-focused scores in the nondisabled condition as well as non-friends-focused thoughts in both the visually impaired and in the nondisabled conditions, and (b) scores were lowest in the disabled stereotype friends-focused category.

Table 4. Mean SOM Ratios in Different Focus of Attention Thought Categories

Focus of Attention:	Self-Focused		Other-Focused		Situation-Focused		Friends-Focused	
	Dis.	Able.	Dis.	Able.	Dis.	Able.	Dis.	Able.
Experimental condition								
Nondisabled	.54	.54	.55	.55	.53	.53	.52	.56
Visually impaired	.46	.47	.52	.52	.45	.47	.43	.45

Note Higher SOM scores reflect more positive thinking; values range from 0 to 1 Dis = Disabled, Able = Able-bodied.

Table 5. Mean SOM Ratios in Friends-Focused and Non-Friends-Focused Thought Categories

Focus of Attention:	Non-Friends-Focused Thoughts		Friends-Focused Thoughts	
	Disabled	Able-Bodied	Disabled	Able-Bodied
Experimental condition				
Nondisabled	.54	.55	.52	.56
Visually impaired	.47	.48	.43	.45

Note Higher SOM scores reflect more positive thinking; values range from 0 to 1

Goffman (1963) proposed that negative reactions toward people with impairments can "spread" to nondisabled associates. To examine this hypothesis, we explored similarities and differences between friends-focused thoughts which evaluated beliefs about friends' reactions to oneself (i.e., what will my friends think of me) and friends' reactions to the dating partner¹ in a 4-way ANOVA comparison [2 Status X 2 Stereotype X 2 Sex X 2 Friends' Thoughts (About Oneself / About Dating Partner)]. Of interest is the significant Status X Friends' Thoughts interaction, $F(1,325) = 9.10, p < .01$. Tukey HSD post-hoc tests show that not only were scores lower in the visually impaired stimulus person condition than in the sighted condition for both thoughts About Oneself and About Partner, but also that while these two scores did not differ significantly in the nondisabled condition ($M = .551, M = .548$, respectively), thoughts About Oneself in the visually impaired condition ($M = .431$) were significantly ($p < .05$) lower than thoughts About Partner ($M = .461$). This suggests that Goffman's notion of "spread of stigma" may be operating in the present context.

Thoughts, Feelings, and Behavioral Intentions

The relationships among thoughts, feelings, and behavioral intentions in the nondisabled and visually impaired experimental conditions were explored using correlational analyses. Pearson product-moment correlation coefficients show a significant relationship between feelings of comfort in the situation and the likelihood of going out with the stimulus person; the coefficient, however, is considerably larger in the visually impaired, $r(223) = .58, p < .001$, than in the nondisabled condition, $r(103) = .31, p < .001$. Similarly, coefficients presented in Table 6 show a closer relationship in the visually impaired than in the nondisabled condition between the proportion of positive thoughts (SOM scores) in all focus of attention categories and both feelings of comfort and the likelihood of going out with the stimulus person. Moreover, the data show that favorableness of thoughts about friends' reactions was correlated more strongly with behavioral intentions than other-focused thoughts and at least as strongly as self-focused thoughts in both experimental conditions.

Table 6. Correlations Between Thoughts, Feelings, and Behavioral Intentions

Condition:	Comfort in the Dating Situation		Likelihood of Going Out	
	Nondisabled	Visually Impaired	Nondisabled	Visually Imp
Attention Focus of Thoughts				
Self-focused	.24**	.42***	.18*	.58***
Other-focused	.21*	.38***	.23*	.38***
Situation-focused	.32***	.50***	.16*	.55***
Friends-focused	.25**	.52***	.40***	.60***

Note Pearson product-moment correlation coefficients $df = 103$ in the nondisabled and 223 in the visually impaired experimental condition.

* = $p < .05$.

** = $p < .01$

*** = $p < .001$

DISCUSSION

The findings clearly indicate that able-bodied college students believed that their peers were less comfortable with the prospect of dating visually impaired than nondisabled students and that they were less likely to go out with students with visual disabilities. The data also show that thoughts about oneself, the dating partner, the situation, and friends' reactions were also more negative when the potential dating partner had a visual impairment. Severity of the impairment (i.e., partially sighted vs. blind) had no impact on evaluations.

To the best of our knowledge this is the first study to have investigated thoughts about friends' reactions. Nevertheless, the overall findings are consistent with previous data which show that thoughts and feelings are more negative when the other person in a casual interaction has a disability (Amsel & Fichten, 1988; Fichten, 1986; Fichten & Amsel, 1988), that the nature of the disability has little effect on cognition and affect in nondisabled individuals (Fichten, Robillard, Tagalakis, & Amsel, 1991), and that decreasing social distance is associated with more negative evaluations (Grand, Bernier, & Strohmmer, 1982; Weinberg, 1976).

Results on the attentional focus of thoughts provide a clue about one factor which may have influenced evaluations about peers with visual impairments as dating partners: social value. The data show that (a) there was a close relationship between the likelihood of dating the stimulus person and the positivity of respondents' friends-focused thoughts, (b) thoughts about friends' reactions to dating someone with a visual impairment were especially negative, and (c) thoughts about friends' reactions to oneself, rather than to the dating partner, were particularly negative when the partner had a disability. Such findings are consistent with previous research which shows that nondisabled college students believe that others hold more negative views of peers with disabilities than they themselves do (Babbit et al., 1979) and suggest that concerns about the "social value" of a visually impaired dating partner may be a particularly important factor. As Goffman (1963) argued long ago, those who associate with individuals with disabilities may be affected by the "spread of stigma" and, thus, come to be negatively evaluated by their peers. Indeed, both the present findings as well as the results of a recent study (Gordon, Minnes, & Holden, 1990) clearly show that a key component of attitudes toward people with impairments is expectations regarding stigmatization of the self by others. Findings on friends-focused thoughts, thus, may reflect the concern that if one dates someone with an impairment, one must, in some way, be deficient oneself.

That perceptions of the social worth of individuals influence the choice of dating partners is a cornerstone of social exchange and equity theories of attraction (cf. Walster, Walster, & Berscheid, 1978). As any social psychology text will attest (e.g., Myers, 1990), key elements which go into the equity formula include physical attractiveness and diverse indicators of social status. Thus, it is possible that the present results reflect the lower perceived "social worth" of individuals with disabilities, who are usually viewed as characterized by limitations, deficiencies, and inadequacies (Wright, 1983). A young man put this succinctly, "Nobody believes that 'handicap is beautiful.'"

The finding that stereotypes had virtually no impact on thoughts, feelings, or behavioral intentions was unexpected. It has been suggested that negative reactions to people with impairments are mediated, at least in part, by assumptions about personality characteristics of individuals with disabilities, who are typically seen as different from oneself and from one's nondisabled peers (Fichten & Amsel, 1986). Also, it has been noted that findings of extremely favorable evaluations of individuals with disabilities are due, in part, to the belief that when people with impairments are behaving like everyone else, their performance is "better" than one expects (i.e., they have "overcome misfortune") (Wright, 1983). Thus, we expected to find more favorable attitudes toward individuals with visual impairments who fit an "able-bodied" rather than a "disabled stereotype."

The data, however, do not support the hypothesis that stereotypes, as presented in this study, mitigate negative thoughts, feelings, and behaviors toward potential dating partners with visual impairments. This was both surprising and disheartening, as the findings suggest that it is an immutable characteristic—the presence of an impairment—rather than personality traits assumed to characterize individuals with disabilities, which results in discomfort, avoidance and negative thinking about dating peers with visual impairments.

It should be noted, however, that there are several alternate explanations of the finding that peers with visual impairments, even when described as having typically "able-bodied" characteristics, were seen as less desirable dating partners than nondisabled individuals. First, it is possible that the response prediction methodology used in this investigation may have produced less positive evaluations and ratings than a more conventional "own response" paradigm. Second, the descriptions of both the "disabled stereotyped" and the "able-bodied stereotyped" stimulus persons depicted an average individual (the mean likelihood of going out with both stimulus persons in the nondisabled experimental condition hovered around 6 on a 10-point scale). Had the stimulus persons been described more favorably, the results may have been different. Also, it is well known that people make assumptions about stereotypes (Kirtley, 1975; Lukoff, 1972; Scott, 1969) and have negative images about the physical appearance of those with disabilities (Bordieri, Sotolongo, & Wilson, 1983). Thus, it is possible that subjects held beliefs about the characteristics of peers with visual impairments which went above and beyond the descriptions provided in the present investigation, and that subjects' own stereotypic beliefs about people with disabilities overrode our depictions of the stimulus persons (cf. Fiske, 1982). Moreover, in naturalistic contexts, people rarely ask someone out in the absence of previous contact where areas of compatibility and mutual interests have been explored. Indeed, it has been found that attitude similarity is a powerful determinant of attraction for individuals both with and without disabilities (Weinberg-Asher, 1973). Thus, it is possible that different variables may be operating in "real life."

Implications of the Findings for Research and Practice

The data from this study, although analogue in nature, do suggest that young adults with visual impairments are likely to experience more difficulties with

dating sighted individuals than do their nondisabled peers. While some outstanding individuals have minimal difficulties, most "average" young adults who have a visual impairment are likely to be adversely affected by the "social worth" comparison, especially during the initial stages of forming a relationship. This can be compounded by factors more directly linked to visual acuity, as people with visual impairments may not be aware of the presence of friends and acquaintances and often have to wait to be approached by others (Warnath & Dunnington, 1981).

A visual impairment may also cause other difficulties with dating, but in a less direct fashion. Because individuals with disabilities may be perceived as particularly understanding and nonthreatening, it is possible that they have numerous opposite sex Platonic, confidant, and helping relationships; the person with a visual impairment may misconstrue personal disclosures in such relationships as indicative of romantic interest (Glueckauf & Quittner, 1984). Also, people are not likely to reveal why they refuse to date someone when the reason relates to uncontrollable and stable personal characteristics of the other (Folkes, 1982); thus, feedback in this context is likely to be inaccurate. Moreover, difficulties interpreting the many visual cues which denote interest and lack of interest in pursuing a romantic relationship (Fichten, Judd, Tagalakis, Amsel, & Robillard, *in press*) may also predispose individuals with visual impairments to fail to respond or to inadvertently reject romantic initiations by sighted individuals. For example, one determined young sighted woman reported that after numerous attempts at indicating that she was interested in pursuing a romantic relationship with a man who was blind, she found that the only way she could communicate her interest was to waylay forcibly and trip the man who is currently her husband (personal communication). Similarly, sighted individuals—who rely heavily on visual cues which denote interest in dating (Fichten, Tagalakis, Judd, & Amsel, 1991)—may misinterpret the intentions of individuals with visual impairments if they fail to emit the expected visual stimuli.

While the option of dating someone who also has a visual impairment would seem a logical solution, relatively few individuals who have been integrated into the sighted community date others with disabilities (Fichten et al., 1989). Impediments include minimal contact with others who have visual impairments (Pfanstiehl, 1983), negative evaluations of others who have disabilities, including the same disability as one's own (Dixon, 1977; Fichten et al., 1989), and pessimistic views about two people with visual impairments being able to manage various life situations (Pfanstiehl, 1983).

Yet, positive and fulfilling romantic relationships do form between people with visual impairments as well as between those with visual impairments and sighted individuals. It is important that investigators study such positive relationships. Indeed, it has been suggested that the study of "acceptance" is an important endeavor which has generally been neglected. (Bogdan & Taylor, 1987). The challenge for research is both to better understand the factors which constitute and cause difficulties and to explore variables which facilitate the development of such relationships. In this regard, more research is needed on the romantic relationships of adolescents and young adults with visual impairments. For example, is it really true that individuals with visual impairments have an

unusually large number of Platonic, confidant, and “buddy” relationships with opposite sex individuals? If so, is this more common for men or for women? How do people with visual impairments fare in the gay and lesbian communities? What cues indicate that the other person wishes to alter the nature of a relationship which started out as a friendship and what are good ways of trying to change friendships into romantic relationships without risking loss of self-esteem as well as of the friendship? What sorts of cues do both sighted and visually impaired individuals express and perceive as indicative of romantic interest and what cues do individuals who are blind substitute for physical attractiveness when forming first impressions? What are the social skills needed by people with visual impairments to “put their best foot forward” in the dating game? [For a sophisticated analysis of how social skills in interactions between visually impaired and sighted individuals can be assessed, see Ammerman, Van Hasselt, Hersen, & Moore (1989) and Van Hasselt, Hersen, Kazdin, Simon, & Mastantuono (1983).] Do romantic relationships between individuals with and without visual impairments develop in a manner different from those between sighted individuals? How do nondisabled partners of people with visual impairments view the equity issues noted earlier? Is it easier for people with visual impairments to form romantic relationships when they are well into their twenties (i.e., when peer, conformity, and parental pressures are no longer as important)? How can the acceptance and “social worth” of individuals with disabilities be enhanced? Now that so many adolescents and young adults with visual impairments are attending regular schools and holding jobs in the sighted community, research to explore issues such as these is urgently needed.

NOTES

¹Examples of thoughts in different attentional focus categories:

Self-Focused Thoughts

I enjoy meeting new people. (+)

I feel uncomfortable. (-)

Other-Focused Thoughts

He/she seems like an OK person. (+)

He/she might expect too much from me. (-)

Situation-Focused Thoughts

We probably have a lot in common. (+)

If I go out with him/her we'll probably both feel awkward. (-)

Friends-Focused Thoughts

Friends' reactions to oneself:

My friends will be happy for me if I go out with him/her. (+)

My friends may think I'm really desperate if I go out with him/her. (-)

Friends' reactions to the dating partner:

My friends will get along well with him/her. (+)

My friends might be nervous around him/her if we go out. (-)

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