

# Social Skill Deficit or Response Inhibition: Interaction Between Disabled and Nondisabled College Students

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*The interaction between wheelchair users and nondisabled college students was investigated in two studies. Results suggest that the response inhibition model best explains interaction difficulties.*

Since 1981, the International Year of Disabled Persons, there has been a heightened awareness of the concerns and needs of people with physical disabilities (Fichten, Hines, & Amsel, in press). In recognition of the needs of such persons for higher education, many colleges and universities have recently removed architectural barriers, thereby providing access to increasing numbers of people who have disabilities.

But how well will these students be able to adjust to college life, which includes not only academics but also socializing and seeking out relationships with peers? The adaptation of these students could determine whether they will complete their studies, an objective particularly important for those with disabilities (McLoughlin, 1982). For many such students the college experience is their first encounter with the "nondisabled world." Because of negative social experiences, many disabled persons discharged from rehabilitation settings return to those settings (Stensrud & Stensrud, 1981).

Little is known about college students with physical disabilities (Mitchell, 1982) or about the attitudes or behavior of nondisabled students toward their disabled peers (Stovall & Sedlacek,

1983). Existing information suggests that adjustment to college life and social isolation are among the most common (and most serious) problems faced by students with disabilities (Penn & Dudley, 1980).

Such problems are hardly surprising because interaction between those who have a physical disability and those who do not has been shown to be difficult. Many nondisabled people avoid such interaction if possible (Eberly, Eberly, & Wright, 1981; Snyder, Kleck, Strenta, & Mentzer, 1979), and when interaction occurs they are less comfortable with disabled than with nondisabled persons (Fichten, 1983; Robillard & Fichten, in press) and both nondisabled (Kleck, 1968; Kleck, Ono, & Hastorf, 1966) and disabled people (Comer & Pillavin, 1972) generally behave atypically during such encounters.

Problems during interaction between nondisabled persons and those who have a physical disability and social anxiety concerning such encounters can have numerous sources. Poor social skills are a likely source of difficulty and have been shown in other areas to have a strong impact on both the likelihood of engaging in interpersonal behavior and on social anxiety (Hersen & Eisler, 1976).

Inadequate social behavior can be caused by lack of knowledge about what to say or do (i.e., the skill deficit model) (McFall & Twentyman, 1973) or by failure to enact the appropriate behavior despite knowledge about what constitutes adequate behavior (i.e., the response inhibition model) (Schwartz & Gottman, 1976). Knowing which of these two models best explains problems of interaction between those who have physical disabilities and those who do not has important theoretical and practical implications.

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Because different social situations require different behaviors (Eisler, Hersen, Miller, & Blanchard, 1975), we identified in Study 1 the common interaction situations involving physically disabled and nondisabled students and empirically determined what are and what are not appropriate behaviors by both groups in each situation. In Study 2 we evaluated whether nondisabled students know how to behave appropriately in specific situations.

## STUDY 1: METHOD

### Sample

There were three groups in this study. All participants were either presently enrolled in a junior college or university or had been students during the past 4 years. Academic status ranged from second year of junior college to postgraduate studies.

The first group consisted of 24 wheelchair users (14 men and 10 women) recruited through personal contacts, coordinators of services for disabled students, and associations for people with disabilities. These persons had been disabled for an average of 17 years (range of 2 to 43 years); they had a wide range of disorders.

The second group consisted of 31 people without disabilities (10 men and 21 women), each of whom had had significant contact with a disabled person (i.e., a close friend or relative or someone encountered in volunteer work). These persons were recruited through participants who used wheelchairs and through the offices of coordinators for disabled students.

A sample of 14 nondisabled people, 8 men and 6 women, who had had little contact with disabled persons also was obtained. These individuals, students and former students whose ages were similar to those of students in the other groups, were solicited through personal contacts and college and university courses. They constituted an ad hoc comparison group rather than a true control group and were included for hypothesis generation only. Although data from these participants are provided in some of the analyses, their scores should be interpreted with caution. The mean age of both wheelchair users and nondisabled participants (who had had contact with disabled persons) was 28; the mean for the ad hoc comparison group was 27.

### Measures

*Background Information Form.* This measure included questions about sex, academic status, presence and duration of a physical disability, and previous close contact with physically disabled people. Respondents also specified how many nondisabled and disabled friends and acquaintances they had and indicated on 6-point scales, ranging from *very uncomfortable* (1) to *very comfortable* (6), how comfortable they were with disabled and nondisabled students.

*Social Interaction Questionnaire.* We consulted the literature on interaction in institutions of higher education and interviewed 14 individuals (wheelchair users and nondisabled students) to generate a list of frequently occurring situations involving social interaction and common behaviors in academic settings between nondisabled college students and those who use wheelchairs. Based on this list, the Social Interaction Questionnaire, an objective measure, was compiled. On this questionnaire students were asked how often each of 45 situations involving social interaction between nondisabled students and those using wheelchairs occurred. Answers were rated on a 6-point scale ranging from *very rarely* (1) to *very often* (6). For each social situation a variety of possible behaviors by both nondisabled students and those using wheelchairs were listed. Respondents indicated how often they believed each of these behaviors occurred and how appropriate they believed each behavior to be. Different versions allowed respondents to evaluate behaviors by male or by female students.

Because this questionnaire was intended to be an exploratory measure, we conducted only minimal psychometric evaluation. Six social situations were listed twice on the questionnaire; test-retest scores of nondisabled students (who had had contact with wheelchair users) and those using wheelchairs on the frequency of various social situations indicated reasonable reliability (Spearman  $\rho = .80$ ,  $p < .05$ ). In addition, frequency of behavior ratings of male and female respondents in each group were related, with Spearman  $\rho$  values for these comparisons ranging from .60 to .85 ( $p < .01$ ). Additional data on the psychometric properties of the questionnaire are available elsewhere (Fichten & Bourdon, 1984, 1986).

## Procedure

Questionnaires were distributed in various ways. Some potential participants were telephoned, and the questionnaire was mailed to them if they agreed to complete it. Questionnaires were also distributed by students already participating in the study, by coordinators of services to students with disabilities, and by organizations for disabled persons. It is therefore difficult to calculate an accurate return rate; it is estimated that approximately 60% of those who received the questionnaire completed it. Participants completed the questionnaires concerning interaction between same-sex nondisabled and wheelchair user students.

## RESULTS OF STUDY 1

### Friends, Acquaintances, and Comfort During Interactions

Data on friends and acquaintances indicated that wheelchair users had as many nondisabled friends ( $M = 7.9$ ) as did their peers who were not disabled ( $M = 6.1$  for those who had had close contact with disabled persons and  $M = 7.8$  for those who had had no contact). Furthermore, the nondisabled friends of the wheelchair users ( $M = 7.9$ ) far outnumbered their friends with disabilities ( $M = 1.7$ ).

Ratings of nondisabled participants' who had had contact with disabled people and wheelchair users were compared using a three-way (2 between  $\times$  1 within-group) analysis of variance (ANOVA) comparison (sex  $\times$  wheelchair user or nondisabled  $\times$  comfort with disabled-nondisabled students). Results showed no significant main effects or interactions, indicating that students using wheelchairs and nondisabled students who have had contact with disabled people and are equally comfortable with disabled and with nondisabled students.

### Frequent Social Situations and Common Behaviors

*Social situations.* Social situations rated by either wheelchair users or nondisabled students (with contact) as occurring reasonably often (with a frequency rating of 3 or more on a 6-point scale) are listed in rank order in Table 1. These ratings demonstrate that the interactions that occur frequently encompass both typical college

social situations (e.g., encounter in corridor, joining classmates in the cafeteria) as well as encounters that are related specifically to a disability (e.g., transportation, help, curiosity).

*Behaviors.* To determine whether wheelchair users and nondisabled participants with contact agreed about which behaviors by each group are appropriate, ratings made by these two groups were compared. Only common behaviors were examined. There were 59 such behaviors, 28 by students using wheelchairs and 31 by nondisabled students. In some situations, behavior can be initiated by both the wheelchair user and by the nondisabled student. In other situations a response from only one of these is required. Data analyses take these factors into account.

Results show that ratings of appropriateness made by students using wheelchairs and by nondisabled students who have had contact with disabled people are very similar [behaviors of wheelchair users:  $r(26) = .74, p < .01$ ; behaviors of able-bodied students:  $r(29) = .94, p < .01$ ]. In addition, the data were scrutinized for any large discrepancies in appropriateness ratings; however, there were none found. Therefore, the two groups of participants seemed to be in agreement concerning what constitutes appropriate behavior by each group.

To find out the appropriateness of common behaviors in frequent social situations, we combined the ratings of wheelchair users and nondisabled participants (Fichten & Bourdon's scoring manual [1986] provided information on specific behaviors). Table 2 provides the mean ratings of social appropriateness and demonstrates that most common behaviors by both disabled and nondisabled students are reasonably appropriate. The means, although not tested for significance, also suggest that disabled participants believed that the responses of nondisabled participants were more appropriate than the nondisabled participants believed them to be; ratings suggest that the responses of disabled students were more appropriate than the disabled participants believed. It seems, therefore, that both groups may be overly critical about the behavior of people like themselves and that both behave more appropriately than they realize.

To examine this possibility further, we carried out additional analyses. For each of the 90 behaviors of wheelchair users that occurred at least occasionally (i.e., frequency greater than 2 on a 6-point scale), the mean ratings of appropriateness by the three groups of participants

**TABLE 1**  
**Frequent Interaction Situations in Academic Settings**

Rank <sup>a</sup>	Social situations
1	A (able-bodied student) is walking down the corridor and sees D (disabled student) wheeling toward him or her.
2	A, D, and some classmates want to go out for dinner. The question of transportation comes up.
3	A and D are having a deep discussion about their lives.
4	A and D are talking in a corridor. A casually rests his or her hand on one of the handles of D's wheelchair.
5	D is trying to move his or her wheelchair up one step. A grabs the chair and starts to pull.
6	D had just asked A for help to reach a pencil sharpener on the wall.
7	A and D are having a deep discussion about their lives. A has just asked D, "What's it like to be handicapped?"
8	The cafeteria is half full. There are people sitting alone. Some classmates of D's are sitting in a group at one of the tables. D has just bought some coffee and wants some company.
9	D is trying to sharpen his or her pencil. The sharpener on the wall is too high to reach. A is nearby.
10	D, one of A's classmates, is trying to move his or her wheelchair up one step. She or he is concentrating on the task. A is walking down the stairs.
11	The library is on the third floor and there is no elevator. D needs to track down an obscure reference for an English paper.
12	In class, A notices that D is sitting alone. A joins D.
13	A and a group of students are talking about dates, sex, and sports. D arrives.
14	Having joined a group discussing dates, sex, and sports, A asks D, "Are you going out with anyone special?"
15	A and D are talking in the corridor. Noting that D has to look up, A sits down on the floor.
16	D has been told by A, someone A just met, "I see you're in a wheelchair. How long have you been like that? What's wrong with you?"
17	A and D are passing each other in the corridor. A waves a cheery hello, musses D's hair, and says, "See you later."
18	A and a group from class are planning to attend a campus get-acquainted party. A is organizing the students in class. Everyone seems to be going. D arrives as the discussion progresses.
19	A and D just met in the cafeteria. A tells D, "It's really very courageous of you to continue your education in spite of all the difficulties. How did you make it against such great odds?"
20	A and some classmates are planning to go out to celebrate the end of exams. Everyone is talking about which bar to go to when D arrives.
21	A is sitting with some friends in the cafeteria. D, whom A doesn't know well, comes and joins the group. They are introduced and shortly after everyone leaves. A has 15 minutes before class.
22	A is organizing the students in the class to meet at a campus get-acquainted party. D told A that she or he doesn't intend to go. A insists that D attend.
23	A insists on helping D move his or her wheelchair up a step, even though D has said she or he could manage alone.
24	A and D have been assigned to work together on a project.

<sup>a</sup>Ranks are based on the mean combined frequency ratings of able-bodied participants who have had contact with disabled people and of participants who use wheelchairs.

were ranked. The same was done for the 86 behaviors of nondisabled students. Results show that the disabled students rated behaviors of nondisabled students considerably higher than did either of the two nondisabled groups,  $\chi^2(4, N=69)=89.64, p<.001$ . On the other hand, when the appropriateness of wheelchair users' behaviors was evaluated, the highest ratings were given by nondisabled students,  $\chi^2(4, N=69)=62.73, p<.001$ . These analyses also

suggest that each group is most critical about the behavior of people like themselves and that both groups are behaving more appropriately than they realize.

Although most common behaviors by both groups were deemed appropriate, some of these, as well as some less commonly occurring behaviors, were rated as inappropriate (i.e., less than 3 on a 6-point scale). Inappropriate behaviors of wheelchair users, as rated by nondisabled

**TABLE 2**  
**Social Appropriateness of Common Behaviors**

Behaviors	Ratings by:	
	Wheelchair users	Able-bodied with contact
Able-bodied students		
<i>M</i>	4.91	4.45
<i>SD</i>	0.81	0.92
Wheelchair users		
<i>M</i>	4.71	4.81
<i>SD</i>	0.56	0.48

participants with contact, included unassertive, passive behavior (e.g., accepting unwanted help, disengaging from desired interaction), behavior that reflects self-pity (e.g., referring to oneself as being undesirable as a companion, friend, or date; making jokes at one's own expense), and behavior that conveys that the person with a disability is a burden to others (e.g., preempting desired interaction because it is presumably too difficult to coordinate travel arrangements).

Nondisabled students seem to engage in a wide variety of behaviors deemed inappropriate by wheelchair users. These include behaviors that avoid or prematurely terminate interaction (e.g., looking the other way, making an excuse to stop interaction); missionary or "do-gooder" behavior (e.g., blatant attempts to involve a wheelchair user in various activities; switching topics from presumably sensitive issues, such as dates, sex, and sports); preemptive, overly solicitous behavior (e.g., conveying the assumption that certain activities are too strenuous or not possible for those using wheelchairs); patronizing behavior (e.g., asking the wheelchair user to do an unnecessary task to make him or her feel useful in a group, insisting that socializing is good for the wheelchair user); behavior that reflects gross ignorance (e.g., assuming that buses and subways pose no problems, speaking slowly and loudly); and behavior that conveys the assumption that those using wheelchairs fit a stereotype (e.g., courageous, intellectual, depressed, nongregarious, inactive, sick, and dependent).

## DISCUSSION

The results show that common behaviors by both nondisabled and disabled students are generally socially appropriate and that disabled and non-

disabled students who have had contact with disabled people agree on what are and are not appropriate behaviors by both groups. But problems of interaction do not occur between wheelchair users and their nondisabled friends. Difficulties occur between students who have a disability and their nondisabled classmates who have had little contact with disabled people. Therefore, in Study 2 we investigated whether nondisabled students who have had little contact with disabled people know what are and are not appropriate behaviors. Being able to judge whether behavior is appropriate is not equivalent to knowing how to respond. Therefore, participants were asked what they would say or do in frequently occurring social situations.

## STUDY 2: METHOD

### Participants

Participants were 136 volunteers (56 men and 80 women) in their 1st or 2nd year of college. All were enrolled in psychology courses and were participating in a larger study (Fichten & Bourdon, 1984). The mean age of participants was 19, and none were physically disabled.

### Measures

*Information Form.* This measure included questions about sex, age, absence or presence of a physical disability, and previous contact with physically disabled people (relative, a disabled person encountered while doing volunteer work, friend, or acquaintance).

*Social Situations Questionnaire.* In this measure we listed 11 common situations involving social interaction between nondisabled students and those using wheelchairs that were found in Study 1 to occur frequently. Each requires a

response by a nondisabled person. Social situations are described as hypothetical interactions between the respondent and either a male or a female college student and are followed by the question, "What do you say or do?" Different versions allow participants to respond in terms of interaction with a male or female student who is either nondisabled or uses a wheelchair.

### Procedure

Participants were randomly assigned to complete the Social Situations Questionnaire with reference to a same-sex student who was either nondisabled or used a wheelchair. All participants completed the Information Form.

Appropriateness of responses was scored on 6-point scales in accordance with a scoring manual that lists possible responses for all situations listed in the Social Situations Questionnaire. This manual provides the appropriateness value, as determined in Study 1, for each response (Fichten & Bourdon, 1986). A final mean score (i.e., ranging from *very inappropriate* [1] to *very appropriate* [6]), based on all of the participants' responses to the 11 social situations, was calculated.

### RESULTS OF STUDY 2

To determine how much students knew about how to behave with wheelchair users, we analyzed their scores in a  $2 \times 2$  between-groups (disabled-nondisabled  $\times$  sex) ANOVA. No significant main effects or interaction were found. Inspection of the means shows not only that students knew as much about how to behave with wheelchair users ( $M=4.77$ ) as they did about how to behave with nondisabled classmates ( $M=4.68$ ), but also that the appropriateness of their responses was very similar to ratings made by wheelchair users about common behaviors of nondisabled students in Study 1 ( $M=4.91$ ).

To determine whether contact with disabled people influenced students' scores, responses of participants in the disabled experimental condition who had and who had not had contact with disabled people were compared. Of the 73 students in the disabled experimental condition, 45 had had some contact with disabled people. The  $2 \times 2$  between-groups ANOVA (contact

or no contact  $\times$  sex) revealed no significant main effect or interaction.

### DISCUSSION OF STUDY 2

The findings of Study 2 suggest that nondisabled students with or without direct contact with disabled people know what are and what are not appropriate behaviors with their classmates who use wheelchairs. Furthermore, because the methodology of this study required participants to respond in an open-ended format, the results also show that these students were capable of generating appropriate behavior.

### IMPLICATIONS

The data from these two studies show that students who have a physical disability tend to be older than the typical college student. They are quite comfortable with nondisabled students and, like their nondisabled peers, have many more nondisabled than disabled friends. At least for college students, the theory that people with a disability prefer "their own kind" seems to be unsubstantiated.

Although frequent behaviors of both nondisabled students and wheelchair users are generally socially appropriate, some common behaviors are not. For example, nondisabled participants believed that wheelchair users engage in undesirable behaviors such as unassertive, passive behavior and behavior that reflects self-pity and conveys that the wheelchair user is a burden to others. Wheelchair users identified a large variety of inappropriate behaviors by nondisabled students. These included behaviors that avoid or prematurely terminate interaction; missionary or do-gooder behavior; preemptive, overly solicitous behavior; patronizing the wheelchair user; and behaviors that convey the assumption that wheelchair users fit a stereotype that reflect gross ignorance about the realities of using a wheelchair.

The results of these studies also demonstrate that both nondisabled and disabled students know what behaviors are appropriate or inappropriate for each group in frequently occurring social situations. Furthermore, nondisabled students were found to know as much about appropriate behaviors with physically disabled peers as they

do about appropriate behaviors with nondisabled classmates.

Although this investigation also demonstrated that nondisabled students can generate appropriate behavior, the important question is whether they actually do so. Although in the "real world" interaction between nondisabled and disabled students should be investigated, the literature reviewed above suggests that nondisabled students probably do not behave effectively with their disabled peers. Interaction difficulties can be explained by both the skill deficit and by the response inhibition models. The findings of this investigation indicate that lack of knowledge about what constitutes effective behavior is not the main cause of interaction difficulties and suggest that the skill deficit model alone cannot account for these difficulties and for the avoidance of people who have a physical disability.

According to the response inhibition model, interaction problems are thought to be caused by the inability of people who know what to say or do to enact the appropriate behavior. Appropriate responses toward people with disabilities can be inhibited by various factors, including negative attitudes (Siller, Ferguson, Vann, & Holland, 1967; Yunker & Block, 1979), incorrect assumptions and attributions (Fichten & Amsel, in press; MacDougall & Morin, 1979; Robillard & Fichten, 1983; Siller, 1976), and social anxiety (Girard, 1983). The findings of this investigation suggest that negative self-evaluation and self-consciousness are also implicated in the lack of ease that characterizes interaction between disabled and nondisabled strangers and casual acquaintances. Each group was found to be its own worst critic; wheelchair users rated behaviors of disabled students more negatively than did nondisabled people. Nondisabled students did the opposite. Both wheelchair users and nondisabled participants rated behaviors of members of their own group more negatively than did the recipients of such behavior.

These results suggest that concern about the other person's sensibilities and about the appropriateness of one's own behavior contribute to interaction difficulties. Cognitive variables such as expectations of self-efficacy and automatic thoughts probably play a central role in influencing interaction between physically disabled and nondisabled people (Fichten, in press; Fichten & Bourdon, 1984) and deserve serious attention by researchers.

A final issue involves the effects of contact between nondisabled people and those with a physical disability. In this investigation contact was shown to be unrelated to knowledge of appropriate behavior. Although this result may have been caused by ceiling effects, because most behavior generated by nondisabled students was reasonably appropriate, it is equally likely that it was caused by the lack of useful contact to affect behavior or attitudes. Many studies (e.g., Antonak, 1981; Fichten & Amsel, in press; Fichten, Compton, & Amsel, 1985; Fichten, Hines, & Amsel, in press; Robillard & Fichten, 1983) have shown that contact is unrelated to attitudes, stereotyping, or comfort with people who have disabilities. Therefore, it is probably the nature rather than the mere existence of contact that influences social behavior. Many workers in the field (e.g., Anthony, 1972; Bender, 1981; Rowlett, 1982; Yunker & Block, 1979) have suggested that for contact to have beneficial effects, it must be prolonged and based on an equal status relationship.

Performance deficits, whether caused by skill deficits or response inhibition, can be altered through behavioral techniques (Bandura, 1977). One of the basic assumptions of most behavioral interventions is that individuals need to be exposed to anxiety-arousing situations; this provides new information, encourages extinction of anxiety, and alters maladaptive cognitions and self-evaluations. In the college setting there are many opportunities for exposure with contact based on equal status between nondisabled and disabled students. To promote the integration of disabled students into college life, it is particularly important that both student services personnel and professors take steps to ensure that the potential for such contact is realized.

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