

Exploring the understanding of entry-level graduate OT students' perceptions of disability

Laura VanPuymbrouck, PhD, OTR/L

Rush University and Medical Center

Carli Friedman, PhD

The Council on Quality and Leadership



Funding Source:
The Spencer Foundation (#201700112)

Background

- Occupational therapy students informed by their own cultural backgrounds
- Attitudes toward and beliefs toward disability
- Explicit and implicit attitudes/prejudice
- Previous research exploring OT students' attitudes of clients with disabilities
- This study explores incoming OT graduate students' understandings of disability and their implicit attitudes towards it

Methods

- Mixed methodologies
- Qualitative analysis of students' definitions of disability
- Quantitative - Disability Attitudes Implicit Association Test (DA-IAT) (Pruett, 2004; Pruett & Chan, 2006)
- Relationships between students' understandings of disability and their unconscious attitudes

Demographics

- Total participants = 67 mean age was 24.8
- Three graduate level OT programs in Chicago with different curricula
- 89.6% Female
- 83.6% Caucasian
- No one identified as disabled but 2 participants preferred not to say
- Majority were from middle socio-economic class
- 52.2% identified as having a close relationship with someone with disability
- 70.1% had taken at least one undergraduate class on disability

Qualitative analysis

- Data analysis - constant comparative grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss 1967)
- Use of a dialogical intersubjective approach (Saldaña, 2016) in analysis
- Aligned epitomizing quotes for each identified theme
- Attending to qualitative rigor in research

Quantitative Measure

- The DA-IAT – the most commonly used disability implicit measure test
- Presents participants with ‘disabled persons’ & ‘abled persons’ categories
- In conjunction with ‘bad’ and ‘good’
- DA-IAT - high construct & discriminant validity and reliability with built in safeguards against participants faking results

Disabled

Bad



Abled

Good

Abled

Bad



Disabled

Good

Results – 4 Qualitative themes

Individualization – An overarching theme

- Disability defined strictly from a biomechanical stance

“[Disability is] an impairment either physically, cognitively, or both. It affects your body or mind.”

- Mirrors the medical model of disability frames of disability as a problem

Dependence equates Disability

- Students saw dependency as a burden to others – overcoming narrative

“A physical or mental handicap that must be overcome to live a satisfying life as they see fit.”

Themes continued

Disability constructed – Some students defined disability as located outside the person – a more social model perspective

“I believe disability is often the result of physical or attitudinal barriers in society.”

- Definitions linked disability as hindering participation & exclusion from society

Concepts of Normal – Defining disability as abnormality (*“abnormalities of the body or brain”*), or in relation to ‘norms’ (*“hinders doing things as the norm”*), or a just a general difference (*“a difference and an aspect of living”*)

Analysis – relationship between understandings and implicit attitudes

- Quantitatively coded participants' qualitative responses to question asking them to define disability
 - Using binary coding – received a 1 when response was reflected and 0 when not - able to receive 1 for multiple themes
- DA-IAT scores were also calculated
 - For example: a score of .35 - .64 was a moderate preference for nondisabled
- We then explored the relationships between participants definitions and their disability attitude scores

Relationships between Disability Definitions and Attitudes

- Average Implicit prejudice score was .49 or Moderately prejudice
- 83.6% of participants preferred nondisabled people implicitly
- 7.5% preferred PWD and 9.0% had no preference
- Controlling for significant disability relationships - Those with no close relationships:
 - If definitions included impairment, individualization or inability = high implicit bias score
 - If defined disability relating to environment and social norms = no implicit bias

Relationships between Disability Definitions and Attitudes

- Participants who had significant relationships with PWD had lower implicit disability prejudice scores across all definition types.
- For example:
 - No disability relationship defining disability as a limitation typically scored with high implicit bias
 - Someone who defines disability the same way but has a disability relationship typically scored only slightly prejudiced

Implications

- Most commonly participants expressed individualized views of disability
- Individualizing disability depoliticizes
- Past research shows having a close social relationship with a PWD increases attitudes towards PWD (Stachura & Garven, 2007) – our findings support this
- How might curriculum design attend to these issues?

Implications for Occupational Therapy Curriculum

- Society conceptualizes disability located in the individual
- Encourage intentional critical reflection with and by students

QUESTIONS FOR YOU

- How might a OT program that is more bio-mechanical, using occupation based interventions at the individual level reinforce the negative bias?
- How are OT students currently encouraged to engage with clients with disabilities outside of the clinical setting to expose 'living life with disability'?

Conclusion

- Discourse continues -- impairment instead of occupation and participation (Fisher & Jones, 2009).
- Occupational therapy graduate programs (in US) still largely guided by impairment focusing educational standards (American Occupation Therapy Association, 2016).
- How does a program's curriculum influence beliefs and attitudes toward disability?
- Does reductionist based curriculum increase negative prejudice?
- What impact does a more social model curriculum have?

Laura VanPuymbrouck, PhD, OTR/L
email: laura_vanpuymbrouck@rush.edu

&

Carli Friedman, PhD
email: cfriedman@thecouncil.org

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