



ISSUE: 2015 VOLUME: 1

Affecting Attitudes toward Individuals with Special Needs Using Positive Settings.

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Abstract. Previous work has discovered that personal interaction with individuals with special needs has produced the most positive attitude change (Patrick, 1987). It was predicted that viewing individuals with special needs in unassisted work conditions will yield the highest positive attitudes, whereas viewing them in assisted social settings will yield the lowest positive attitudes. An analysis was run to examine the differences in attitude scores between the work (assisted, unassisted) conditions and the social (assisted, unassisted) conditions. Despite the prediction, there was no evidence of a setting by assistance interaction. Furthermore, the attitude scores from the work condition were not significantly different from those of the social condition. Attitude scores also did not differ across levels of assistance. Results are discussed in light of a need for a change in the stereotypes held about this group and the roles they are able to play in our communities.

Affecting people's attitudes either negatively or positively is an important question asked often. Determining what type of stimulus proves to be the best at changing individual's attitudes can be applied in many different areas of a society. Examining how it is that people change their personal opinions can be applied in many ways such as, how a product is introduced into an economy, political stances taken by politicians, and probably most importantly how people interact with individuals that are different from themselves. By examining what it is that affects people's attitudes change most significantly, we will then be able to apply that knowledge to helping others be more accepting of those that are different from themselves. Many people lack interaction with people with disabilities and when the situation presents itself they are unsure how to behave. Observation of individuals with special needs in positive settings that depict independent work and leisure activities will yield positive attitude change.

It is important to understand what has been most successful in changing people's attitudes towards individuals with special needs and if in fact there is an easier, less time consuming way than what already exists. Most of the research focuses on changing the attitudes of individuals who are in contact with those having special needs within their careers; teachers, doctors, nurses, occupational and physical therapists (Stachura & Garven, 2007).

How it is that those attitudes are affected has been approached in several different ways revealing different results depending upon the method attempted. What has been documented and seen as the most effective way of recording the attitudes of the individuals is using a scale developed by Yunker and his associates, the Attitudes Toward Disabled Persons (ATDP); (Yunker, 1986; Yunker, Block, & Campell, 1960; Yunker et al., 1966). The scale developed is a paper and pencil scale inventory that accesses the attitudes one holds toward an individual with



special needs. There is no regard for a specific impairment used in the inventory. This scale has been used to assess the attitudes participants have towards individuals with special needs after various methods of being exposed to them.

In the Anthony (1972), Hamilton and Anderson (1983), and Yuker et al. (1966) studies, spending close personal time with and performing activities with those individuals led participants to have the most attitude change towards the individuals with special needs. This was in comparison to other methods that took a more instructional technique approach. Participants purely spent their time learning about individuals with special needs instead of actually interacting with them. This type of attempted attitude change has seen very limited success (Nesbitt, 1976; Threlkeld & DeJong, 1982). These data suggest that pure observation of individuals with special needs may not yield positive attitude change either. Regardless of the strategy used, it is clear that a combination of both interaction and educational information are needed to have a true change of attitude. Not only is this notion true when speaking to affecting attitudes towards individuals with special needs, but it is also seen when attempting to change attitudes towards other portions of the population.

With the world changing, services are now available for individuals with disabilities that assist them in living longer, more independent and productive lives. The same is true for a growing elderly population; understanding how we change attitudes and behaviors towards one group may be able to be applied to another such as individuals with special needs. This notion suggests an increased need for better attitudes towards these specific populations. Doing so is not only a benefit for those individuals but also for the society they are a part of as a whole. A systematic search strategy was used to compile 27 studies all employing different methods to affect attitude change toward the elderly. Both medical students and doctors

were used as participants of these studies (Samra, Griffiths, Cox, Conroy & Knight, 2013). They found that studies utilizing empathy building components, simulation exercises and personal contact with older individuals, successfully demonstrated higher levels of positive attitude change towards the elderly population. This notion becomes an apparent theme across attempting to affect attitude change towards different types of populations.

People with disabilities are in constant contact with health related professions. Because of this it is important and necessary to examine the attitudes held by such professionals. Affecting attitudes within these professions starts with early intervention, when individuals are beginning their education and are exposed to too much information but very little exposure to the populations they will be working with. In a cross sectional survey involving 2299 students, occupational therapy students and physiotherapy students were surveyed about their attitudes towards individuals with special needs (Stachura & Garven, 2007). The results showed that the students who had previous interactions with individuals with special needs, had family members that were individuals with special needs or social contact with individuals with special needs had significantly more positive attitudes than those without such experiences. While work experience during their education did not affect a significant attitude change for the individuals who had previous experience, a change was seen in the results of the individuals who had not previously had experience and received interaction in their educational process. These results show a need for more interactive type learning credit required for students choosing such professions, thus raising their positive attitudes towards individuals with special needs (Stachura, 2007). While those in the health professions come in contact with extremely diverse populations throughout their career, educators come into more contact

with individuals with special needs than any other profession.

The educators of our societies have an immense responsibility to create environments that promote learning and acceptance. The attitudes of those creating the environments play an integral role in the success of achieving positive attitudes and acceptance. In Patrick's (1987) study that included undergraduate physical education students taking an adapted physical education course that included course lecture, clinic contact with individuals with special needs, relevant films, disability simulations, and readings. This study concluded that those who were in the treatment groups showed significant attitude changes towards individuals with special needs. The control groups who did not receive the adapted courses did not have significant positive attitude changes. Also significant was a pretest effect on those in the experimental condition that may have led to extra sensitivity towards individuals of the special needs population. These results show that not only priming may occur while testing for attitudes towards this population, but that positive experience based exposure can affect attitudes. With these results being what they are, affecting attitudes may be possible with the right set of pretest questions coupled with positive presentations of individuals with special needs.

Inclusion is one term most associated with individuals with special needs and the type of education they receive. Inclusive education theory suggests that both students without disabilities and students with special needs be included in the same classroom and receive the same curriculum. This notion is one supported by research across the board in affecting attitude change and yet has been slow to be introduced into schools worldwide. A study was done in which two schools of different philosophies were included (Cairns & McClatchey, 2013). One school had the theory of inclusion and the other was a school where there were few children that needed additional supports. Samples were taken from


both schools where students viewed video clips of different students with varying disabilities. The students from the school that employed the inclusion theory provided more positive productive suggestions for helping the students with special needs in the videos, as well as had a more positive attitude towards individuals with special needs in general (Cairns, 2013). It would seem that the importance of physically interacting positive experiences with individuals with special needs is paramount in affecting attitude changes in a person. Changing the mind set an individual has about a certain subject or population can and does occur. It can be seen across occupations and age groups.

Affecting attitude change towards individuals with special needs allows for a change in how we provide services for those individuals. By changing attitudes we can improve their quality of life, assisting them to not only interact with but contribute to society as a whole. The undeniable truth about what research has been done shows us that positive attitude change is affected most by positive personal setting experiences with individuals with special needs, information that reduces bias, positive models representing individuals with special needs. The question is what amount of effort and time is required in order to obtain that change? The current study aims to show that the most positive attitude change in participants will coincide with the use of positive settings that present individuals with special needs contributing to society independently in a short period of time. It was predicted that viewing individuals with special needs in unassisted work conditions will yield the highest positive attitudes, whereas viewing them in assisted social settings will yield the lowest positive attitudes.

Method

Design

A 2 (Type of Meaningful Setting: Work or Social) X 2 (Assistance: Assisted or not Assisted) between-subjects design was used to examine how factors impact attitudes



towards individuals with special needs. The four conditions included situations that involve individual with special needs either with assistance or without assistance, in either a social or work environment. The independent variables were presented as part of a scenario along with picture. The dependent variable was the attitudes towards individuals with special needs.

Participants

Eighty male and female (29 males, 50 females) undergraduate students from Minnesota State University Moorhead were used as participants of this study. The average age of participants was 22.6 years ($SD=6.4$). They were recruited through the use of a sign-up sheet posted on peg boards outside of the psychology department at the university. Extra credit opportunities for students participating in this study was offered. All participant were treated ethically using APA standards.

Materials

Demographic information was collected using a generic demographic survey that ask about the participant's age, sex and work or personal experience with individuals with special needs.

Attitudes towards Disabled Persons scale. Assessing the attitudes participants have towards individuals with special needs was done through the use of the Attitudes Towards disabled persons scale (ATDP; Yuker, Block, & Campell, 1960). The ATDP is a pencil and paper test that has a 6-point Likert scale ranging from "I agree very much" to "I disagree very much," and scored on a 1-6 (negative to positive) range. This scale has been shown to have a reliability rating that lies in the +.70 to +.80 range and has been described as having satisfactory coefficients considering that the scale is fairly brief for this type of an instrument (Patrick, 1987). The ATDP instrument version used was Form O and has been used primarily to access the attitudes of people most likely to come into contact with individuals with special needs (i.e., teachers, doctors, other health

professionals, and school aged children). The scale has been designed to access attitudes without regard for any specific type of disability or impairment. It is a 20-question test where the questions have been randomized for each participant. The survey used was an updated version from the original in order to make the scale more politically correct. Where in the original survey it used the term "disabled person", it now says individual with special needs instead. A sample from the ATDP scale is, "Individuals with special needs are usually more sensitive than other people." This question implies that you have to be careful about what you say and how you act around individuals with special needs because their feelings are more easily hurt. The rating scale in the original version of the survey was changed from rating questions +3 - -3 to a 6 -1 rating with 6 being that you agree very much and 1 being that you disagree very much.

Written Scenarios. The work written scenarios that were presented to participants give information about what the individual with special needs does for work, how often they work, how often they are paid, as well as whether they receive assistance or do not receive assistance from a direct support professional. In the social written scenarios that were presented to participants the information that is presented is what type of activity the individual with special needs is doing, what the setting is, that they do such activities with friends, and whether or not they receive assistance from a direct support professional while participating in those activities. Appendix A depicts the written scenarios presented to participants.

Picture of the Scenarios. A picture setting was provided to participants within the experiment. There was three photos used depicting each of the four study conditions. The six photos that depict the work condition were of an individual with special needs working in a movie theatre sweeping under movie theatre seats with (without) the assistance of a DSP. The next picture was of

an individual with special needs working in a movie theatre taking out garbage with (without) the assistance of a DSP. The third picture presented was of an individual with special needs working in a movie theatre wiping down mirrors in the bathroom with (without) the assistance of a DSP. The six photos that depict the non-work condition were of an individual with special needs spending time with friends in a movie theatre sitting in their seats waiting for a movie to begin with (without) the assistance of DSP. The next picture presented was of an individual with special needs spending time with friends in a movie theatre in the lounge area of the movie theatre with (without) the assistance of a DSP. The final picture presented was of an individual with special needs spending time with friends in a movie theatre in line at the snack counter with friends with (without) the assistance of a DSP. Appendix B depicts the pictures presented to participants.

Procedure

Each participant was tested individually in a quiet room. After obtaining informed consent, participants were randomly assigned to one of six conditions: 1) fake good/professors, 2) fake good/peers, 3) fake bad/professors, 4) fake bad/peers, 5) honest/professors, or 6) honest/peers. After receiving special instructions based on condition, participants then completed the shortened MPS and sealed their responses in a manila envelope for anonymity purposes. After completing the questionnaire, participants received a general debriefing about perfectionism and its effects in academic settings. At the conclusion of the entire study, participants were emailed with the full debriefing, which stressed that participant responses were not actually shown to or evaluated by a professor or peer. Lastly, participants were given proof of participation for extra credit. The experiment lasted approximately 15 minutes.


Results

The results of this study did not indicate that viewing individuals with special needs in specific settings with or without assistance had a significant effect on the positive attitudes held towards this population. When the between-subjects factorial ANOVA was run to examine the differences in attitude scores between the work (assisted, unassisted) conditions and the social (assisted, unassisted) conditions, there was no indication of a setting by assistance interaction, $F(1, 76) = .35, p > .05$. Furthermore, the attitude scores from the work condition were not significantly different from those of the social condition, $F(1, 76) = .29, p > .05$. Attitude scores also did not differ across levels of assistance, $F(1, 76) = .38, p > .05$. Figure 1 depicts the four condition means.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to test how presenting individuals with special needs affects the attitudes held toward this population. Past research suggests that actual personal experience in combination with relevant and current information with regards to individuals with special needs creates the highest positive attitudes towards this group (Partrick, 1987). Most of the research surrounding this subject matter tests affecting the attitudes of professionals that are most likely to have interaction with this population (Stachura, 2007). Affecting the attitudes held towards individuals with special needs as well as other vulnerable populations, such as the elderly, is important to enhance the quality of life of these groups as a whole (Samra, 2013).

While the results of this study did not indicate a significant effect on the attitudes held towards our target population, a trend did present itself that was both unexpected by this investigator and also important to note. Those participants who viewed individuals with special needs in work settings where they were unassisted yielded the highest positive attitude scores out of the four different conditions. While there was in deed no effect, this trend may suggest that how we present



individuals with special needs to the public may indeed have an impact on the way people feel about this population had more samples been collected and analyzed. While we saw the highest positive attitude scores when individuals with special needs were presented as working independently without assistance, we saw the lowest positive attitude scores when individuals with special needs were presented as needing assistance.

If we are able to alter the way people feel about individuals with special needs simply by how they are presented we may be better able to integrate them into our communities allowing them to be more independent as a whole. The hiring of individuals with special needs could occur with less hesitation by employers if attitudes towards this group as a whole were more positive. By gaining employment that allows for a greater quality of life to be obtained, including things such as, paying for their own housing, food, and social expenses we can reduce the amount of stress we put on our communities to supplement these things for them. If we can better instill confidence in these individuals by reducing the stereotypes that not only others hold about them but that they hold about themselves we can strive to create a more independent and self-sufficient person. As a result we would reduce the amount of economic supports and consequently be able to better apply those funds elsewhere in our communities.


The strengths of our study is that it was based on confirmed data that surround affecting attitudes toward individuals with special needs. We knew that presenting individuals in ways that are deemed positive and productive would yield the highest positive attitudes. The results suggest just that. Unfortunately limitations of our studies exist also. An obvious limitation of our study was the number of participants used considering the number of conditions of the study. Because of this limitation, where only 20 participants were included in each condition, the possible output of the analysis

was limited. There was a real issue with the number of participants who had previous experience with individuals with special needs, and as the past research indicates this will greatly increase the positive attitudes a person holds toward this group (Partick 1987). Had a covariate been included in the analysis to account for this notion the results of our study may have yielded different more significant results.

This study is important and yields an interesting trend surrounding affecting the attitude people hold towards individuals with special needs. Future directions for research surrounding this subject matter may possible call for the measuring of attitudes about this group through the use of implicit association testing. Currently the research with implicit association surrounds racial and LGBT issues and the attitudes held towards these groups. But the model of the IATs was used to create a testing procedure to measure the attitudes held towards the population that is investigated in this study could be useful in getting significant results.

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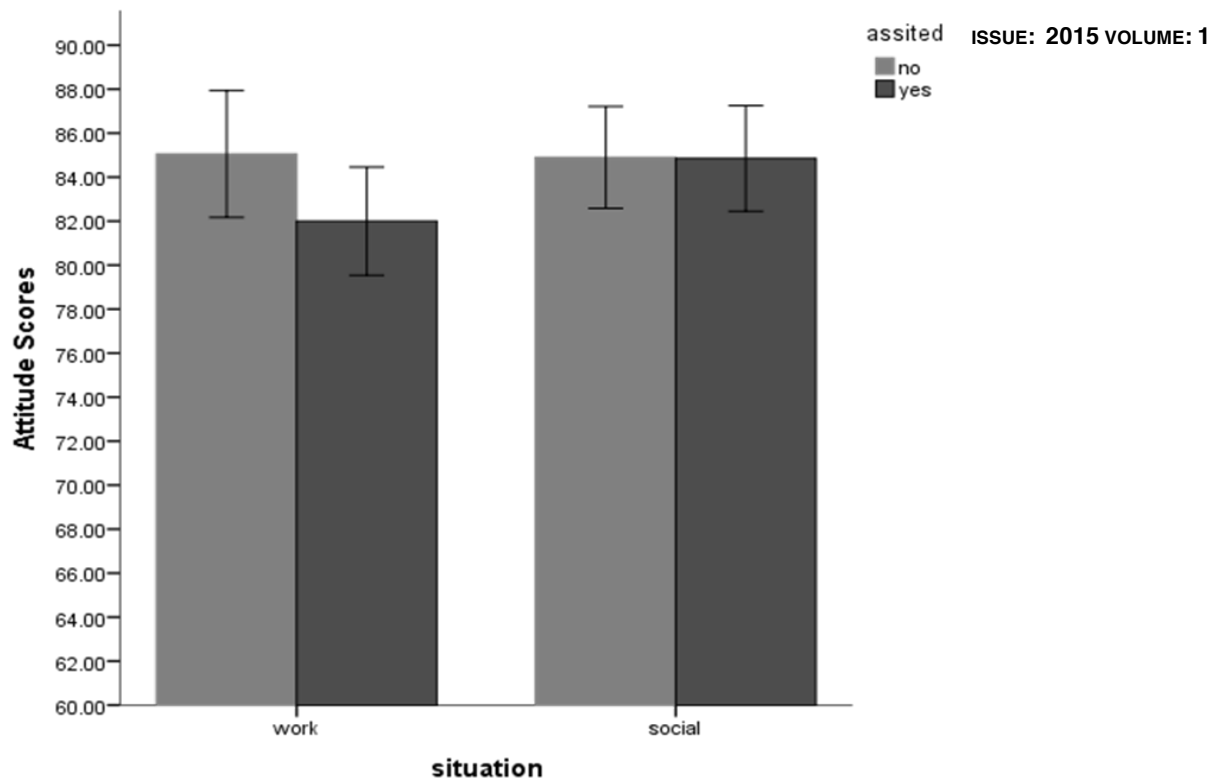


Figure 1. Attitude scores for work and social settings (assisted yes, assisted no), with error bars.

Appendix A
Work and social written scenarios

An individual with special needs is working at a movie theatre with (without) the assistance of a DSP (Direct Support Professional) to complete his janitorial task. His duties include emptying garbage on a need basis, sweeping around and under movie theatre seats, spraying and wiping down mirrors in the restrooms at the theatre area and cleaning up any other extra spills and or messes that occur in the theatre hallways. The individual works three days a week. He earns hourly pay and receives a monthly paycheck for the amount of work he does.

An individual with special needs spends time three days a week with (without) the assistance of a DSP (Direct Support Professional) at a movie theatre where he socializes in a variety of different ways. He spends time with friends in lounging areas, purchases snacks at the snack bar and views movies with friends. He chooses activities based on what his other friends are doing that day.

Appendix B

Work with (without) assistance photos.



Social with (without) assistance photos

