Silenced and Invisible:
Students with Intellectual Disabilities in Higher Education

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Abstract

Researchers examined stigma attached to people with disabilities, focusing specifically on stigma regarding individuals with intellectual disabilities. The study involved focus groups with undergraduate college students in a major South Florida University, who did not self-identify as having any disabilities. We performed content analysis to understand perceptions and presumptions towards individuals with intellectual disabilities on campus. Our study addresses the question of how universities could act as a point of social justice. Our specific goal is to help reduce stigma towards individuals with intellectual and other disabilities to promote inclusion and integration to advance broader higher education and community equity goals.

Keywords: stigma, disabilities, diversity, communication, integration, higher education, muted group theory

Introduction

In this study, researchers examined stigma attached to people with intellectual and other disabilities on a university campus. Our study contributes to literature by offering an approach from the communication discipline. Communication is a process enacted and constructed through social interactions and intimately related to how we use stigmatized language to influence perceptions and representations of "the Other", perpetuating marginalization on university campuses. Our communication focus comes from the need to address the question of how the university could help advance diversity, equity, inclusion, and social justice regarding people with intellectual and other disabilities.

People with disabilities have faced rejection and stigma throughout history, with their disabilities sometimes being associated with ignorance, negligence, or inferiority for past deeds (Corrigan, 2014; Eddey & Robey, 2005). Stigma is perpetuated through words and actions. Through the use of language, we cultivate ideas, influence perception building, and empower notions of discrimination, stereotyping and stigma, which contribute to the shaping of social identity of "the Other" (Smith, 2007). In other words,

through language we communicate representations of "the Other." Thus, the links between language and stigma as well as between stigma and prejudice have been clearly established (Smith et al., 2019).

When stigma messages are consistently communicated, they become social facts which operate at various social levels and powerfully impact people's beliefs and actions (Rimal & Lapinski, 2015; Smith et al., 2019). Stigma messages evoke negative emotions which generate possible negative reactions against the stigmatized group due to the fact that these members (in this case, individuals with disabilities) are portrayed as having lower intelligence, being unproductive, and isolated. This representation increases in-group identification and bonding among the non-stigmatized members (Heath et al., 2001; Hoffner & Cohen, 2018; Lawler et al., 2000; Smith et al., 2019) and differentiates members from the out-group, the stigmatized individuals. In turn, the members of the stigmatized group are designated as a social group and are assigned a social label. Consequently, they are devalued, discredited, and shamed by the dominant group, leading to adverse life consequences (Goffman, 1963). Goffman discusses how individuals who carry stigmas might avoid socializing to conceal

munication because they are perceived and consid
ered less respected, accepted, and unrecognized.

Cubbage (2017) applied MGT to study the dy

mended for richer discussions (Gundumogula, 2020); hence, we selected students who were attending a discussion-based class. Since the data collection was mid-semester, the participants had an established rapport and a level of trust amongst themselves. Facilitators made conscious attempts to ensure each participant contributed to the discussions.

Moreover, the connection between negative labels as a result of lack of education was a recurrent topic addressed by participants. The following quote accurately describes the lack of information about disabilities in the educational context: "I didn't know what autism was until after high school. There is no visibility for these people. Education/awareness about these disabilities should be done" (Participant 44). The following testimony summarizes the over all sentiment about how students with disabilities are perceived and seen within society:

> Participant 49: I don't think I have had a negative experience, but it's just that you need to be very patient. I work as a cashier and dealing with a blind/deaf customer might require hand gestures or whatever. It takes a lot of patience. Most people with disabilities are usually very friendly in those situations so it's not a negative experience.

Participants attributed the source of negative perceptions to lack of education. This finding connects to a great deal of research (Goffman, 1963; Rimal & Lapinski, 2015; Smith et al., 2019), which shows that stigma messages lead to prejudice because when communicated, stigma messages become social facts powerfully impacting social perceptions and actions. Moreover, these negative perceptions are connected with how students recall interactions with students with disabilities. The participants almost unanimously talked about the fact that they "do not know how to treat students with disabilities" or they "do not know how to approach them or talk to them."

> Participant 25: I think it's not always negative reactions. Sometimes you try to be of help to them... sometimes it's offensive to them because you are treating them differently, more care, more attention. I think it's almost as mean to them because you are treating them differently.

According to Goffman (1963), the use of negative labels generates possible negative reactions against the stigmatized group, and consequently, they are devalued, discredited, and shamed. Participant 21 summarizes lack of education as the source of the "fear of the different" and explains how this fear of the unknown creates anxiety among

This comment is an example of tokenism recognized by the participant. Communication is of great- im portance in perpetuating or decreasing social stigma, since the idea of "the other" is established and perpet uated through communication itself (Goffman, 1963). Minimal acts of access, such as admitting a number of students with disabilities to an educational institu tion or putting up a ramp for easier physical access into a building, are addressed as symbolic gestures

and it makes you realize that sometimes you are being dramatic.

ly change individual behaviors as well as policies, it is essential that the voices of students with disabili ties are prioritized. This will lead to true integration which will build representation, by generating spaces to exercise their voices, be truly heard and embraced. These practices will fight ableism and start construct ing a reality in which there are no "disabled groups" and "abled groups," but different individuals to whom you can truly relate at different levels.

There is a need to consciously review the cur rent ableist and exclusionary practices and policies through which both academia and society has framed the experiences of people with disabilities (Peruzzo, 2020), and learn to live with the discomfort that will inevitably come from disrupting current ableist norms (de la Garza, 2020). We need to get out of our ableist privileged perspectives and start talking about ableist privilege the way we talk about white privilege and wealth privilege. We need to talk about how ableism perpetuates ableist privilege.

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