

Attitudinal Impacts on Employment Participation of Persons with Disabilities

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Abstract – Poverty and under-employment are major issues faced by Canadians with disabilities. This brief literature review, written by a Master of Occupational Therapy student, will explore the impact of dominant culture and social attitudes on the employment of persons with disabilities. The attitudes encountered by individuals with disabilities are a major contributor to either impeding or allowing success. Attitudes will be discussed as either inclusive, facilitating employment, or ableist, limiting employment. As healthcare professionals, it is part of our responsibility to ensure all members of our society can participate and thrive. Therefore, we must be aware of our own attitudes and how they either facilitate or hinder the participation of persons with disabilities.

Keywords: Employment, Persons with disabilities, Attitude toward disability, Ableism, Inclusion

Introduction

Culture is a set of values, attitudes, and perceptions that are shared among a group of people; it engenders behaviour and shapes interpretations of experience (Haviland, Prins, Walrath, & McBride, 2008). Negative perceptions and attitudes toward the employment of persons with disabilities¹ (PWD) have been prevalent in western cultures for many years, likely having roots in the Elizabethan Poor Laws of 1601, which labelled PWD as *deserving poor* who are dependents needing to be cared-for by society (Hick, 2006; Mackelprang & Clute, 2009). Although these laws may have been intended to support individuals, they also fostered ableist attitudes and decreased public perception of the capacities of PWD to participate as productive members in society, and in employment particularly. Thus, these laws impacted the attitudes, values and perceptions of individuals and thereby shaped culture. There is evidence that newer inclusion policies, such as the United Nations (UN) Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, are increasing the participation² of PWD in employment; however, ableist attitudes are still prevalent and PWD continue to be deprived of equitable employment opportunities (Deal,

2007; Kaye, Jans & Jones, 2011; UN, 2006). The objective of this review is to demonstrate that social attitudes³, be they inclusive or ableist, impact the participation of PWD in employment opportunities; ableist attitudes limit participation, while inclusive attitudes enhance participation.

Ableist Attitudes Limit Employment

Barriers to participation can range from physical and tangible features of the built environment to abstract and invisible aspects of social or political practice. They are created and sustained by ableist attitudes and, regardless of the intentionality of barriers, they are very real and greatly impact employment opportunities for PWD. According to information gathered by the UN (2006), ableist attitudes are “a major barrier to the realization of the goal of full participation and equality in society by persons with disabilities” (para. 4). Attitudinal barriers to participation are some of the most insidious and difficult to overcome because ableist attitudes create and propagate physical, institutional, and invisible barriers (Martz, 2007; Schur, Kruse, & Blanck, 2005).

Interpersonal Acceptance

Evidence reveals that employment participation and opportunities are influenced by attitudes of staff and the wider culture toward PWD (Li, 2004; Migliore, Grossi,

¹ For the purpose of this paper, disability will be used as an umbrella term referring to any restriction resulting from an impairment of mind, or body structure or function, including limitations to participation (Office for Disability Issues, 2004; Townsend & Polatajko, 2007). These definitions are compilations of various expert perspectives; however, it is important to acknowledge that disability is often defined by those in power, and there may be different definitions for different purposes (Office for Disability Issues, 2004).

² Participation is defined as being involved in meaningful life situations (Kielhofner, 2008; Townsend & Polatajko, 2007).

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³ Collectively, social attitudes will refer to the attitudes and beliefs held and/or expressed by individuals and groups within a culture, with two specific social attitudes being discussed: inclusive and ableist. The term ableist is used throughout this paper to refer to discriminatory, oppressive or abusive conduct, behaviour or attitude directed at people based upon their physical, cognitive, or mental abilities, and may include the belief that PWD are inferior to others (Deal, 2007; Harpur, 2012). Inclusive will be used as an opposing term that denotes attitudes which promote full acceptance of and accommodations for all persons, including PWD.

Mank, & Rogan, 2008; Rutkowski & Riehle, 2009). For example, studies cited by Li (2008) found that “the quality of [participants’] work experiences was mainly related to interpersonal relationships in the workplace and to the attitude of employers and co-workers” (p. 243). In order for full participation to occur, PWD must be fully accepted in the workplace and enabled to engage in meaningful interactions with coworkers (Burge, Ouellette-Kuntz & Lysaght, 2007). If other workers consider PWD to be inferior, and therefore do not engage meaningfully with coworkers who have disabilities, full participation in the employment situation cannot be reached. Additionally, Li (2008) found that low rates of employment participation among respondents was related to “discrimination due to lack of social acceptance in the workplace and the misconception of employers and/or coworkers about their abilities” (p. 243). Ableist attitudes, evident in misconceptions held, assumptions made, and lack of social acceptance, create barriers to the participation of PWD in workplaces. Moreover, social acceptance and participation in non-work related activities with coworkers is an important aspect of full and equitable participation in employment (Burge et al., 2007; Lysaght & Larmour-Trode, 2006).

Hiring Decisions

The ableist attitudes of employees contribute to the overall culture of the workplace and may influence hiring decisions. Supervisors and employers do, however, hold more power in terms of influencing workplace culture and their attitudes are especially salient due to their hiring and decision-making power. Ableist attitudes of potential employers are cited as a major obstacle to hiring PWD (Burge et al., 2007; Chan, Strauser, Gervery, & Lee, 2010; Kaye, Jans, & Jones, 2011; Li, 2008). In a study reported by Li (2008), respondents stated that “employers should treat [PWD] with equality...they should not judge [their] work abilities on appearance only” and “employers...should not look down on [PWD]” (p. 243). Furthermore, when employers have ableist attitudes, they are also less likely to be willing to accommodate PWD and more likely to see accommodations as too much difficulty (Chan et al., 2010; Corrigan et al., 2008). Some employers assume that a potential employee who has a disability requires unreasonable accommodation and will be too much to *deal with*, rather than an asset to the workplace. This poses a barrier by making it less likely that an individual will be given accommodations needed, if the person is ever hired.

Inclusive Attitudes Enhance Employment

While ableist attitudes may pose barriers to the participation of PWD in employment, inclusive attitudes promote participation not only by posing no barriers, but also by creating a welcoming environment. PWD participate more successfully in workplaces with a culture of acceptance of diversity and an atmosphere of respect; therefore, improving the work-environment’s culture, which

consists of increasing inclusive attitudes and decreasing ableist attitudes among all members of the environment, is a significant factor facilitating the full participation of PWD in employment situations (Kaye, et al., 2011). For example, “instilling diversity values in a corporation allows an arena for inclusion no matter what a person’s orientation, race, or abilities,” and thus increasing “respect for disability as an aspect of a diverse workforce” can contribute to improved participation (Kaye et al, 2011, p. 535). A positive workplace, at the supervisory and coworker level, is a key component of facilitating full participation. A study reported by Lysaght and Larmour-Trode (2006) found that, for many respondents, positive relationships with supervisors was a prerequisite to successful employment participation. Li (2008) reports that inclusive attitudes of employers and co-workers were the main factors contributing to positive workplace experiences for PWD. The salience of supervisor attitudes is emphasized by Kaye et al. (2011), who found that “the commitment (to inclusive culture) has to come from the top and filter down” (p. 533). When a supervisor demonstrates inclusive attitudes, he or she facilitates a culture of inclusion.

Counter Arguments

Some theorists propose that attitude does not always predict behaviour for all individuals (Crano & Prislin, 2008; Tilmann & Haberstroh, 2004). It might then be argued that ableist or inclusive attitudes might not predict behaviours that in-turn impact employment participation. However, an alleged lack of attitude-behaviour connection is supported by only a few studies and theorists, and it is not claimed that attitude does not impact behaviour at all, but rather that *sometimes* attitude does not correlate directly with behaviour (Crano & Prislin, 2008; Tilmann & Haberstroh, 2004). Therefore, even if it was conceded that attitude does not always *predict* behaviour, it could still stand that attitude does *impact* behaviour. Therefore, when individuals in an environment hold ableist or inclusive attitudes, this *impacts* their behaviour, which in turn impacts the participation of PWD in employment. Moreover, one might cite evidence showing that a majority of employers surveyed are open to hiring PWD; however, despite this survey outcome, there is no correlation with results in actual hiring of PWD (Burge et al., 2007). Therefore it is likely that these employers “have learnt acceptable behaviours and verbal expressions towards disabled people, thus exhibiting non-prejudicial behaviours...[while still] holding prejudicial feelings and beliefs” (Deal, 2007, p. 94; Roessler et al., 2007). Furthermore, although unemployment rates are slowly improving, PWD usually have fewer career prospects, lower pay, and higher rates of being fired (Deal, 2007). These facts highlight that attitudinal change has not occurred, leading to continued lack of full participation in employment.

Limitations

Inclusive and ableist social attitudes have been discussed as a social factor impacting participation in employment. However, the author acknowledges that social attitudes toward PWD also impact individual self-esteem and other personal factors, and that social attitudes impact other areas of participation. Moreover, as each individual is unique, attitudes and other environmental factors will impact individuals in unique ways. Additionally, there are other factors impacting participation in employment, which may compound or stymie social attitudes. These may be avenues for further discussion and research.

Conclusions

As demonstrated throughout this brief literature review, studies show that the attitudes of employers and coworkers, be they ableist or inclusive, impact the full and equitable participation of PWD in employment. Where attitudes are ableist, and there are negative assumptions made about PWD, it is less likely those individuals will be able to fully participate in the employment situation. Where attitudes are inclusive, fostering a culture of inclusion, it is more likely that individuals will be able to fully participate. According to Rutkowski and Riehle (2009), cultural perceptions of the employability of PWD must change in order for greater participation to take place. Li (2004) concurs, emphasizing that “something needs to be done to promote the social acceptance of people with disabilities, so that they can enjoy equal employment opportunities that lead to a better quality of life” (Li, 2008, p243). The onus is on all members of the culture to participate in shaping the attitudes and perceptions that will engender behaviours and actions toward persons with disabilities.

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