

## ISSUE EXPLANATION

As we begin processing the concerns about ability and how it is seen through society, there is an immediate analysis of a person based on perceived stereotypes in the first few seconds after meeting this person. Primarily, when noticing someone with a visible disability the general reactions are either to ask what happened or to stare intently at the person. With this in mind, each person discusses ability differently and has different experiences. These experiences draw on comfort levels and how the person with a different ability matches up to the personal definition of "normal." Dr. Brenda Allen (2011), defines a "disability as a complex, socially constructed aspect of social identity" (p. 158). We explored how this definition applies to experiences that people have with inter-ability communication and their reactions to those with a physical disability. In addition, authors Van de Putte and Deschawer (2013), stated that "teachers, who were interviewed on their experiences with students who displayed a disability, were most nervous about how to include the students into the class curriculum without overloading or intimidating them" (p. 248-249, 252-254). It is plausible to state that teachers and other students may be limiting these learners by monitoring their interactions and making themselves out to be kind and charitable. This aspect also correlates with Allen's (2011) description of how "those who have a physical disability or a companion have a lack of privacy because of the general curiosity from other who can be defined as 'normal'" (p. 153). Another issue that sparked the idea of communication overall is potential mannerisms or emotions when talking with a person who has a visible disability. An article by Trainin and Swanson (2005), states that "students with a disability have low phonological processing" (p. 264). People do not necessarily understand that they treat a person with a visible disability more like a child rather than the adult that they actually are because of the aforementioned stereotype. In other words, the perceived mental capacity of those with a visible disability comes with an extremely low expectation.

The purpose of this study is to determine what experiences students have with ability in the classroom. In the following sections, you will have the opportunity to see how we tracked how people felt about their mannerisms and emotions towards someone with a visible disability.

## METHODS

We created an ability inventory based on the racial and sexual inventories provided by Dr. Brenda Allen in her book *Difference matters: Communicating social identity* (Allen, 2011, pp. 65-91, 115-135). We wrote our ability inventory making sure our statements were not biased or confusing to get our classmates' opinions about ability (Purdue Owl, 2010). After the class had time to respond to the statements based on their personal experiences, each individual placed either a five if the statement was always true, a three for sometimes true, or a zero for never true. Next, Dr. Lahman, our Intercultural Communications professor, lead the class in a discussion on ability to allow us to take participant observation notes, which we coded.

According to Guest, Namey, & Mitchell (2013), during participant observation the researchers are "trying to discover and analyze aspects of social scenes that use rules and norms that the participants may experience without explicitly talking about [them]" (p.75). During the class discussion, Dr. Lahman asked the class, which questions surprised them and why. Based on Lindlof & Taylor (2002), we went through the processes of open coding, integration, and dimensionality (pp. 219-222). "Open-coding" is when each group member goes through the data to find categories, before the group meets to allow the group to have ideas about what the themes should be. Once all group members completed the open coding process, we came together to integrate the data. During the integration process, we discussed all of the categories that each individual presented to help determine the themes. Finally, we moved on to dimensionality, which is how we found examples of our themes from our participant observation notes.

## METHODS CONT.

Before the students handed in their inventory, we had them respond to the following question: Describe your mannerisms and emotions when interacting with a person with a visible disability. After receiving the responses from our classmates, each group member open coded the responses to allow us to determine themes and examples we could potentially use when presenting our data. The responses from our classmates to the open-ended question gave us examples for the themes we determined were the most important in regards to ability.

## RESULTS

Inventory scores did not have much variance. The highest score was 50 and the lowest was 39 with an average of 45 and a median of 44. This tells us that most people in the classroom did not experience very many setbacks regarding their ability.

Statement Number	Percentage of Participants	Explanation
3—When I struggle in the classroom, help is offered not forced upon me.	33% 7 out of 21 Avg Score: 4.6	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Able-bodied person may be told to seek help in places outside the classroom.</li> <li>Help is something able-bodied person must ask for and is not something that is forced or excessive.</li> </ul>
5—After high school, I was not questioned about whether I was going to attend a higher education institution, it was assumed.	52% 11 out of 21 Avg Score: 3.9	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>It is often assumed that one can find a way to attend college if one does not have a disability.</li> <li>Able-bodied individuals are asked "Where are you going to college?" instead of "Are you going to college?"</li> </ul>
7—In public spaces, I can be sure that no one will bother me and people will respect my privacy.	43% 9 out of 21 Avg Score: 4.3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>People are often curious and feel as though it is okay to inquire about a disability regardless of whether or not they know the person with the disability.</li> <li>People make assumptions about a disability without first getting to know the origin or nature of the disability.</li> </ul>
8—I never worry that my education suffers because professors are too nervous to correct my mistakes for fear that they may look insensitive	38% 8 out of 21 Avg Score: 4.9	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Professors do not feel bad or fearful for marking able-bodied down on assignments if they are incorrect.</li> <li>It is assumed that a mistake is not due to an able-bodied person's ability.</li> </ul>

Table 1 describes the four statements that most surprised participants. Average scores are based on a scale of 0-5 (0=strongly disagree, 5=strongly agree).

### Cautiousness

Most participants (62%) admitted that they use cautious actions when interacting with persons with disabilities. For example, one may talk more politely or speak as though one is conversing with a child, avoid eye contact or all contact, being excessively conscientious of actions and comments, and being afraid to say or do the wrong thing. One participant experienced no invasiveness when using a cane but did notice that peers responded more formally when communicating. These types of interactions can create "emotional boundaries" along with the already present physical boundaries.

### Comfort Level

Participants that have had previous experience with disabilities had a higher level of comfort when interacting with a disability (38%). For example, having a temporary ailment ceased one participant's urge to question others' disabilities. The type of disability influences one's response.

## RESULTS CONT.

Wearing a military uniform may be more inviting and evoke more reverence in onlookers so they will be inclined to ask about the disability out of respect. Children may ask about a service dog because they enjoy the presence of animals. More taboo disabilities may cause discomfort to onlookers and cause them to avoid the interaction entirely.

### Invisibility

People with an unseen disability may feel inclined to hide it if that means they can avoid the effects of TUI (Allen, 2011, p. 9). Invisible disabilities are harder to account for because we cannot know the experiences and thoughts of others.

## DISCUSSION

Dr. Brenda Allen (2011) wants us to brainstorm if we "think under the influence," which is "placing dominant valued meanings to words like ability, gender, social class, and others" (p. 9). Allen (2011) asks if we can embrace all abilities without forcing anyone to disclose their own. Everyone has their own experiences and the goal is to value them not to change them. Sharing our experiences could be the first step towards progress because one cannot start to question salient beliefs if they do not understand the issue.

During our participant observation, we were given different examples of experiences regarding the relationship between mental capacity and communication and the relationship between visual disabilities and privacy. In terms of mental capacity, one participant shared that his grandfather is in a wheelchair because of muscular dystrophy. People automatically assumed that because he is in a wheelchair there is not a lot going on within his brain, thus stereotypically treating him like a child. Regarding privacy, another participant shared that she experienced an invasion of privacy when training a service dog in public. While walking with the dog in Costco, she overheard a mother saying to her child, "No, honey, you cannot touch the dog because she needs him." Upon realizing that the participant was not blind, the mother expressed surprise and admitted that she assumed the participant must have had emotional issues.

In conclusion, our research found that there is a margin of error in our qualitative data because people still struggle with using "People First Language" (Allen 2011 p. 153). Most experiences that students have with ability are determined by prior knowledge. If per does not have adequate background information on a disability, per will be more uncomfortable and therefore will a build salient belief barrier that continues to separate the able and the unable. By doing this observation with our participants, we hope to increase awareness of the stereotypes about persons with disabilities--hidden or visible--and thus improve the quality of inter-ability communication.

## References

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