Research Paper

Perception of Students without Disability towards Students with Disability (SWD): A Qualitative Exploration

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ABSTRACT

The effects of stigma are manifold in the lives of students with disability (SWD). They are often shunned from social spaces, social opportunities are denied, and self-esteem suffers. However, the present study attempted to explore the perception of students without disability towards students with disability (SWD). A qualitative research design was adopted with a phenomenological approach to explore the aim of the study. A group of 15 male (n=7) and female (n=8) students between the age range of 20 to 25 years were interviewed in this study. The transcribed data was coded and themes and sub-themes were developed by thematic analysis. Four themes and nine sub-themes emerged from the narratives. The participants narrated that disability includes a wide range of experiences and that the society to some extent adds burden on to the experiences of SWD by making public spaces inaccessible. In turn, it interferes with the SWD's abilities to exercise their basic rights of existence. The participants' narratives indicate that there is much work to be done in order to enhance the lives of SWD. Thus, it can be concluded that participants' perceive disability to be a complex and multifaceted phenomenon.

Social perception is a complex process through which we seek to know and can understand other people (Neuberg & Newsom, 1993). Social perception is often a very difficult process to get it right. One has to rely on their cognitive faculties, skills, and abilities to understand others.

The 3 most cultural aspects of social perception are:
1. **Nonverbal communication**: Communication between individuals that does not involve the content of spoken language. It realises instead of an unspoken language of facial expressions, eye contact, and body language (Goman, 2010).
2. **Attribution**: The process through which we seek to identify the causes of others' behaviours to gain knowledge of their stable traits and dispositions (Monson & Snyder, 1977).
3. **Impression formation**: The process through which we form impressions of others. Impression formation refers to the process by which individual pieces of information

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about another person are integrated to form a global impression of the individual
(Crawford et al., 2002).

Another word for these preconceptions or individual pieces of information is "schemas". A
schema is an organised, structured set of cognitions including some knowledge about the
category, and some relationships among the various cognitions about it (Crocker et al.,
1984). Several types of schemas are important in a person's perception in forming
impressions of others. Person schemas are structures about people (James et al., 2004).

Other schemas focus on groups. The most familiar is the group stereotype, which attributes
specific traits to a particular group of people (Blum, 2004). Perceives form inferences about
others based on the specific group role they hold. In drawing inferences about another
person, we often draw on the prototype of the schemas. A prototype is a scheme for a
particular type of person or situation.

Perceptions are also influenced by social categories such as gender, race, and social clan.
Perceivers do not respond to salient stimuli in isolation, they immediately and spontaneously
perceive stimuli as part of some group or category. Determining that an individual is a
member of a particular category may lead to social judgments about that person that are
consistent with the category-based stereotype (Baron et al., 1995; Jones, 1990). Categorising
a person also speeds up the information processing time.

We combine all of these separate inferences about a person into an overall impression. The
most important and influential aspect of impressions is evaluation—the "goodness" or
"badness" of another person, object, or concept. Impressions are more influenced by
negative traits than by positive traits (Sedikides & Skowronski, 1993).

According to Social Identity theory (Turner et al., 1979), People tend to categorise
individuals into one of two groups: - the in-group (we) or the out-group (others).
Unfortunately, by categorising individuals into these groups, people often develop biases
and negative attitudes towards out-group members (Ahmed, 2007; Howard & Rothbart,
1980). Persons with disabilities are often seen as "others" (Green et al., 2005), being
categorised into the out-group in relation to the general population as a result of their
impairment (Arbour et al., 2007). Evidence suggests that attitudes towards people with
physical disabilities are generally negative, simplistic, and discriminative (Dovidio et al.,
2010; Arbour et al., 2007). These stigmatised impressions can pose significant social
barriers for disabled people.

Stigma is a common problem among disabled people. It not only affects people with
disability but may extend to include his or her whole family as well. The person is shunned,
social opportunities are denied, and self-esteem suffers. Thus, the present study aims to
explore the perception of students without disability towards students with disability (SWD).

METHODOLOGY

Study Design: A qualitative research design was adopted with a phenomenological approach
to explore the aim of the study.

Sample: A group of 15 male (n=7) and female (n=8) students between the age range of 20 to
25 years were interviewed in this study. The participants were Bengali, residents of Kolkata,

had a minimum educational qualification of being a graduate student and belonged to middle class socio-economic status.

Instruments:

- **Information Schedule**: It was used to collect demographic details of the participants such as their age, gender, religion, mother tongue, educational qualification, socio-economic status, family structure, and proximal relationship with a person with disability.
- **Interview Schedule:** A set of interview questions were prepared beforehand to facilitate the interview process.
    - ➢ What do you think makes a person disabled?
    - ➢ Is disability a result of sin?
    - ➢ Do you think SWD faces any kind of challenges?
    - ➢ Do you think the government can do anything to help SWD?
    - ➢ Do you think SWD should be employed in jobs?
    - ➢ Do you think SWD can be allowed to participate in sports? Do you think the media has any role in the context of disability?
    - ➢ Do you think any social facilities can be offered to SWD?

Data Collection Procedure

Rapport was established with the participants. First, the informed consent was obtained from the participants. Then the participants were requested to fill up the information schedule. A structured interview was conducted individually one on one. The interview schedule, which was prepared beforehand, was used to guide the interview. The participants were instructed to answer a few questions about their perception towards students with disability (SWD). There are no right or wrong answers. In case of any difficulty they were asked to report to the interviewer. The total time taken for conducting a single interview was recorded using a stopwatch. The response of the subject was noted verbatim as well as recorded in a recorder. After the interview, necessary qualitative analysis was carried out.

Analysis

The transcribed data was coded and themes and sub-themes were developed by thematic analysis by Braun and Clark (2006). The transcribed data was repeatedly read in order to generate the themes and sub-themes.

RESULTS

Demographic data revealed that 80% of the participants belong to a nuclear family and 20% belong to a joint family structure. 60% of the participants reported that they share a proximal relationship with at least one person with a disability.

Thematic analysis revealed the following themes from the interview.

Theme 1: Functionality

Following are some of the important verbatim expressed by the participants

Table 1: Narration of the participants under Theme 1

Participant	Verbatim
Participant 1	"Disabilities are a result of chromosomal aberration."
Participant 2	"It can occur because of high dose medicine."

Participant	Verbatim
Participant 4	"Because of surgical procedures, disabilities can happen. For example, forceps baby."
Participant 6	"During pregnancy if the mother consumes too much alcohol or smokes a lot, it can lead to heavy exposure to toxins in the womb. It can lead to disability."
Participant 10	"Sometimes accidents such as car crashes can be so extreme that a person may be required to be amputated - like losing a limb - it can lead to a different kind of trauma and disability."
Participant 11	"Depression is associated with feeling sad, not feeling like doing any work. It becomes even difficult to get out of bed. So, some with depression can be recognised as being disabled because they are also unable to fully participate."

Sub-theme: 1. Organic Disability, 2. Acquired Disability, 3. Psychogenic Disability

Theme 2: Religion

Following are some of the important verbatim expressed by the participants

Table 2: Narration of the participants under Theme 2

Participant	Verbatim
Participant 1	"Sin has got nothing to do with disability."
Participant 2	"It is an outdated notion. Science has progressed a lot to not hold onto these notions."
Participant 4	"No it is not a sin. It is very much natural and not a God thing."
Participant 6	"Reproduction is like probability - a chance factor. So is disability."
Participant 10	"No, no, disability can occur due to some accidents. Accidents have no connection with sins. It is a mere coincidence."
Participant 11	"It is absolutely not under anyone's control. Like we cannot choose to have straight or curly hair, you are either disabled or not. It's an accident, we are never prepared for it."

Theme 3: Livelihood

Following are some of the important verbatim expressed by the participants

Table 3: Narration of the participants under Theme 3

Participant	Verbatim
Participant 1	"There should be a structured education system which could accommodate students with disabilities. If they don't get the scope to study how will they get a job"
Participant 2	"To have daycare homes to facilitate the enhancement of abilities through occupational training, and to find suitable job opportunities based on their range of abilities"
Participant 4	"There should be provisions to make public buildings more accessible - more disability friendly so that such people can also use the public spaces, there should be more accessible public transport - if a disabled person can get out of the house and cannot get a transport how will they do their jobs properly."
Participant 6	"There can be a reserved category for disabled people. However, it can further alienate the person, they may feel inferior, they may feel that they got the job not because they are capable enough but because of their

Participant	Verbatim
	inability - like a token."
Participant 10	"There is very little scope for earning livelihood, so placements should be increased."
Participant 11	"There should be policies to include disabled employees in the public and private sectors."

Subtheme - 1. Training, 2. Reservation, 3. Inclusivity

Theme 4: Social Opportunities
Following are some of the important verbatim expressed by the participants
Table 4: Narration of the participants under Theme 4

Participant	Verbatim
Participant 1	"If they are willing to participate in sports they should be able to. If they have the willpower, they can achieve anything."
Participant 2	"There is a special kind of sports activity, the Paralympics for the disabled people. They can participate in that. Apart from that, Prince Harry of England, started the 'Invictus Games' dedicated to the veterans who lost their limbs during battle."
Participant 4	"With the advancement of social media, not there are now initiatives that promote advertising with disabled people. There are TV programmes that promote awareness."
Participant 6	"Media has the power to promote favourable views of disability, however, they often take a sympathetic pathway which essentialises the issue. All that is required is an empathic outlook. Media only highlights the person's disability, stripping the person off their dreams, hopes and aspirations."
Participant 10	"There should be disability-friendly public spaces such as cinema halls, restaurants etc. There should be traffic guards to help disabled people, important signs should also be written in brail."
Participant 11	"Disabled people should not be labelled, they should not be called names. Sign language should be made like a language paper offered in schools or colleges just like any other languages we learn."

Subthemes - 1. Sports, 2. Media Representation, 3. Accessibility
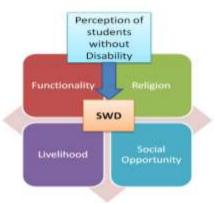
Conceptual Framework

Figure 1: A conceptual framework derived from the present study

DISCUSSION

The findings of the study suggest that the participants perceive disability as encompassing various forms of impairment in mental and/or physical capabilities which hinders the SWD from fully engaging their minds and bodies. The absence of certain physical attributes adds up the challenges they face in performing a task, which sets them apart from those without disability.

The participants reported various types of **functional disability** such as physical, mental, psychological and emotional disability. The participants also reported that these disabilities originate from chromosomal aberrations, high-dose medicine, surgical procedures, exposure to toxins at birth or traumatic accident. It implies that the participants perceive that disabilities can be both **Organic** in nature, that is disability occuring due to chemical imbalances during the prenatal stage and that disability may be **Acquired** in nature due to some accident, for example loss of limb due to car crash. From the participants' report a third category of disability emerged in the form of **Psychogenic** disability. Here, the participants linked mental health issues such as depression with disability, implying that the participant feels that although temporary but mental health issues can act as a barrier. Friedrich (2017) reported that 4.4% of the world's population is suffering from depression and is one of the leading causes of disability especially in the developing countries.

Historically, in India, disability was thought to be a sinful condition (Miles, 2002). However, the participants of the present study who represent contemporary India, do not align themselves with that notion. Rather, they grounded disability to be a biological phenomenon, which is not under the conscious control of any individual. Moreover, disability was neither perceived to be a punishment nor a result of wrong deeds in the past. Participants' understanding of the basic nature of disability, its types and causes are at par with that of scientific knowledge.

Participants feel that the government can help to improve the quality of SWD's lives. Participants reported that the government can provide a structured education and **training** programme which can accommodate SWD and facilitate the enhancement of abilities through occupational training keeping in mind their range of abilities. Most participants reported that they feel a disability based **reservation** category for SWD is important. However, having a separate reservation category may further alienate SWD from the mainstream. Often, reservation is seen as a mark of inferiority, such a person may be used as a token representation without actual improvement. Although the participants acknowledge recruitments should be based on a person's aptitude, yet they feel that **inclusive** policies should be made to include disabled employees in the public and private sectors. Provisions should be made to make public buildings and public transport more accessible to facilitate mobility and to increase visibility.

Participants are optimistic in the willpower of SWD that they can do anything in sports. There is scope for participation in the **Paralympics** games which happens every year after the Olympics games are over. One participant also mentioned the "Invictus games" which was started by Prince Harry of England for the war veterans who lost their limbs. The participants reported that with the advancement of social media, initiatives have been taken for advertising and arranging various TV programmes for awareness on disability. **Media** projects achievements on various disabled people which in turn become inspiration for others. Media may help in promoting views in favour of disability but it really does not help

in India. Media takes a sympathetic view and essentialises the whole issue. There is an invisibility of disability in the mass media.

Participants feel that SWD should be provided to disabled people with a proper education system along with sufficient extracurricular activities. There should be **disability-friendly** public spaces, public transport, separate traffic guards should be appointed, and important signs to be written out in brails. People should know sign language to be able to communicate with disabled people. They should be treated with respect for their struggle. They should not be called names and not label them. They should be provided acceptance so that they can succeed on their own.

The participants feel that SWDs face a myriad of challenges due to their physical and mental inabilities which interfere with their education, job, and adjusting with daily living activities. Participating in social gatherings, dealing with bullies, asserting themselves in society, and establishing interpersonal relationships were all identified as significant challenges. Moreover, social stigma, ableism, interpersonal conduct were also reported, lack of empathy makes them crippled even further.

CONCLUSION

Thus, it can be concluded that participants' perceive disability to be a complex and multifaceted phenomenon. They feel that disability includes a wide range of experiences. Their reports also indicate that society to some extent adds on to the disability by making public spaces inaccessible. In turn, it interferes with their abilities to exercise their basic rights of existence. The participants' narratives indicate that there is much work to be done in order to enhance the lives of SWD.

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