

Disability and Society: Appearance Stigma Results in Discrimination Toward Deaf Persons

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This experiment tested whether deaf consumers experience a longer wait for service in retail establishments than their hearing counterparts. Pairs of confederates, either deaf persons conversing in sign language or hearing persons using spoken English, entered randomly selected retail stores. Confederates clocked the time it took for a sales clerk to approach and offer service. The results indicated that sales clerks offered assistance significantly more quickly to hearing consumers. This result suggests that the ability to hear is a significant factor in determining the length of wait for service. We offer suggestions for studying discrimination in restaurants, department stores, and employment settings and for educating retailers about appropriate ways to serve disabled consumers.

NUMEROUS AUTHORS (E.G., BOYLE, 1997; Fishbein, 1996; Katz, 1981) agree that nondisabled persons behave differently toward persons with disabilities. Some researchers have found that people without disabilities are prejudiced against their disabled counterparts (Blaska, 1993; Fishbein, 1996; Zola, 1993), whereas other researchers attribute negative attitudes toward persons with disabilities to feelings of ambivalence (Katz, 1981; Söder, 1990). For example, a person who is prejudiced against persons with disabilities will treat disabled individuals differently or unequally because they are different. However, a person who has ambivalent feelings intends to behave kindly toward persons with disabilities, but is apprehensive about interacting closely with them. Researchers clearly agree that disabled people are stigmatized and that the stigma is related to discriminatory attitudes of individuals. However, so few studies exist in this field that it is difficult for researchers to make effective comparisons or draw concrete conclusions from the findings.

Before discussing the connection between stigma and discrimination, it is important to first clearly define the relevant concepts. The ancient Greeks used

the term *stigma* to refer to a bodily mark or characteristic that was designed to symbolize disgrace, for example, branding in the case of a slave or criminal, or placing a tribal mark upon an outcast (Goffman, 1963, as cited in Katz, 1981). Since that time, the meaning of the term has evolved, and the word *stigma* is now used to describe the disgrace due to an attribute, rather than the mark itself. Crocker, Voelkl, Testa, and Major (1991) state that disadvantaged groups in America, including the disabled population, are stigmatized based on their physical appearance. Such stigmas denote attributes that society considers to be socially unacceptable (Katz, 1981), which serves to exaggerate differences between disabled and nondisabled groups (Milner, 1983, as cited

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in Fishbein, 1996) and leads to dehumanization or depersonalization (Fishbein, 1996). Generalizations such as deaf people are melancholy (Jernigan, 1975, as cited in Bogdan & Biklen, 1977; Scott, 1969, as cited in Bogdan & Biklen, 1977), perpetuate the idea that specific undesirable characteristics are shared by all deaf persons. However, to *stereotype*, or conceptualize that people with similar disabilities are all alike, is incorrect, because a disability does not define the person.

The stigmatizing characteristic or mark of deaf persons remains unknown. Influenced by stereotypes, many nondisabled people assume that all persons with disabilities are incompetent (Katz, 1981). Fishbein (1996) attributes stigma to the “objective characteristics of the individual, which are often used to signify the person herself, e.g., ‘She’s deaf’; ‘She’s Jewish’; ‘She’s an African American’” (p. 15). Thus, it is conceivable that the stigma of deafness is characterized by a hearing aid or other assistive listening device, use of sign language or a sign language interpreter, a speech impediment due to the inability to hear, or simply the obvious difficulties of communicating with the hearing world.

Stigmatizing characteristics cause some nondisabled persons to classify disabled individuals into groups, prejudging and assigning disabled persons to categories based on their appearance. Generalization based on prejudice and stereotypes can lead to discrimination against persons with disabilities. *Discrimination* is the unfair and unequal treatment of individuals or groups based on prejudice and stereotypes, which may lead to harmful actions toward persons because of their perceived membership in a particular group (Bogdan & Biklen, 1977; Fishbein, 1996). Mistreatment of persons with disabilities occurs because society allows the defining characteristics of the disability to define the person (Fine & Asch, 1988). Boyle (1997) stated that society has considered the abnormalities of persons with disabilities, and has deemed them broken and inferior. Other authors have reported degrees of aversion to persons with disabilities based on the type of disability, for example, a permanent disability or chronic illness (Katz, 1981).

In order to make sense of the research findings, a background understanding of the nondisabled population’s negative behavior toward disabled persons is necessary. Kleck, Ono, and Hastorf (1966, as cited in Katz, 1981) wrote that society desires to treat disabled persons kindly, but finds intimate encounters with them aversive. Nondisabled persons have preconceived notions of how disabled persons should behave, and people with disabilities often act in

accordance with those beliefs. Thus, disabled persons create a self-fulfilling prophecy, which lessens the normal persons’ apprehensiveness in face-to-face interactions and fuels further discrimination (Crocker et al., 1991; Katz, 1981). A central theme throughout the history of the deaf community is the dominant cultural view of deaf persons as incomplete and deficient, rather than merely different (Fishbein, 1996). This view perpetuates the societal norm of maintaining a distance from the deaf population, because nondisabled people feel that comfortable interpersonal interactions between the two groups require too much effort (Fishbein, 1996).

Boyle (1997) advanced this perspective when he wrote that societal barriers for the disabled result from a majority culture view of them as damaged, second-class citizens. Similarly, Hahn (1988) maintained that the problems of the disabled population stem from societal attitudes, rather than from limitations due to a disability. He asserted that the model for studying disabilities has changed from the “functional-limitations” perspective (p. 39), with a focus on what a disabled person cannot do, to the “minority-group” perspective (p. 39), with a framework for discrimination based on personal appearance. Goffman (1963, as cited in Rodin, Price, Sanchez, & McElligot, 1989) identified three types of flaws that mar social identity and perpetuate discrimination: physical disfigurement, flaws of character, and flaws of race or ethnicity. Rodin et al. (1989) operationally defined discrimination against persons who exhibit differences in speech or appearance as derogation, exclusion, and unfair treatment.

Borrowing the terminology of behaviorism, if stigmas are considered to be the stimulus, discrimination would be the response. In other words, given that stigma is the characteristic which brands a person as different or disabled, it follows that a stigmatizing characteristic can influence individuals without disabilities to note differences in disabled individuals and treat them differently. McArthur (1982, as cited in Makas, 1993) stated that because a person’s physical appearance has salience, society tends to categorize people on the basis of characteristics such as skin color or a physical disability, and also tends to pay more attention to people who have a novel physical appearance. Hahn (1988) wrote that modern society highly values the physical and behavioral capabilities that enable a person to master the environment. Hahn also asserts that persons without disabilities experience “‘aesthetic’ . . . anxiety” (p. 39), a fear that arises when interacting with people whose physical traits are regarded as unappealing. Similarly, Makas (1993) maintains that another reason nondisabled

persons experience physiological arousal when interacting with a disabled person, is due to the anxiety of violating a social norm. Some nondisabled persons become uneasy around persons with disabilities because they are unsure how to act in their presence and are concerned that they will offend them. Therefore, persons without disabilities intend to be friendly to persons with disabilities, but dislike contact with them (Kleck et al., 1966, as cited in Katz, 1981).

In summary, past research indicates that disabled persons, including deaf individuals, are stigmatized. The stigmas, based on the differences between the disabled and nondisabled groups, are related to discrimination. Although additional research in this area is critical, it should be conducted with a clear understanding of concerns and limitations of past research. Katz (1981) noted that the majority of information about attitudes toward the disabled has been gathered from literature, folklore, and personal accounts and that systematic research on the topic is scarce. One concern is that existing studies are not comparable because of their differing methodologies. Katz (1981) stated that studies concerning discrimination against deaf persons lack experiments with similar designs and procedures that are necessary to determine the possible causes of negative behavior toward persons with physical stigmas. Similarly, Makas (1993) remarked that in order to effectively compare studies, executed research must be based on similar definitions, rather than vague generalities. Researchers must define concepts clearly and provide detailed operational definitions.

An application of this methodological concern in performing studies with disabled confederates is to determine what identifies them as disabled. For example, Fine and Asch (1988) assert that a confederate in a wheelchair, who is faking a disability, is not a credible source of evidence as to how disabled people successfully negotiate social interactions. Data collected under false conditions are meaningless. Similarly, when carrying out a study using deaf confederates, the researcher must decide what will identify the person as deaf. The best choice may be to have deaf confederates who use sign language as their primary mode of communication. This identifying characteristic will be realistic and perhaps more noticeable than an assistive listening device. It will be obvious that communication is an issue with these confederates.

Another related issue is where to study discrimination; some possible locations include a retail store, a workplace, or an educational setting, because all three are situations in which deaf persons would normally be found so that the participants' (i.e., clerks)

suspicions would not be aroused. Previous studies of discrimination have been conducted in retail settings using a measure called "latency to serve" (Carlson et al., 1998, p. 129; Kraus, Davis, & Burns, 1997, p. 16). Kraus and colleagues (1997) found that race, sex, and type of attire are significant factors in determining the length of wait for service, presumably because clerks use easily observable characteristics as a basis for discrimination against their customers. Carlson and colleagues (1998) found that customers who are nicely dressed and are carrying shopping bags receive quicker service from store clerks, and consequently determined that both variables are viable factors related to discrimination against customers in a retail setting.

In their discussion of the Kraus et al. (1997) study, Horvat and Davis (1998) remarked that an experiment in a retail setting was ideal because it was a simple, objective study, performed in a realistic setting. Using single-entrance retail stores would narrow down the number of clerks (participants) and would ensure that the confederates would be seen by the clerks as they enter the store. The participants would retain anonymity, which would allow them to exhibit their true attitudes and behaviors, because they would have no reason to hide their real feelings. These conditions would not exist in a workplace or educational setting. A retail setting would also be ideal, because it is clear that retailers actively categorize customers in order to maximize product promotion and sales (Sharma & Levy, 1995). Also, there is evidence that customers' interaction styles and appearance influence store employees' willingness to comply with a return request (Krapfel, 1988).

Another issue is how to measure discrimination. One possibility is to use self-report measures, specifically questionnaires such as the Attitudes Towards Disabled Persons (ATDP) scale (Söder, 1990). However, it is clear that bias, untruths, or embellishments often influence responses on questionnaires, and the intensity of the response is difficult to capture (Fishbein, 1996). The other general category of measures includes behavioral observations. The benefit to this objective method of data-gathering is that the participants often do not know they are being observed (Carlson et al., 1998; Kraus et al., 1997). As mentioned previously, these researchers found that latency to serve is a good measure of discrimination against persons because of race, sex, attire, and potential to purchase.

In summary, these are the issues which must be considered prior to designing or replicating studies of discrimination. First, similar methodologies for studying discrimination must be used in order for

researchers to compare the findings. In order to determine which studies are similar and consequently compare them, clear definitions of concepts are essential. Second, researchers must determine what characteristic will identify the confederate as disabled and ensure that the disability is not a false condition. Finally, the researchers must choose an appropriate location and determine how they will measure discrimination against persons with disabilities.

The present study was a field experiment performed in a retail setting, investigating discrimination against persons who are deaf and who use sign language as their primary means of communication. As in the studies by Kraus et al. (1997) and Carlson et al. (1998), discrimination was measured by a store clerk's latency to serve or offer assistance to the confederates. Given the evidence from these studies that latency to serve in a retail store is a good measure of discrimination against persons because of race, sex, attire, and perceived potential to purchase, it would follow that latency to serve would be a good measure of discrimination against persons who have disabilities.

Method

Participants

The participants consisted of 77 sales clerks in 27 single-entrance, service-oriented retail stores in one large shopping mall in Michigan. Preliminary research of shopping malls in the area ruled out many of the malls because their philosophy and practice was to offer little or no customer service as a rule. We chose this shopping mall in Novi, MI (population 33,000), a suburb of Detroit, because it housed a variety of single-entrance retail stores and because customers appeared to be of various socioeconomic backgrounds, cultures, and ages. The stores were randomly selected from the shopping mall's approximately 175 stores, based on similar price range of products, the number of entrances, and whether or not they offered service to customers. The sales clerks did not know they were being observed.

The confederates consisted of 20 people, 8 men and 12 women, ages 20 to 34 (mean age 24.6), 10 of whom were deaf (sign language users) and 10 hearing. Because a previous study had shown that customers' style of dress may influence sales clerks' responsiveness (Kraus et al., 1997), the confederates all wore dress-casual slacks and shirts. Confederates resided in the Detroit metropolitan area and were either college students or bachelor-level college graduates. They were recruited from responses to an informational flyer posted at Madonna University in Livonia, MI, and from flyers sent to persons associated with

the researcher. Each confederate completed a consent form describing the study and giving his or her agreement to participate.

Procedure

All data for deaf and hearing confederates were collected during the same time frame, from 1:00 to 4:00 p.m. on Saturdays. The confederates were randomly assigned to pairs and then sent in pairs (of two deaf or two hearing people) into single-entrance, service-oriented retail stores. The deaf confederates were easily identifiable as deaf because they entered the stores using sign language to converse with their partners. Confederates were randomly assigned to stores. In each pair, one confederate carried a silent, digital stopwatch in his or her coat pocket. The stopwatch was activated as the pair crossed the threshold of the store and made eye contact with a sales clerk. Timing was stopped when a clerk approached and offered assistance. An offer of assistance was defined as the use of comments such as "May I help you?" or "Is there something specific that you are looking for?" or "If I can assist you, or help you find anything, please let me know." After the timing was stopped, the confederate concluded his or her browsing and left the store. If the sales clerk responded to their entrance with, "Hello" or "I'll be right with you," timing was not stopped (Carlson et al., 1998; Kraus et al., 1997). If the confederates were not offered assistance within 6 min (Carlson et al., 1998), they left the store.

After leaving the store, the confederates showed the stopwatch to the researcher, who was positioned in the mall corridor outside of the stores. The researcher recorded the latency-to-serve times. A time of 6 min was recorded if a sales clerk did not approach the confederates. Following their participation, confederates were given the opportunity to ask questions and obtain clarification about the details of the study. Confederates were also told where they could obtain the results of the study.

Results

Sales clerks' latency to serve deaf consumers compared to hearing consumers was tested using a *t* test for independent samples. Sales clerks took an average of 1.3 min ($SD = 2.4$) to serve hearing consumers, whereas they took an average of 3.9 min ($SD = 2.4$) to serve deaf consumers. The average latency to serve deaf consumers was significantly higher than the average latency to serve nondisabled, hearing consumers, $t(87) = 5.03$, $p < .001$. Inspection of the data indicated that many more deaf consumers than hearing consumers waited the maximum amount of time without receiving service. The Mann-Whitney

U test of mean ranks revealed that this was a statistically significant difference (mean rank for deaf confederates = 59.5, mean rank for hearing confederates = 30.2), $U = 336.5$, $p < .001$).

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to determine whether retail sales clerks exhibit a greater latency to serve deaf customers who use sign language as their primary mode of communication than hearing customers who communicate through spoken English. As expected, the results of this study supported this hypothesis. In addition, examination of the data indicated that compared to hearing consumers, many more deaf consumers waited the maximum amount of time, 6 min or more, without receiving service. Because the sales clerks discriminated against their customers based on observable, stigmatizing characteristics—ability to hear and mode of communication—deafness and disability can be added to the list of elements established in previous studies that affect salespersons' response times (Carlson et al., 1998; Kraus et al., 1997). A visible difference in communication method and the potential of difficulty in communicating appear to influence the customers' attractiveness to salespersons and thus their likelihood of receiving service. The data appear to support a negative view of deaf individuals in society, manifested in the form of a longer wait for service compared to their hearing counterparts.

Though the sales clerks often smiled at or simply ignored the deaf confederates, one discriminatory response is noteworthy. The encounter occurred with a pair of male, deaf confederates. They were quickly offered service upon entrance. However, when they gestured to the clerk to communicate with them in writing because they were deaf, the young female sales clerk rolled her eyes and responded, "You're deaf? Oh forget it!" The clerk initially exhibited a desire to assist customers, but her attitude indicated her unwillingness to assist customers who were different.

Though previous studies have established that latency to serve is a sensitive measure of discrimination (Carlson et al., 1998; Kraus et al., 1997), one limitation of the present study is noteworthy. Results of the study indicated that discrimination against deaf consumers occurred. Whether store clerks discriminated based upon the deaf consumers' personality or attitudes, or the stigmatizing characteristic of deafness, is unknown; however, it is unlikely that the sales clerk could have seen or known the confederates' personalities from such a brief encounter. Nevertheless, ascertaining the cause of the discrimination would necessitate confirming store clerks' attitudes

with a follow-up questionnaire or interview. Regardless of this limitation, the finding that store clerks discriminated against deaf consumers remains.

Awareness of discrimination is important for all individuals who work with the public. Anecdotal evidence indicates that deaf consumers are aware of salespersons' negative attitudes and tend to avoid stores that discriminate against them. Sales clerks who aim to perform their jobs well and aspire to offer prompt and fair service to all customers equally, regardless of stigmatizing characteristics, will desire to change the current state of retail affairs. Retailers who wish to retain customers rather than lose them will train their employees to treat all customers fairly and equally. They must become aware of the diverse needs of their customers and encourage sales clerks to be sensitive to those needs.

In addition to being good business practice, these changes are necessary for legal reasons. One purpose for which the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990 was written is to eliminate discrimination against persons who have disabilities. The ADA specifically restricts retail businesses from exhibiting discrimination against disabled patrons. The results of the present study suggest that retailers should teach employees to treat all customers fairly in their training sessions to ensure compliance with the ADA.

In conclusion, past research demonstrates that persons with disabilities, including deaf individuals, are stigmatized. The stigma, which occurs because of a differing physical characteristic, perpetuates discrimination. In addition, negative attitudes are associated with discrimination against the disabled population. However, due to the many unanswered questions in this field, additional research investigating discrimination against deaf persons is necessary. The present study could be a springboard for future research. For example, additional studies could examine the effects of appearance stigma (disability and deafness) in other settings in which interpersonal interaction is critical (e.g., restaurants, department stores, educational settings, and employment situations). The goal of this research should be an end to discrimination based on stigmatizing characteristics. Society must come to understand that the disability does not define the person.

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