

Degree of “ableism” depends on disability, gender and the social context ^{1, 2}

Shane Timmons*, Frances McGinnity & Eamonn Carroll

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INTRODUCTION

Many people with disabilities face stigma, prejudice and discrimination because of their disability. Some may experience higher levels of this “ableism” due to negative stereotypes of the type of disability they have or because of other characteristics, such as their gender. Our aim was to test whether the public judge potential forms of discrimination differently depending on an individual’s disability and gender. We were interested in judgements of potential discrimination towards a disabled person and judgements of how people with disabilities behave.

DATA AND METHODS

A nationally representative sample of 2,000 adults took part in the experimental study online. They read short descriptions of different social scenarios relevant for people with disabilities: a job candidate failing to secure a role; a single parent starting a new relationship; a welfare recipient refusing poorly paid work; a schoolchild being placed on a reduced timetable; and a community resident protesting against people with disabilities being housed in their neighbourhood. The study used an experimental design and participants were randomised to read one of three different versions of each scenario. The descriptions varied by three factors: whether the individual had a disability, the type of disability (e.g., a physical disability or a mental health condition) and their gender. Participants rated how acceptable the action in each scenario was. Although no scenario described an explicit form of discrimination, the logic was that using an experimental design allows any differences in judgements between types of disabilities (or gender) to

¹ This Bulletin summarizes the findings from: Timmons, S., McGinnity, F., & Carroll, E. (2023). Ableism differs by disability, gender and social context: Evidence from vignette experiments. *British Journal of Social Psychology*. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1111/bjso.12696>

* Correspondence: shane.timmons@esri.ie

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be attributed to differences in how people perceive the disability in question; judging the same action to be more, or less acceptable for someone with a disability than without is a signal for ableist attitudes. At the end of the study, participants reported whether they have a family member, friend or colleague who has a disability, in addition to socio-demographic characteristics like their age, gender and level of educational attainment.

RESULTS

The findings show broadly positive attitudes towards people with disability. However, the degree of ableism depended on the scenario and the type of disability. Despite everything else being equal, participants judged it to be more acceptable to restrict the school timetable of a child with autism than one with a speech and language disorder and to not hire a candidate with an anxiety disorder than a candidate with a spinal disorder. They also judged it more acceptable to protest housing former mental health patients in a community than former patients with intellectual disabilities. Gender also mattered for some judgements. Participants judged it to be much more acceptable for a male wheelchair user to start a new relationship than a female wheelchair user, but there was no gender difference when the individual had an intellectual disability. Participants judged it equally acceptable for welfare recipients to refuse poorly paid work, regardless of whether they had a disability. Across all scenarios, participants who reported being close to someone with a disability (e.g., their parent, child or partner) were less likely to make ableist judgements, suggesting that being familiar with disabled people and the challenges they face may reduce ableism.

CONCLUSIONS

The findings imply that negative stereotypes of some disabilities may lead to higher levels of ableist judgements. Although there are differences across the type of disabilities used in the study, a general pattern was for mental health conditions, intellectual disabilities and autism to be judged more negatively than physical or sensory disabilities, despite everything else in the scenario being the same. The finding that physically disabled women are judged more negatively than physically disabled men with respect to having relationships implies that other characteristics of individuals with disability may exacerbate the challenges they face. The results highlight the need for further research on the forms ableism can take and to identify groups most at risk. The link between being close to someone with a disability and more positive judgements suggests that increasing the inclusion of disabled people in communities may help to combat ableism.