

# How Might a Critical Disability Studies Perspective Guide Disability Attitudes Research?

## Progress Report on the Development of a New Measurement Instrument

Deborah Engelen-Eigles

Century College

White Bear Lake, MN

[debbie.engelen@century.edu](mailto:debbie.engelen@century.edu)

SDS, San Jose, CA, 17 June 2011

# Critical Disability Studies—Key Principles

(Meekosha & Shuttleworth, 2009)

- Knowledge is not context-free
- Committed to social change
- Continually self-critiquing
- Engages in a dialogue among cultures

## Two existing attitude measures:

- Attitudes Toward Disabled Persons (ATDP)
- Implicit Associations Test for Disability (IAT)

What assumptions do they embody?

- ATPD scale: 30 statements
  - 22 = personality characteristics or mental states
  - 8 = social interaction or status in society
- Of the 22 personality-oriented items: 9 positive
- Of the 8 status-oriented items: 3 positive

# ATDP sample items

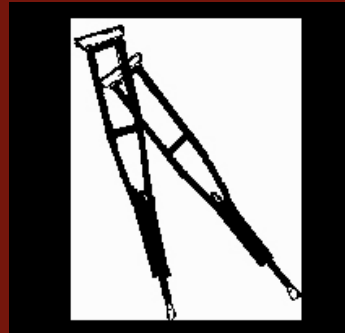
1. Severely disabled persons are usually untidy.
2. Disabled people are usually sociable.
3. Disabled persons are not as conscientious as physically normal persons.
4. It would be best if disabled persons would live and work with nondisabled persons.
5. There are more misfits among disabled persons than among nondisabled persons.

# ATDP reflects the medical model

- Focus on disability in the individual
- Many “social interaction” or “status” items also individually oriented, for example:
  - The driving test given to a disabled person should be more severe than the one given to the nondisabled.
  - Most nondisabled people would not want to marry anyone who is physically disabled.
  - Disabled children should compete with physically normal children.

- Disability as deficit, something to be overcome
- Nondisabled people are the norm against which disabled people are measured
  - Most severely disabled people are just as ambitious as physically normal persons.
  - Disabled people show as much enthusiasm as other people.
- Assumes a “nondisabled gaze”

# Implicit Associations Test (IAT)



## Nondisabled:

- All images of people
- All people in active poses
- One image of a group
- Two images of vigorous activity

## Disabled:

- Two images of people
- One person in active pose; one passive, schematic figure
- No groups
- No vigorous activity
- One assistive device
- One [service] animal

# Assumptions of IAT images

- Lack of parity in representation
- Objectification: people absent, disabilities represented by objects and animals
- Passivity
- Emphasis on impairments and devices; highlights disability as deficit and medical condition
- Reproducing the very stereotypes one is attempting to measure?

# Focus on Health Care Providers

- Barriers to effective health care include provider attitudes
- Health care system often a first point of contact in becoming “disabled”, whether at birth or later in life
- Professionals accorded esteem and status as “experts”; have control and influence over patients
- Health care system is the symbolic reference point for the medical model of disability

# New Attitudes Instrument: Goals

- Represent many definitions of disability
- Move focus away from the individual
- Decenter nondisabled as a reference point
- Cover as broad a range of issues as possible
- Study “up” the power hierarchy (Dorothy Smith)
- Inclusive of many types of disability

# New Attitudes Instrument Sample Items

1. Disability is a normal part of life, like differences in height, athletic ability, or personality.
2. There are barriers at my workplace that make it difficult to meet the needs of my patients with disabilities.
3. Making schools and workplaces fully accessible to disabled people is more important than searching for a cure for paralysis or blindness.
4. The existence of disability is a sign that the medical profession has not yet been able to fully achieve its mission.
5. In a world of ramps and elevators, rather than stairs, wheelchair users would not be considered “disabled.”

# New Attitudes Instrument: Challenges

- Using simple language without losing meaning
- Capturing the fullest range of meanings of disability
- Referring to “individuals” or “people with disabilities” where needed without losing the broader focus
- To use examples or not?