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BEYOND CURRENT EFFORTS: A CRITICAL LOOK AT REDUCING DISABILITY DISCRIMINATION

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Abstract

This study examined current efforts to address discrimination against individuals with disabilities. Participants were asked to complete the survey to provide examples of ongoing relevant initiatives and to assess each initiative's effectiveness, beneficence, and continuation. The findings indicated thirteen major themes in participants' responses: accessibility, accommodation, awareness/advocacy, content reading, equity, inclusive education, employment, legislation, media representation, open discussion, perception/attitude, technology, and training. The study highlights a pressing need to critically evaluate each initiative in terms of effectiveness, beneficence, and continuation, and calls for action to revisit and readjust current efforts to address disability discrimination moving forward.

Keywords

Disability Discrimination, Critical Reflection, Effectiveness, Beneficence, Continuation

Introduction

Individuals with disabilities are challenged by discrimination socially and occupationally (Lindsay et al., 2023). They also encounter difficulties in accessing equitable educational opportunities (Duncan et al., 2020). To address those challenges, there have been efforts to promote the inclusion of individuals with disabilities in the workforce and education (Schloemer-Jarvis et al., 2022; Bines & Lei, 2011). Despite ongoing efforts, significant societal changes regarding discrimination cannot be achieved by a single effort or a few. In order to drive substantial and meaningful change in society, it is important to critically review current efforts and proactively plan next steps. In light of this, the current study delved into ongoing initiatives to address disability discrimination. It aimed to systematically identify key themes and critically examine those efforts. To address these research agendas, the study employed a survey to elicit participants' critical reflection on ongoing efforts to address disability discrimination in terms of effectiveness, beneficence, and continuation; in other words, the efficacy of these initiatives in reducing disability discrimination, how much they benefit individuals with disabilities, and whether they should be continued.

Methods

The study employed a convenience sampling method, in which participants were recruited through distributing online and offline recruitment materials, and participation was voluntary. Fifty-eight individuals consented to participate and provided survey responses. Participants were predominantly aged 18-24 (77%), followed by those aged 25-34 (16%), 35-44 (5%), and 45-64 (2%). In the breakdown by gender, 91% were female while 9% were male. Participants consisted of 65% White/Caucasian, 16% Hispanic, 7% Black/African American, 10% Asian/Pacific Islander, and 2% Other. Of the participants, 53% were non-disability stakeholders, 45% were disability stakeholders (e.g., people with disabilities, their family members, caregivers, teachers, or service providers), and 2% preferred not to respond.

This study sought to critically analyze ongoing initiatives aimed at reducing discrimination against individuals with disabilities. A survey was newly created for this study to examine perspectives on the effectiveness of these initiatives in reducing disability discrimination, the extent to which they benefit individuals with disabilities, and whether they should be continued. Questions included: What are some examples of efforts that aim to reduce discrimination against individuals with disabilities? There were sub-questions for each example

participants provided: To what extent do you believe this effort is effective in decreasing discrimination against individuals with disabilities? To what extent do you think individuals with disabilities are benefiting from this effort? To what extent do you think that this effort should be continued? The "example" questions were open-ended, while the "extent" questions were 5-point Likert scale items (4 = A Great Deal, 3 = Much, 2 = Somewhat, 1 = Little, 0 = Never). Participants were asked to complete multiple sets of the "example" and "extent" questions. Survey data were analyzed qualitatively and quantitatively to examine whether themes emerged in participants' responses and to assess participants' perceptions of the effectiveness, beneficence, and continuation of the examples provided. The "example" responses were manually coded and categorized by similarity, and each category was named to represent a common theme. The "extent" ratings were analyzed using mean scores and standard deviations to assess overall tendencies in participants' responses regarding effectiveness, beneficence, and continuation for a specific theme, and to examine how responses were variable or consistent.

Results

Participants provided 150 examples of initiatives addressing disability discrimination and rated their effectiveness, beneficence, and continuation on a 5-point Likert scale. Thirteen themes were identified in the participants' responses: accessibility, accommodation, awareness/advocacy, content reading, equity, inclusive education, employment, legislation, media representation, open discussion, perception/attitude, technology, and training. Descriptive statistics of participants' ratings across the 13 themes are in Table 1.

Accessibility was identified through participant statements including "making public places accessible to individuals with disabilities" and "mandates that public places, such as restaurants, hotels, and government buildings, be accessible to people with disabilities." Accommodation was identified through participant statements including "setting up an accommodation process for individuals with disabilities to voice their needs and have accommodations implemented in a given setting/environment (e.g., school, workplace, healthcare facilities)" and "making sure there are reasonable accommodations for disabilities to be able to participate and engage with other individuals without disabilities." Awareness/advocacy was identified through participant statements including "A disability awareness training session being available to increase awareness and understanding of disabilities" and "advocacy for certain disabilities." Content reading was identified through participant statements including "assigning reading content" and "books." Employment was identified through participant statements including "People with disability get priority for a job interview" and "giving more working positions to those who have disabilities". Equity was identified through participant statements including "allowing them to have equitable opportunities." and "making adjustments to policies, practices, and environments to ensure equal access to education for students with disabilities". Inclusive education was identified through participant statements including "providing students with an IEP and inclusive classroom" and "incorporating students with disabilities into general education classrooms". Legislation was identified through participant statements including "the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA)" and "the Rehabilitation Act of 1973". Media representation was identified through participant statements including "more positive and accurate representation of individuals with disabilities in media and public life." and "positive representation in the media." Open discussion was identified through participant statements including "talking about disability" and "openly talking about disabilities in a positive light and not as something that holds people back." Perception/attitude was identified through participant statements including "never judge" and "reduce stigma." Technology was identified through participant statements including "providing assistive devices or software, such as screen readers, ergonomic keyboards, or magnification software" and "using accessible technology, like screen readers and voice recognition software." Training was identified through participant statements including "staff, parent, and family workshops" and "preparing teachers with strategies to reach all students even if they have a disability."

Table 1 *Descriptive Statistics of Participants' Ratings Across the 13 Themes*

	M	***SD***
Accessibility (*n* = 10)		
Effectiveness	3.40	.84
Beneficence	3.60	.70
Continuation	3.60	.52
Accommodation (*n* = 11)		
Effectiveness	3.36	.81
Beneficence	3.54	.69
Continuation	3.72	.47
Awareness/Advocacy (*n* = 18)		
Effectiveness	3.39	.61
Beneficence	3.39	.70

Continuation	3.56	.70
Content Reading (*n* = 5)		
Effectiveness	2.40	1.52
Beneficence	2.00	1.41
Continuation	2.60	1.52
Equity (*n* = 6)		
Effectiveness	3.33	.82
Beneficence	3.17	.75
Continuation	3.67	.52
Inclusive Education (*n* = 23)		
Effectiveness	3.43	.90
Beneficence	3.48	.79
Continuation	3.57	.66
Employment (*n* = 13)		
Effectiveness	3.23	.93
Beneficence	3.46	.78
Continuation	3.69	.48
Legislation (*n* = 21)		
Effectiveness	3.19	.68
Beneficence	3.05	.74
Continuation	3.48	.75
Media Representation (*n* = 3)		
Effectiveness	3.33	1.15
Beneficence	2.33	.58
Continuation	4.00	0
Open Discussion (*n* = 5)		
Effectiveness	3.40	.55
Beneficence	3.20	.84
Continuation	3.20	.84
Perception/Attitude (*n* = 11)		
Effectiveness	3.45	.52
Beneficence	3.36	.67
Continuation	3.55	.52
Technology (*n* = 3)		
Effectiveness	3.33	1.15
Beneficence	3.67	.58
Continuation	4.00	0
Training (*n* = 3)		
Effectiveness	4.00	0
Beneficence	4.00	0
Continuation	4.00	0
Overall (*N* = 150)		
Effectiveness	3.33	.80
Beneficence	3.32	.81
Continuation	3.56	.68

Note. *N* = total responses; *n* = responses per category; *M* = mean; *SD* = standard deviation.

Identified themes are ordered from most to least frequent: inclusive education (18.32%), legislation (16.03%), awareness/advocacy (15.50%), employment (11.40%), accommodation (8.63%), perception/attitude (7.63%), accessibility (6.87%), content reading (3.82%), open discussion (3.82%), equity (3.05%), media representation (2.29%), technology (2.29%), and training (2.29%).

The overall mean scores for all categories across effectiveness, beneficence, and continuation were greater than 3, indicating that participants had a positive perception of current efforts to address disability discrimination, with 4 being the highest rating.

The mean effectiveness score for each theme can be ranked as follows: training, perception/attitude, inclusive education, accessibility, open discussion, awareness/advocacy, accommodation, equity, media representation, technology, employment, legislation, content reading.

The mean beneficence score for each theme can be ranked as follows: training, technology, accessibility, accommodation, inclusive education, employment, awareness/advocacy, perception/attitude, open discussion, equity, legislation, media representation, content reading.

The mean continuation score for each theme can be ranked as follows: media representation, technology, training, accommodation, employment, equity, accessibility, inclusive education, awareness/advocacy, perception/attitude, legislation, open discussion, content reading.

In terms of reported standard deviations, participant responses were more consistent for training but more variable for content reading. Also, responses regarding effectiveness and beneficence were generally more variable than those regarding continuation.

Discussion

The findings indicated that current efforts to address disability discrimination spanned 13 thematic approaches: accessibility, accommodation, awareness/advocacy, content reading, equity, inclusive education, employment, legislation, media representation, open discussion, perception/attitude, technology, and training.

The most frequently identified efforts were inclusive education, legislation, awareness/advocacy, and employment. This indicates that such initiatives could be the most widely known and implemented approaches to address disability discrimination. Likewise, to address attitudes towards people with disabilities, disability awareness initiatives are employed (Lindsay & Edwards, 2013). Various attempts exist to foster inclusive employment (Bonaccio et al., 2020). The Americans with Disabilities Act (1990) and the Rehabilitation Act (1973) serve as legal safeguards against disability discrimination. Nevertheless, there is a necessity to respond to the growing demands of recent years and implement strategies to safeguard these emerging needs. The acknowledged efficacy and benefits of inclusive education encourage the continuation of these efforts (Kramer et al., 2021).

However, these approaches, except for inclusive education, were not ranked highest in effectiveness, beneficence, and continuation. This indicates the need to reassess the current efforts regarding disability discrimination and find ways to improve. Moreover, the overall mean scores for all initiatives were above 3, indicating that participants had a positive perception of current efforts to address disability discrimination. Notably, the findings reveal a pattern in which, on many occasions, participants perceived that initiatives should continue more boldly than they did, given their effectiveness or beneficence. This might suggest that initiatives are being carried out or encouraged without adequate evaluation of their effectiveness or benefits. Meanwhile, this also implies that people still acknowledge the necessity to continue efforts to tackle disability, even though putting these efforts into practice is challenging.

Training, perception/attitude, and inclusive education were seen as more effective, whereas content reading was considered less effective. Training, technology, and accessibility were more often perceived as beneficial, while content reading and media representation were less so. Media representation, technology, and training were identified as areas that strongly need to be continued, while content reading was less likely to be seen as necessary to continue.

Content reading was ranked as the lowest. Content reading could imply giving individuals access to resources for viewing. Nevertheless, this process is not mutual, but inputting information one way, while addressing disability discrimination could be not only about learning about it but also actively responding to it. Consequently, this approach appears less likely to be effective or to necessitate continuation; thus, it suggests that efforts to address disability discrimination require more than mere knowledge. However, the standard deviations for content reading were lower, indicating more variable responses; this should be interpreted with caution.

In particular, there was a significant discrepancy between effectiveness and beneficence in media representation. This indicates that while media representation initiatives may be perceived as effective, they do not necessarily benefit individuals with disabilities, highlighting the need to revisit current media representation initiatives. standard deviations for effectiveness are markedly higher than for beneficence, reflecting greater variability in responses. Accordingly, careful interpretation is necessary, yet revisiting media representation remains crucial. Misrepresented media portrayals can perpetuate disability stigma (Goethals et al., 2022), thus implying the need for careful reassessment and adjustment, incorporating the findings of the current study.

Training was perceived most positively in terms of effectiveness, beneficence, and continuation. This is substantiated by the active application of training across various professional environments, including educators (Bialka et al., 2024) and healthcare professionals (Rotenberg, 2022). Meanwhile, media representation and technology were also considered as strongly needed areas for continued effort. However, cautious interpretation is warranted, as the number of responses in these categories, including training, media representation, and technology, was relatively small and may not reflect a widely held opinion.

Another interesting point is the difference in response patterns. Participants responded more consistently in training and more variably in content reading. Responses related to effectiveness and beneficence were typically more inconsistent than those related to continuation. This can imply that, when it comes to continuation, people might have more general opinions about it and respond consistently; however, effectiveness and beneficence are more likely to differ. Therefore, providing evidence or assessment of whether current efforts to address disability discrimination are effective or beneficial that people can reflect on, agree with, and consent to is important, and it can play a crucial role in intervening in those issues.

Whereas the study provided noteworthy suggestions regarding initiatives to address disability discrimination, it was limited because participants were disproportionately drawn from specific genders, ethnicities, and age ranges, which may not represent a broad cross-section of the population and may reflect certain demographic groups' perspectives. Also, limited outreach for participant recruitment might have contributed to a small pool of participants and a restricted demographic composition. However, the study included a similar number of non-disability and disability stakeholders; therefore, it could still be generalized to both groups. Moreover, the study did not rely on direct measurements but instead used indirect measures of perceived effectiveness, beneficence, and continuation. Despite this limitation, the study can still serve as a stepping stone for further investigation and direct measurement of each initiative's impact. Lastly, the study assessed participants' perceptions and opinions, and these self-reported data may be subject to individual bias. Further research can incorporate more extensive and diverse samples, account for differences across stakeholder groups, improve generalizability, and assess the actual outcomes of initiatives.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the study has identified 13 distinct themes of effort: accessibility, accommodation, awareness/advocacy, content reading, equity, inclusive education, employment, legislation, media representation, open discussion, perception/attitude, technology, and training. Although these efforts were widely acknowledged and employed approaches, they are not necessarily widely perceived as effective, beneficial, or worth continuing, necessitating a reassessment of current efforts regarding disability discrimination and ways to enhance them. Moreover, overall, continuation was scored higher than effectiveness and beneficence, which may suggest that efforts could be carried out without adequate evaluation of their effectiveness or benefits; therefore, critical evaluation is necessary. Finally, it underscores the vital need to critically evaluate each initiative in terms of effectiveness, beneficence, and continuation. Ultimately, the study calls for action to revisit and readjust current efforts to address disability discrimination moving forward.

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