

## Students Attitudes and Perceptions Towards People with Disability

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### Abstract

The aim of this study was to explore and interpret student perceptions and attitudes towards disability, factors underpinning the attitudes, and student views on discrimination and legal rights of disabled people. Students describe disability as being physically and mentally different that hinders them to do something. Findings from the review of literature indicated that developing an understanding of the attitudes that predominate in a community, in turns would influence the action of its member. Therefore the way the students view the disabled will influence the student's action towards the disabled. An explorative, interpretative design was employed. The data were collected by means of in-depth interviews with a sample of students studying in one of university in Aceh, and were analyzed using content analysis approach. The findings revealed five main themes emerged from the interview; definition of disability, different types of disability, view towards disability, reason behind people behavior and discrimination. This study indicates that the attitude and perception towards people with disability appears to be affected by they previous encounter with people with disability and other factor that underpinning they viewed included environment, situation, awareness and experience.

Keyword : student, attitudes, perceptions, disability

### Introduction

Internationally, social policy has been designed to promote the acceptance, integration and inclusion of people with disabilities into the mainstream of society (International Association for The Scientific Study of Intellectual Disabilities, 2001), creating a community in which people with disabilities are able and allowed to be themselves among others (Nirje, 1985). This trend has been advanced on the premise that people want and have a right to an identity and a role in society defined by their humanity, rather than their disparate abilities (Bank – Mikkelson, 1976). Therefore, developing an understanding of the attitudes that predominate in a community, which in turns influence the action of its member is needed (Antonak & Linvch, 2000).

Attitudes are latent or referred psychological processes that are present in

all people and are given expression or form when evoked by specific referents (Antonak & Linvch, 2000). Attitudes are acquired through experience over time and are socially constructed (Tregatis, 2000). Moreover, attitudes are composed of positive and negative reaction toward an object, accompanied by beliefs that impel individual to behave in a particular way (Yuker, 1998).

This article will report a qualitative study on the nature of disability. The aim of the study is to explore and identify student perceptions and attitudes towards disability, factors underpinning the attitudes, and student views on discrimination and legal rights of disabled people.

### Methods

A qualitative research was

conducted on the content of disability; perceptions and attitudes the students have for the disabled. There are three participants for this study; a different interviewer interviewed each participant. The participants were students studied in one of university in Aceh.

Respondent 1 is a female medical student who is disabled, she has muscle weaknesses, which make her not able to walk in far distance, climb stairs and carry heavy objects. Respondent 2 is a female bioscience student, she worked as volunteer in a hospital and mostly deal with children who are disabled and she also has a disabled aunt. Respondent 3 is a student nurse, she had been disabled herself, but it is only temporary and she also work with many disabled patients.

Qualitative data were collected in one to one semi structured interviews, the interviewed were lasted for 30 – 45 minutes, using a topic guide to focus the discussion, all interview were audiotaped. The interviews were transcribed and later the emerging and repeated themes were identified. Each student gave oral informed consent to participate in the study. We used the “content analysis” approach to analyze the data.

The first step of data analysis was by begin to developed descriptive codes from individually continued reading of transcript then identified emerging themes on the basis of early indexing, hierarchical grouping of codes.

## Results

At the beginning of the interview all participant were asked about they experience of disabilities or come across people with it. All respondent had the experience, Respondent (R1) is disabled herself, (R2) has one of the members of her family who is disabled and R3 had been or deal with temporary disability and sometimes working

with disabled people.

Our analysis focused on seeking what perceptions and attitudes did the students had about the disabled. We identified five main themes emerged from the interview; definition, different types of disability, view towards disability, reason behind people behavior and discrimination.

Respondents give an account for the definition of disability based on their own experience. All of the three respondents explaining the description of disabled based on their experience to come across with the disabled. R2 described disabled as “different” -- physically their different and mentally also (female, bioscience student). Others respondent give a meaning of disabled as “you can't do something”. R3 says -- *“Disability is either a physical or a mental impairment which prevent you reaching your full potential”* (female, Nurse). The concept of wheelchair man is connected with disability was mentioned by R1, although she fully understand that this is not the whole idea of disability. -- *“ Umm, the first thing that comes to my mind is that sign, the wheelchairman. The wheelchair person they put on parking spaces. And after that other ones come in, but more common ones like blind and deaf. And.... obviously I know that that isn't the whole thing, but whenever people say disability I just assume they mean the wheelchair people”* (female, medical student). Although she assumed that disability means wheelchair but she wish that people did not corresponded disability with obvious deformities and concentrating only on physical things.

### *Different Types of Disability*

Each participant has individual idea in type of disability. We identified four types of disabilities, illustrating participant statements about disability in term of physics, mental, age, illness and attitude.

The three respondents gave

statements that having differences in one part of your body could be categorized as disability. As R3 explained --"I mean I suppose having spectacles can be viewed as disability". R2 did not talk too much about the type of disability but she gave a statement that disabled people different from normal not only in the term of physics but also in mental, for her disability comprise the two type of disability. However, she also noted that age can be classified as one type of disability as R2 said that --" they old and disabled, they just sitting with no interaction, I guess we can say old people as the disabled one". As disability in term of mentally R3 viewed it in different types of mental impairment--" when I'm dealing with people who has mental impairment whatever whether it..it because they had head injury or because it's a child with learning difficulty..". Furthermore R3 point out that discrimination is a disability in term of attitude --" Discrimination in itself is a disability, impairment of attitude".

For R1 she put illness as part of being disabled, this statement could be connected to her condition because she is disabled herself, and she disagree with the campaign by disabled people to separate sickness and disability --" I've come across some disabled people who campaign for things like they want to separate sickness from disability which is bad for me because I've got a disabling illness. And I don't want people to say oh you just have a disability, you're not ill. Because I do have illness and I do take a lot of tablets and I have side effects and it's sort of belittling that part of me".

Every respondent gave different concepts of types of disability. However, there is some type of disability that one participant did mention but others didn't. Nevertheless, they put the type of disability based on their personal encountering or

undergoing with disability.

#### *Viewed Toward Disability*

How people viewed the handicapped person can be assessed in two point of view, negative behavior and positive behavior. Negative view can be categorized hostile, suspicious, nuisance and embarrassed, while positive view can be classified as compassionate and friendly.

The respondents view the negative view as being treated with unfriendly manner, --" once, like when, coz medical students have white coats and we have badges, umm I was in the canteen in the () with this other medical student and this security guard or porter or something just came and said "are you going to be a doctor? You look like you need help yourself" (R1). R1 is a medical student who is disabled, but her disability doesn't look obvious she is not paralyzed but she has weaknesses in her muscle. Another experience that she felt about sarcasm is when she used an elevator and because she young and also a medical student people judge her as a lazy medical student without knowing that she has disability. --"there was an old man in the lift, the lift wasn't full at all, so it wasn't like I was taking up extra space or anything...and I heard him tell someone..."I don't like how these new generation of doctors, they really cheeky and I don't like how they take everything and they're so lazy..." And I thought why did they say that when I didn't even affect them in any way?" People tend to treat them in insignificant way "people who don't have respect for people generally treat human beings quite insignificant" (R2).

For R2 people think that disabled people is nuisance, --" I think it was being at waist height to everyone else and not being able to see what I wanted and being treated as though I didn't exist and if I was actually acknowledged it was more that I was a

nuisance factor than anything else”.

Suspicious towards disabled people could arise if people are not aware with their condition, they jump to the conclusion that they using the facility for their own benefit, whether in term of using public facilities or services. “ *I went to the admin person in the medical school whos supposed to deal with everything like exams and stuff, and she was really horrible. And she even suggested, even though I had a letter from my consultant about my illness and my doctor about everything, saying why I couldn't do stuff, then she just looked around, she was like “ You want some extra time in your exams, I wonder if really need that or you just want it”* (R1).

People started to make a distance and felt embarrass towards disable. Their stop hanging around with you “ *I found that there were some people who seemed like they were embarrassed, coz at the beginning I had walking stick and stuff and I had to wear trainers and couldn't have a normal shoes and I had to sit... the lecture theater had stairs so I had to sit kinda in the back and there were this individuals who just felt that it wasn't cool. And they stopped hanging around with you or didn't really want to hang around to chat... They equate coolness with looking good and looking normal and it would be embarrassing if someone weird with sticks and everyone would hate them coz they would link them to me or something”* (R1).

Never in the state of being handicapped would give a different view towards disability. R2 mostly give the positive view towards the disabled “ *Because we are at better advantage so we should even treat them with more respect, maybe we shouldn't take those things for granted and perhaps not make fun of them for what they going through”*. By understanding their position it's easier to understand what the disabled felt “ *I already*

*had a very sort of enabling attitude I suppose to the disability, but it certainly gave me more of an insight into what the psychological effects would be like”* (R3).

Friendly manner according R1 is in form of information. She came across with one of medical student in her placement who told her about where she can get help regarding to her condition “ *I was in my first placement with this medical guy students, and he told me about... I think one of them had relatives who had like disability benefits or something and he told me stuff like that and how you can get transport, help with transport and things.... He told me about the disability officer in the university. He's like you have to go there because they're there. They're supposed to help you and you know there's loads of fake people out there so why should a real person not go”*. For R2 as a able bodied people we should have sympathize for the disabled “ *... We all are at better advantage so we should even treat them with more respect, .... we shouldn't take those things for granted and perhaps not making fun of them for what they going through”*

#### *Reason Behind People Behavior*

All participants talk about many differences in the reason behind people behavior towards disability. Two from the three participant mentioned that situation is the main reason of people behavior as in hectic situation such as in the ER or in the celebration situation, people would develop a single minded mind and you don't have time to explain, as R1 say “ *I think the ER placement, that happened lots, but that's because it's really busy there, and it was a place where there could be random people, different nurses each day and different auxiliaries and no time to explain it cause there were loads of patients around and relatives around and there's no time to explain about yourself when they're really sick”*. R2 describe that is reasonable enough

if the disabled had to work harder than normal people because that is the situation “What do I think about them have to work harder, I think sometime it just that's just the way it goes some people just luckier than another”. Another situation that contribute to people behavior in situation is stress, if people under stress would think that why others has special treatment while I don't, and jealousy will arise as R1 says “ So mainly they were sort of feeling stressed for themselves. And when they see someone who's not old or not physically obviously deformed that they can tell, or not in a wheelchair then they feel that this person is the same as themselves, but is having an easy way out”.

Unaware of one's condition could subject to being treated with unpleasant manner, as R1 described what happen to her friend who is having a difficulty to walk and wants to use the parking lot for the disabled “ ...she just got out of her car and she was just locking it, so she was standing and they couldn't see how she walked. And this woman came to her, a woman who wasn't wanting to use the disabled space..... and said “ oay, do you think you should park here? Show me your badge” or something...”.

Other respondents say nothing but awareness. Experience to work with the disabled or have come across with it, will develop well behaved, as R1 says “ They (people in the university) seemed like they'd had some training or they obviously seen loads of different people. So they never questioned things like are you really sick?...they knew that you could look normal and be classified as disabled. So they weren't questioning, they weren't suspicious....they were treating you like normal”.

Environment also effect how the disabled treated, if they in their own environment they would be treated with

respect, as R3 says “ I think when they're in their own environment i.e. in their own workplace, their own home, their own social circle..... I appears to be good I can't speak for them all, but it appears to be good whether actually in general place... things like that I think it can be quite intimidating and quite frightening”. Environment for R1 is her friend; her close friend would treat her with respect.

#### *Discrimination*

There are four main subjects in discrimination that the participant mentioned namely discrimination in job, education, public facility and services. Public facility that proposed here can be as parking lot, shops and disabled sign, and discrimination in term of facility means not all facilities is disabled friendly although they have put the disabled sign in it, R3 gave example such as unfriendly elevator or door and there is some public facility that is friendly for one particular disability but not for others like R1 describe “ And let's say a building, some buildings say oh yes we have adapted for disabilities and basically all that means is they have a ramp, but their doors quite heavy. So there could be a person in a wheelchair who has strong arms, they'll be fine. But someone like me who's got weak arms and legs you know, I can walk up the ramp but I can't get into the door. And it's sort like you put the world disabled and you passed the test of the disability discrimination thing”.

For job R2 explain that employers tend not to hire disabled people for they lack of incompetency, while for R1 her study right now is related to her job to become a doctor and her opinion also give support to R2 view, R1 says “ ..things just happen the way there are and you have to fit into them. And if you don't then you should just know that oh this is rubbish and why am I trying to be a doctor. This is what doctors are they walk and they do things and patients are

*theones, you know who need treatment so why you coming and you know, sort of asking for all these things yourself and being burden yourself, when you should actually helping. Maybe do another job where you don't need so much changing for yourself".* She also mentioned that the medical school never comes across with the disabled student before. R3 respond that the disabled children should go to mainstream school because although they physically disabled but they often quite bright.

For public services whether is from government or private, the discrimination could happen because people don't know, therefore they unable to change things, and this is where governments should take a part as R2 describe *"...like in the small shops where there isn't any access and to enable access would cost more than the small shops owner could afford. And I think in cases like that you know it should be funded by other people and I know we depend in the government a big deal in order to create totally disabled friendly country that's what we need to do"*. For R1 she thought that the government has a cleaner's service for disabled people but it doesn't. And she wish the medical school also has a disability or welfare officer just like the University has, because for her the disability officer has done her a great deal not like in the medical school admin who suspicious at her and treated her unfriendly.

### Conclusion

Understanding students attitudes towards disabilities can be done by using the qualitative technique, they behavior may developed from they former encounter with the disabled. Factor that underpinning they viewed included environment, situation, awareness and experience.

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