Attitudes Regarding Interpersonal Relationships with Persons with Mental Retardation


Article Summary

Despite numerous legislative actions dating back to the 1960s, negative stereotypes of individuals with disabilities still persist. Research has shown that a hierarchy exists with those with mental retardation and mental illness being the least likely to be socially accepted by the general population of persons without disabilities. Social rejection and desirable social distance have obvious implications for full employment and inclusion of individuals with disabilities into all aspects of the competitive workplace. The purpose of this study was to answer the following questions:

1. Are there differences between attitudes of a non-disabled group regarding friendship and marriage with persons with mental illness and mental retardation compared to other disability populations?
2. Do gender, education on disability issues, and current friendships with persons with disabilities impact perceived knowledge of and desired distance from persons with mental illness by a non-disabled group?
3. Do gender, education on disability issues, and current friendships with persons with disabilities impact perceived knowledge of and desired social distance from persons with mental retardation by a non-disabled group?

Knowledge and Social Distance Scales regarding 13 disabilities were administered to 218 undergraduate psychology students. The participants also completed demographic questionnaires that included information about friendships with individuals with disabilities, knowledge about the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), and previous coursework on disability issues.

Approximately 65% of the subjects indicated that they had no friends with disabilities, but 60% indicated a willingness to have a friendship with someone with a disability. However, the subjects listed individuals with mental illness (71.6%) and mental retardation (68.8%) as the least desirable for friendship among the 13 categories of disabilities. This compared to 98.6% who reported that they would be friends with someone with either Arthritis or Diabetes, the most highly-ranked of the 13 categories.

The authors suggest that the results of this study might have implications regarding the biases of rehabilitation counselors after pointing out the possible disparities between university undergraduates and the general population. However, regardless of their own possible feelings, counselors need to address possible public perceptions as they work with consumers with mental illness and mental retardation.

Although not stated specifically in this study, counselors need to understand and address the issues of knowledge and social distance as they attempt to fully integrate employees with mental illness and mental retardation into employment settings composed primarily of non-disabled supervisors and co-workers.