

Acknowledgment of Handicap as a Tactic in Social Interaction

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Nonhandicapped people often report discomfort and uncertainty when interacting with handicapped individuals. The three studies reported here investigated a possible tactic that handicapped people could use to reduce a fellow interactant's discomfort and uncertainty. Nonhandicapped subjects watched two videotapes of handicapped individuals being interviewed. Each subject then chose the handicapped person with whom he would prefer to work on a cooperative task. Results of all three studies supported the hypothesis that a handicapped person acknowledging his handicap will be preferred to a handicapped person who does not acknowledge his handicap. In Study 1, subjects significantly preferred a handicapped person who acknowledged his handicap to a handicapped person who did not disclose anything personal. In Study 2, subjects significantly preferred an acknowledging person over one who made a personal disclosure other than about his handicap. In Study 3, subjects preferred the individual acknowledging a handicap over one who disclosed something else personal even when the acknowledging individual was clearly nervous about doing so. These results suggest that acknowledging the handicap may be a promising tactic.

Experimental evidence has shown that physical handicaps can negatively affect personal encounters. Nonhandicapped individuals often report discomfort and uncertainty when interacting with handicapped individuals (Davis, 1961; Kleck, Orto, & Hastorf, 1966), and these subjective reports have been corroborated by an objective measure of emotional arousal (Kleck et al., 1966). Further, when interacting with the handicapped, nonhandicapped individuals exhibit less variability in their behavior, express opinions less representative of their actual beliefs, gesture less, and even end the interaction sooner than they do when interacting with a nonhandi-

capped individual (Kleck, 1968; Kleck et al., 1966). Finally, it has been shown that this tension and discomfort is felt by the handicapped individual on the "other side" of the interaction as well (Comer & Piliavin, 1972).

There are several plausible explanations for the discomforting effect physically handicapped individuals have upon the nonhandicapped. First, nonhandicapped individuals may feel discomfort because the mere presence of a handicapped person forces upon them the realization that they, too, are vulnerable to similar disabilities (Novak & Lerner, 1968). There may also be a fear that the stigma accorded to handicapped individuals is contagious, that being seen with the stigmatized is "discrediting" by association (Goffman, 1963).

Yet another source of the discomforting effect handicapped individuals have on the nonhandicapped may stem from the nonhandicapped individual's uncertainty as to what kind of behavior is expected and appropriate. There are strong societal norms to treat the handicapped kindly and carefully, but there are equally strong norms to treat

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them just like anyone else (Kleck et al., 1966) so as not to appear condescending. Similarly, nonhandicapped individuals may find themselves in conflict over a desire to explore the handicap because it constitutes a novel stimulus and a duty to adhere to strong norms against staring at another person (Langer, Fiske, Taylor, & Chanowitz, 1976). Finally, feelings of discomfort may arise in the presence of a handicapped individual because a deformity is unsightly. Closely related to this is the notion that discomfort arises because the deformity violates our expectations of what a "whole" person should look like (Richardson, 1976).

Whatever the cause of the discomfort felt by nonhandicapped individuals in the presence of the handicapped, it is clear that it makes the physically handicapped the socially handicapped as well. Since the handicapped do not receive accurate feedback concerning the appropriateness of their own behavior or experience the normal behaviors of others, (Hastorf, Northcraft, & Picciotto, 1979) it is likely that their learning of rules about social interactions and their development of sensitivity to others is impaired. In addition, Kleck (1969) has found that although the norms to be kind to the handicapped may result in positive impressions of them in initial encounters, this positive first impression usually attenuates with further interaction. This finding is hardly surprising in view of the impaired social skills development of the handicapped mentioned above. Thus, because of the way the nonhandicapped react to a physical handicap, the handicapped individual may be led to the attribution: "I am the type of person who causes others to feel uncomfortable, and am therefore avoided. When people *do* get to know me, they appear to like me less the better they get to know me." The negative implications for self-concept are not difficult to imagine.

Thus, where the handicapped can be successful in overcoming physical and legal barriers, psychosocial barriers confronting them may prevent their entry into the mainstream of society. The present series of investigations sought to determine if there are tactics the handicapped might employ to overcome these psychosocial barriers.

The discomfort of the nonhandicapped in interactions with the handicapped seems to be a major cause of the psychosocial barriers faced by the handicapped. It therefore seems reasonable that any tactic that reduces this discomfort would facilitate interactions between the handicapped and nonhandicapped. One such tactic may be acknowledging the handicap. Just as one may find it disarming when a relatively short individual introduces himself with the phrase "You may have noticed I'm a little tall for a leprechaun," so might it serve to reduce interactional tension when a handicapped individual conversationally acknowledges his or her handicap. This would seem especially true if the acknowledgment serves the purpose of signaling that the handicap is *not* an interactional obstacle, mention of which or involvement with which must be carefully circumnavigated.

The only study that has investigated the tactic of acknowledging the handicap found that it had no impact on the behavior of nonhandicapped individuals or their ratings of handicapped people (Farina, Sherman, & Allen, 1968). There are, however, circumstances that cast doubts on the validity of this conclusion. The study used male subjects, and its findings are therefore equally consistent with the hypothesis of no relationship between disclosure and liking for nonhandicapped males. Furthermore, the handicapped acknowledgment in the Farina et al. study may not have been effective because it did not reduce the significance of the handicap as a topic of suppressed concern. For acknowledgment of the handicap to be an effective tactic, it may be necessary for the handicapped person to mention it in a manner that conveys that he or she is not overly sensitive about it, that it is all right if the handicap comes up in conversation. The confederate in the Farina et al. study merely mentioned that his handicap caused inconveniences and was the result of a car accident. Such a statement, rather than implying that the handicap is an acceptable topic of conversation, may indicate that the topic has been opened *and closed*.

The present series of investigations explored the tactic of acknowledging the handicap in interaction between handicapped and nonhandicapped individuals. Three studies

were conducted to test the hypothesis that nonhandicapped people would prefer to interact with handicapped individuals who acknowledged their handicap in a manner that showed that they were not overly sensitive about it. In each study, nonhandicapped subjects watched two videotapes, each of a handicapped person in a wheelchair being interviewed. All subjects were told they would interact later with one of the handicapped persons they had viewed. After each interview, subjects gave their impressions of the person they had just seen, and after seeing both interviews, subjects chose the handicapped person with whom they wanted to interact.

Experiment 1

This first study investigated whether nonhandicapped subjects prefer a handicapped confederate who acknowledges his handicap over another who does not. It was hypothesized that nonhandicapped subjects would feel more at ease with the acknowledging confederate and would therefore have more favorable impressions of him and choose to interact with him.

Method

Subjects. Fifty-three male and female students at Stanford University served as subjects. Most were first-year students enrolled in the introductory psychology course. Subjects in the course participated for course credit; others participated for money. Only the data of 48 subjects were included in the analysis. Two subjects declined to state a preference between confederates, 2 subjects suspected that the interviews were staged, and 1 subject had met one of the confederates beforehand. The data of these 5 subjects were omitted from the sample.

Procedure. Subjects were told that the experiment was investigating the effects of seeing and hearing a paraplegic individual (as compared to only reading about him) on future interactions with him. Subjects were informed that the two paraplegics working on the project were extremely busy, and that their schedules were unpredictable. For these reasons, it was explained, they would be shown videotapes of the two paraplegics during this first session and would then return at a later date to perform a simple task with one of them. This cover story provided an opportunity to ask subjects their impressions of the confederates and preferences for a partner without arousing suspicion.

Two interviews of approximately 3½ minutes duration each were taped for four apparent paraplegic confederates. The four tapes of two confederates (Mathew and Peter) were selected for use in the experiment because pretests showed that they were most closely matched on attractiveness and were liked substantially more than the other two confederates. One of the confederates (Mathew) was not actually a paraplegic. His tapes were nevertheless used because pretests confirmed that subjects could not detect which of the four confederates was not a true paraplegic.

The interviews were carefully rehearsed to differ only in whether the interviewee acknowledged his handicap. In all interviews, the confederate told of his happy childhood, good relationship with his parents, part-time work, and plans to take a year off from school. Acknowledgment and nonacknowledgment interviews differed in how the confederate responded to the question, "How do you feel about yourself and your college experience up to this point?" In the acknowledgment interview, the confederate spoke of the problems of being in a wheelchair but said that he had learned to accept the inconveniences. He mentioned that he realized people were afraid to talk about his handicap, but he encouraged them to ask questions, anyway; only in this way could his handicap be gotten out of the way so that people could really get to know him. In the nonacknowledgment interview, the confederate responded that college life was agreeable, that school work kept him rather busy, and that he had recently begun to play clarinet in the school orchestra. Effects of confederate viewed, sex of subject, and order of presentation of the confederates and interview conditions were counterbalanced.

After watching the first interview, subjects rated the handicapped interviewee on an impression scale and answered four questions about him. The impression scale consisted of nine polar adjective pairs separated by a 7-point scale. The adjective pairs were pleasant-unpleasant, positive-negative, excitable-calm, active-passive, strong-weak, tough-fragile, likable-unlikable, well adjusted-poorly adjusted, and hardworking-lazy. Two of the four questions asked how the subject thought the handicapped interviewee would act in certain situations, and two asked how the subject would act in certain situations with the handicapped interviewee. After the second interview, subjects rated the second confederate in the same manner.

Following the second rating, subjects also chose the handicapped person with whom they would prefer to work in the second session. Subjects were told that an effort would be made to give them the partner they chose. Although the experimental situation of choosing between two handicapped people may at first glance seem a strange one, subjects did not seem to consider the situation odd. Now that handicapped people are more in the news, this type of situation is apparently viewed as quite plausible. When the second questionnaire was completed, the experimenter asked each subject to explain the rea-

sons for his or her choice. The experimenter then explained the true purpose of the experiment and answered any questions the subject had.

Results and Discussion

Significantly more subjects (71%) chose to work with the confederate who acknowledged his handicap than with the nonacknowledging confederate, $\chi^2(1) = 7.52$, $p < .01$. Analyses of the effects of confederate viewed, sex of subject, and order of presentation of the confederates and interview conditions did not reveal any significant differences in which confederate was preferred. Furthermore, 79% of the subjects who chose the acknowledging confederate reported that the acknowledgment was an important factor in their decision. Clearly the acknowledgment exerted a major influence on working partner preference.¹

Sign tests revealed that of the four questions asked each subject about the confederates, only the question "Do you think you would feel uncomfortable during a conversation with the interviewee and your friends, if someone began talking about a touch football game?" successfully distinguished between acknowledging and nonacknowledging confederates, $p < .05$. This suggests that subjects chose to work with the acknowledging confederate because they anticipated feeling more comfortable in his presence.

Analysis of the polar adjectives revealed that the acknowledging confederate was rated more favorably on the evaluative and potency factors and was perceived as more likable and better adjusted, smallest $t(47) = 2.02$, $p < .05$. Subject ratings of the handicapped confederates thus also support the hypothesis that acknowledging the handicap is an effective tactic for increasing working-partner preference. Moreover, the subjects' ratings suggest that the acknowledging tactic may be successful because it introduces the handicapped person as someone who is not overly sensitive about his handicap.

Experiment 2

The results of Experiment 1 suggest that acknowledging the handicap is an effective

tactic in handicapped/nonhandicapped interaction because acknowledgment reduces discomfort of the nonhandicapped interactant. However, the findings of the first study do not rule out the possibility that the effectiveness of acknowledgment arises because the acknowledgment reveals personal information, thereby increasing intimacy and liking (Jourard, 1959; Worthy, Gary, & Kahn, 1969). A second study therefore compared the preferences of nonhandicapped subjects who had watched a handicapped confederate who acknowledged his handicap and another who disclosed something else personal but did not mention his handicap. Since it was hypothesized that it is acknowledgment of the handicap that helps nonhandicapped individuals feel less uncomfortable and influences their preferences, it was expected that subjects would still have more favorable impressions of, and choose to interact with, the confederate who acknowledged his handicap.

Method

Subjects. Fifty-five male and female students from the same subject population as in Experiment 1 participated in the second study. The data of 48 subjects were included in the analysis. Three subjects were suspicious that the interviews were staged, and 4 subjects had met or heard about one of the confederates. The data of these 7 subjects were omitted from the analysis.

Procedure. The procedure was identical to that of Experiment 1, except that the two interviews that subjects watched featured a confederate who acknowledged his handicap and one who made a personal disclosure unrelated to his handicap. This personal disclosure interview replaced the nonacknowledgment interview of the first experiment.

In the personal disclosure interview, the confederate stated that school was going well and that he had several good friends but that recently he and his girlfriend of 8 months had been having problems. He then described their uncertainty about next year and the "weird religious trip" his girlfriend's mother was "laying on her." He finished the interview by saying that he hoped it all worked out. Although there are other types of disclosures that might have

¹ A similar finding has since been reported. An unpublished paper by Bazakas (Bazakas, Note 1) reports that acknowledgment of the handicap results in more favorable reactions toward a handicapped confederate only when he presents himself as a "coping" person.

been used, this type of disclosure had the advantage of being very revealing. Whether other types of disclosures might have different effects on preferences for the handicapped is a question that merits further exploration.

The dependent measures were essentially the same as those used in Experiment 1. One of the adjective pairs for the activity factor (excitable-calm) was replaced by fast-slow, and three more polar adjective pairs were added (warm-cold, considerate-inconsiderate, and friendly-unfriendly). *Fast-slow* replaced *excitable-calm* because the two adjective pairs comprising the activity factor were insignificantly correlated in the first experiment ($r = .04$).

Results and Discussion

As predicted, subjects preferred the confederate who acknowledged his handicap over the one who made a personal disclosure unrelated to his handicap, $\chi^2(1) = 13.02$, $p < .001$. Fully 77% of subjects chose to work with the confederate acknowledging a handicap.

As in Experiment 1 there were no preference effects due to confederate viewed, sex of subject, or order of presentation of the confederates and interview conditions.

As a manipulation check of personal disclosure, the personal disclosure interviews from Experiment 2 and the nondisclosure interviews from Experiment 1 were shown to 32 additional subjects who rated the interviews on 17 polar adjective pairs. Two of these adjective pairs were combined into a "disclosing" measure. The scales were open-closed and secretive-revealing. A t test of these ratings revealed that there was a tendency to see the personal disclosure confederate as more disclosing, $t(31) = 1.67$, $p < .11$. Although the personal disclosure interview may have differed from the nondisclosure interview on other dimensions, this notion cannot be properly tested. There is no way to distinguish whether other differences would be due to the disclosure itself or to the specific type of disclosure used.

As in Experiment 1, belief in the importance of the handicap acknowledgment in determining subjects' preferences for partner is substantiated by the reports of subjects who chose to work with the confederate who acknowledged his handicap. Eighty-two percent of the subjects choosing the acknowledged

ing confederate stated that handicap acknowledgment was an important factor in the decision.

A sign test on the question "Would you be more comfortable" found that subjects thought they would be significantly more comfortable with the acknowledging confederate, $p < .05$. Again, this suggests that choice of partner may be related to how comfortable acknowledgment of the handicap makes the nonhandicapped individual feel. Analyses of the polar adjectives revealed that the confederate acknowledging the handicap was rated more favorably on the evaluative factor and was perceived as both better adjusted and more friendly, smallest $t(47) = 2.19$, $p < .05$.

The results of Experiment 2 again support the hypothesis that acknowledgment of the handicap (and not just the volunteering of something personal) is an effective tactic in increasing partner preference. Further, the findings of this second study are consistent with the hypothesis that the acknowledgment tactic is effective because it helps the handicapped individual appear less sensitive about his handicap, thereby making those who interact with him more comfortable.

Experiment 3

It may be difficult, at least for some handicapped individuals, to encourage the nonhandicapped to ask questions about their handicap. Handicapped individuals are, in fact, often sensitive about their handicaps and will probably not be able to use the tactic of acknowledging their handicap without showing nervousness and apprehension. Before recommending a tactic, it is important to know something of its limits. This third study explored the consequences for a handicapped individual of showing signs of tension and anxiety while acknowledging the handicap.

It was hypothesized that nonverbally communicated nervousness would cast a different interpretation upon the confederate's acknowledgment of the handicap. Specifically, it was hypothesized that this nervousness would lead the subject to feel that it was *not* acceptable to talk about the handicap. The

characteristic response to discrepant information is to rely more on the nonverbal than the verbal information (Mehrabian, 1971). Consequently, subjects might feel even more uncomfortable around a handicapped person who (nonverbally) showed discomfort about being handicapped while verbally insisting otherwise. It was therefore predicted that the findings of the first two experiments would be reversed: that subjects would have more favorable impressions of, and choose to interact with, a confederate who disclosed something personal but neither mentioned the handicap nor showed signs of nervousness while being personal.

Method

Subjects. Fifty-two male and female students from the same subject population as in Experiments 1 and 2 participated in the study. The data of 48 subjects were included in the analysis. Three subjects had met or heard about one of the confederates, and 1 subject declined to state a preference between confederates. The data from these 4 subjects were omitted from the sample.

Procedure. The procedure was virtually identical to that of Experiment 2, except that a "nervous" acknowledgment of handicap replaced the interview acknowledging the handicap of the second experiment. The verbal text of the interviews remained unchanged. However, during most of the handicap acknowledgment in the nervous condition, the confederate attempted to display tension by avoiding eye contact, running his hand through his hair, and clasping his hands tightly together. The other interview, as in Experiment 2, was of a confederate who made a personal disclosure. In this interview, the confederate neither mentioned his handicap nor showed signs of nervousness. The dependent measures were the same as in Experiment 2.

Results and Discussion

Contrary to predictions, subjects tended to prefer the confederate who acknowledged his handicap, $\chi^2(1) = 3.52$, $p < .07$, even when he was nervous about doing so. Sixty-five percent of subjects chose to work with this confederate.

An analysis of the effects of confederate viewed, sex of subject, and order of presentation of the confederates and interview conditions revealed that the order of presentation of the interview condition significantly affected confederate preferences, $\chi^2(1) = 5.83$,

$p < .02$. That is, the confederate who was nervous while acknowledging his handicap was preferred significantly more often when he was seen first than when he was seen second. Since order of presentation of the interview condition did not affect confederate preferences in the first two studies, this finding is difficult to explain. Nevertheless, it remains striking that although the confederate who acknowledged his handicap was clearly nervous about doing so, he was still preferred.

As a manipulation check on perceived nervousness, the nervous acknowledgment of handicap and personal disclosure interviews were shown to 32 additional subjects who rated each interviewee on 17 polar adjectives. Three of the adjective pairs were combined into a "nervousness" measure. The scales were at ease-nervous, relaxed-tense, and comfortable-uncomfortable. A *t* test of these ratings revealed that the nervous handicap acknowledgment interview was seen as significantly more nervous than the personal disclosure interview, $t(31) = 2.32$, $p < .05$. There were no differences in perceived nervousness of the confederate who acknowledged a handicap as a function of whether he was seen first or second.

Even though the confederate was perceived as nervous while acknowledging his handicap, 74% of subjects choosing the acknowledging confederate identified the acknowledgment of handicap as an important factor in their decision, and 19% of subjects who chose the nervous confederate did so despite acknowledging that the confederate clearly was not comfortable with his own handicap. Apparently, then, some subjects may have chosen the nervous confederate because he was *trying* to cope with his handicap.

Subjects realized that they would be just as uncomfortable around the confederate who acknowledged a handicap as around the confederate who only made a personal disclosure; more than half of the subjects reported that they would be uncomfortable around the confederate who acknowledged his handicap. Finally, nervousness while acknowledging did have a negative effect, as 76% of subjects who rejected the nervous, acknowledging confederate stated that they

rejected him because he did not seem adjusted to his handicap.

The nervous confederate was perceived to be more passive, $t(47) = 2.12$, $p < .05$. Comparison of no other polar adjective pair ratings attained significance. However, the variance of the ratings on 10 of the 12 adjective pairs was larger when subjects were rating the nervous, acknowledging confederate. A check on the variance of subject ratings in the first two experiments revealed that this pattern of variance in the third experiment was a significant reversal of the pattern in the first two studies, $\chi^2(2) = 38.6$, $p < .001$. One interpretation of these results is that in the first two experiments, subjects were more certain how to act with the confederate acknowledging a handicap because his communication in acknowledging made it clear what behavior was appropriate. Impressions of subjects were therefore relatively uniform. In contrast, the message of the acknowledgment of handicap in the third experiment was ambiguous. While verbally communicating an openness about his handicap, the nervous confederate was clearly betraying an anxiousness about the topic nonverbally. As a result, impressions of subjects were uncertain and thereby varied.

This interpretation is consistent with the ambivalence hypothesis suggested by Katz and his colleagues (Katz, Glass, & Cohen, 1973; Katz, Glass, Lucido, & Farber, 1977). They point out that ambivalence creates a tendency toward behavioral instability. As a result, any positive information amplifies favorable attitudes, and similarly, any negative information amplifies unfavorable attitudes. Our subjects, like most nonhandicapped individuals, probably have ambivalent (approach/avoidance conflicted) attitudes toward the handicapped. Acknowledgment of the handicap in the first two experiments was positive information because it reduced discomfort. Therefore, it amplified favorable impressions of the acknowledging confederates. Acknowledgment of the handicap in the third experiment contained both positive information (verbally) and negative information (nonverbally). Therefore, it amplified either favorable or unfavorable impressions, depending on which source of com-

munication was more salient for each subject. This possibility of amplification of impressions in either direction accounts for the increased variance found in ratings of the acknowledging confederate in Experiment 3; the probable high salience of his nervousness accounts for the reduced effectiveness of the acknowledging tactic.

General Discussion

The findings of these three experiments have important implications for social policy; the tactic of acknowledging a handicap seems very promising. In all three studies, the confederate who acknowledged his handicap was preferred to the other handicapped confederate. This finding was true even if the other confederate made a personal disclosure.

In contrast to the results of investigations on personal disclosure (Ehrlich & Graeven, 1971; Jourard & Landsman, 1960), acknowledgment of the handicap was effective even though males were doing the acknowledging. Perhaps the macho stereotype of males, which views *disclosure* as weak and effeminate, is not a barrier to the acknowledging tactic.

It is noteworthy that the acknowledging confederate was still slightly more preferred even when he was clearly nervous about the acknowledgment. This suggests that handicapped people may use the tactic effectively even before they are well adjusted to their handicap. By acknowledging their handicap, handicapped individuals can reduce the discomfort and uncertainty of the nonhandicapped and thereby increase their opportunities for social interaction and its accompanying benefits. This increased opportunity for social interaction can then itself help promote smoother adjustment to the handicap.

Further research is needed, however, to explore the impact of the acknowledgment tactic. It would be useful to know, for instance, if the acknowledgment tactic attenuates the biased, inhibited behavior that the nonhandicapped usually demonstrate in the presence of handicapped individuals. The behavior of nonhandicapped individuals should be measured in interactions with handicapped individuals employing the acknowl-

edgment tactic. Studies of this kind will ultimately determine the utility of acknowledging the handicap.

Reference Note

1. Bazakas, R. *The interpersonal impact of coping, dependency, and denial: Self-presentations by the disabled*. Unpublished manuscript, Department of Educational Psychology, New York University, 1978.

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