Positive Aspects of Disability Among College Students

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Introduction

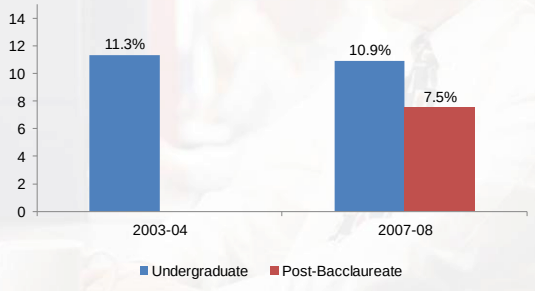
- Personal Interest in this Topic
- Previous Work
- Call for Work in this Area
  - "Positive Psychology's keynote contribution to the study of disability and rehabilitation entails directing researchers and practitioners to the aim of building, reinforcing and extending disabled individuals' strengths and capacities in order to optimize their functioning in all areas of life, and thereby promote wellness" (Naidoo, 2006, p. 595).

Real-Life Example

- Marla Runyan, Diversity Conference, The College at Brockport, 9-22-11
  - "My other perception of my blindness is that it has given me many gifts. It has taught me how to be incredibly perseverant, in fact pretty darn stubborn to be honest, very determined. And, since it happened to me as a child, I think it contributed to the adult I am today. Would I have been an Olympic athlete if I did not have the values of perseverance and determination, and the 'I can do it' attitude? I don't know. To be honest, I don't know who I would be today if it weren't for the gifts that my blindness has given me. And if someone were to say, 'Marla, they can cure you. They can now fix your vision and you can see 20/20.' Wow, what an amazing, miraculous thing that would be, and I'm not saying I would turn it down entirely, but I would take a pause, because I wouldn't go there without first an incredible amount of consideration and gratitude for what this condition has taught me and for the person it has made me become."

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3nSTRstS7L0#t=1139

National Center for Education Statistics, U.S. Department of Education



Statistics on Undergraduate Students with Disabilities 2003-04

- Of the 11.3% who reported a disability:

Type of Disability	Percentage
Orthopedic Disability	25.4%
Mental Illness/Depression	21.9%
Health Impairments/Problems	17.3%
Attention Deficit Disorder	11.0%
Specific Learning Disability	7.5%
Hearing Impairment	5.0%
Visual Impairment	3.8%
Speech Impairment	0.4%
Other	7.8%

Background

- The number of students with disabilities (SWD) at colleges and universities in the United States has increased significantly in recent years (Hall & Belch, 2000; Hitchings, Retish, & Horvath, 2005; Stodden, Whelley, Chang, & Harding, 2001).
- These students may encounter significant barriers that can have a profound impact on their college experience (Madaus & Shaw, 2004; Stodden et al., 2001).

Background

- Studies suggest that disabilities may have positive implications (Salick & Auerbach, 2006; Shessel & Reiff, 1999; Weitzner, Surca, Wiese, Dion, Roussos, Renwick, & Yoshida, 2011).
  - "Nearly all participants also spoke of finding a personal meaning in their disability, which allowed them to make sense of their new circumstances and feel a sense of purpose" (Salick & Auerbach, 2006, p. 1031).
  - Disability as "a catalyst for self-discovery and self-improvement" and "many participants spoke of using their disability positively to help other individuals living with disabilities" (Weitzner, et al., 2011, p. 1461).
- Little is known about positive aspects of disability among college students.

Method/Participants

- Qualitative Study
- In-Depth Interviews
- 12 undergraduate students
  - 8.3% Freshman (n=1)
  - 50% Juniors (n = 6)
  - 41.7% Seniors (n=5)
- Mean age = 24.75 years

Analysis Procedure

- Interview data was transcribed and analyzed as outlined by Seidman (2006)
- Transcripts were reviewed and passages of interest were marked
- Marked passages were reviewed and grouped under tentative categories based on thematic content
- Categories were reviewed and modified as necessary to reflect the themes that emerged from the interview data

Results

Five distinct themes emerged from analysis of the interview transcripts:

1) **Personal Growth and Self-Acceptance** (50%; n = 6)
2) **Empathy/Understanding** (41.6%; n = 5)
3) **Advocacy and Teaching Others** (41.6%; n = 5)
4) **Unique Relationship Experiences and Opportunities** (41.6%; n = 5)
5) **Drive/Determination/Perseverance** (33.3%; n = 4)

Personal Growth and Self-Acceptance (n = 6)

- SWD acknowledged the impact of their disabilities and expressed that they "appreciate life a little more."
  - I'd probably say self-growth. (Interview 2)
  - Other than that, what I said before about perspective, about my disability giving me perspective. I think that students without any disabilities at all, depending on how they're brought up, they may not have that perspective because they may never have had to [think] about how this could be different for other people based on how their brain works or how their body works. (Interview 11)
  - I would say it made me appreciate life a little more. Yeah. It definitely has. I will say that's probably the best thing. (Interview 12)

Empathy/Understanding (n = 5)

- Having an understanding of their own disabilities has allowed SWD to view others with more compassion and empathy
  - It's definitely given me a better understanding for other people who have disabilities … because I've kinda been there and I know what it's like. (Interview 4)
  - That's made a better person out of me. I'm more compassionate. I'm more empathic. I'm more sensitive to different subjects. I can relate to a lot of different people. I can place myself in other people's shoes because of the life I've had to live. (Interview 10)
  - It also gives one a little empathy with other people who have disabilities of just various sorts. If you have a disability that causes the way you think to be fundamentally different from other people's, that gives you perspective on what they're going through, regardless of what their disability is, really. (Interview 11)

Advocacy and Teaching Others (n = 5)

- Assume a role where they teach others about disabilities and advocate for disability rights
  - The biggest thing I can think of is I teach people. I love teaching people about me. (Interview 5)
  - I'm a peer specialist and since I have mental disabilities, I work with people with mental disabilities to help them advocate for themselves, help them be more independent. (Interview 6)
  - On the more positive note, I feel like my disability has made me a stronger person. It has made a better person out of me. I advocate for people. Not just myself. I get to share my unique experiences with other people and I get to open their minds and have them understanding life isn't just pretty flowers and a sunny day. (Interview 10)

Unique Relationship Experiences and Opportunities (n = 5)

- SWD reported unique opportunities in their social lives because of their disabilities, and have also forged close relationships with those whom they felt they could trust
  - There are a lot of experiences that I never would have had had I not had a disability. I never would have had the friends that I have …There's just a lot of—not privileges—I guess privileges that I never would have gotten to take advantage of. (Interview 3)
  - My disability really doesn't change my relation to the other students. It makes it positive cuz they—it shows I'm letting them in to tell them that I have this. It's more of a connection that I trust you to understand that I have a disability and I trust you enough that you're not gonna say anything bad about it. (Interview 8)
  - I've made such closer and better friends because of that. Having someone who I realized I could talk to and trust … I feel like I've made much closer friends because I have something that they respect me enough not to tell other people. There's definitely that for the social situation. (Interview 9)

Drive/Determination/Perseverance (n = 4)

- Having a disability has often required them to work harder than students without disabilities
  - To me, I think it's [the disability] almost had its benefits, because it drove me to push harder. (Interview 1)
  - Also, it's kind of put a competitive edge in me because I feel like I have to prove that, especially since I never took meds, that I have to prove that, listen, I can overcome this. (Interview 9)
  - It's also given me a push to want to do more and be more and help kids out like me because there's plenty of them out there. (Interview 10)

Activity

- Can you identify the potential positive aspects of these disabilities?
  - Bipolar Disorder
  - Down Syndrome
  - Hearing Impairment
  - Learning Disability

Some Examples

- http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7AhieQTIEfI
- http://www.ldonline.org/article/11727
- http://autism.about.com/od/postiveaspectsofautism/
- http://bipolar.answers.com/associated-features/the-positives-of-bipolar-disorder

Implications

- Individuals with disabilities are not always defined/confined by their disability
- Recognizing positive aspects of disability may be adaptive and promote resilience
  - "Finding a personal meaning seemed to help participants feel some control over an experience that was otherwise negative and uncontrollable" (Salick & Auerbach, 2006, p. 1031.
- Cautionary Note: positive stereotypes

Lingering Questions

- Does Type of Disability Matter?
- Acquired vs. Congenital
- Reframing?
  - Salickas & Auerbach (2006) suggested that in the "Choosing to Go On" stage, participants engaged in cognitive reframing
- Does Recognition of Positive Aspects Enhance Personal Adjustment?
  - Can we develop/encourage this?
  - Modeling
  - How do we know if someone is ready?

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Questions or Comments?