



Comparing Disabled and Non-Disabled Students' Reasons for Studying Psychology

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The participation of disabled students in UK psychology

- Proportion of UK first degree students disclosing a disability greater in psych student population (8.8%) than in undergraduate student body as a whole (7.15%) (Higher Education Statistics Agency, 2007/08)
- Greater proportion of undergrad psych students (0.63%) than all students (0.26%) disclose mental health problems;
 - Similar but stronger effect in postgrad students (1.12% vs 0.50%)
 - 0.06 in psych in 2005/06 compared to 0.1% in nursing & 0.08% in medicine
- Rates of disability & mental health problems have consistently increased since 1999/2000, & increasingly slightly faster in psych
- Unclear whether this is due to a greater rate of disclosure among psych students, or an actual greater proportion within psych
- Ratio of acceptances into undergrad psych for disabled students similar to that for non-disabled students (Turpin & Fensom, 2004)

Psychology & disability

- Students find psych course content to be self-relevant, & disabled students are no exception
- Psych curriculum may be particularly relevant to their life experiences
 - Eg, sensation & perception, health psych, neuro psych, cog psych, developmental psych, clinical psych
- Improving Provision for Disabled Psychology Students project (Craig & Zinkiewicz, 2010) found some disabled students reported being more motivated to study the subject, or to gain a greater insight into what is studied
- Murphy & Halgin (1995): in comparison to social psychologists, clinical psychologists reported stronger influence of personal problem resolution, & personal problems & troubled family, on choice of career path

The present study

- Aimed to see whether students with disabilities, particularly mental health difficulties (MHD), choose to study psychology for different reasons than students who have not experienced such difficulties
 - Also explored whether reasons for attending uni were different, though expected more differences to emerge in reasons for studying psych
- Also investigated extent to which individuals felt that their own experiences of disability and/or a MHD had influenced them in choosing to study psychology

Method



- Part of the IPDPS project, a UK Higher Education Funding Council funded project looking at experiences of disabled psych students in UK HE
- Recruited through invitational email with a questionnaire (in Word or .rtf) attached, sent to all psychology students at Uni of York, & IPDPS student email list
- Participants asked if were disabled (& in what way), & whether had any experience of mental health difficulties (as may not classify self as disabled; see Watson, 2002)

Participants

- 111 UK psychology students (14 males, 97 females):
 - 30 with mental health difficulties (either identified as disabled with a MHD, or did not identify as disabled but disclosed MHD)
 - 34 with other disabilities (identified as disabled but did not report MHD as primary issue)
 - 47 non-disabled (neither of the above)

Table 1
Demographic Variables by Disability Group

		Non-disabled	Disabled	MHD	Total
Enrolment	Full time	47	28	24	99
	Part time	0	5	5	10
	Total	47	33*	29*	109
Gender	Male	9	4	1	14
	Female	38	30	29	97
	Total	47	34	30	111
Year of study	1	12	9	16	37
	2	13	10	6	29
	3	22	12	7	41
	4	0	1	0	1
	Other	0	2	1	3
	Total	47	34	30	111
Course	Single honours	47	22	28	97
	Combined honours	0	2	1	3
	Joint honours	0	3	0	3
	Postgraduate	0	5	1	6
	Other	0	2	0	2
	Total	47	34	30	111
Age (years)	Range	18-22	19-46	18-38	18-46
	Mean (<i>SD</i>)	19.81 (1.06)	25.55 (7.90)	21.54 (4.53)	21.98 (5.46)
University	York	45	4	22	71
	Other	2	30	8	40
	Total	47	34	30	111

Note. *One participant did not respond.

Reasons for Attending University by Disability Group

Group	Stop gap	Means to an end	Personal	
			development	Total <i>n</i> reasons
Non-disabled (%)	66 (21%)	139 (44%)	111 (35%)	316
Disabled (%)	35 (15%)	102 (44%)	94 (41%)	231
MHD (%)	37 (16%)	108 (47%)	83 (36%)	228
Total <i>n</i> reasons	138 (18%)	349 (45%)	288 (37%)	775

- Very few differences between groups in reasons for attending uni
- Slightly less likely to be a ‘stop gap’ for disabled & MHD participants, slightly more likely to be for personal development in disabled students

Reasons for studying psychology

Reasons for Studying Psychology by Disability Group

<i>n</i> (%) of group choosing reason	Reason for studying psychology									
	Wanted to be psychologist	Seemed interesting	Useful for career	Recommended	Studied at college	Wanted to help people	Needed to do an undergrad degree	Better understand self/others	Friends also doing	Other
Non-disabled (%)	13 (28%)	42 (89%)	11 (23%)	3 (6%)	31 (66%)	21 (45%)	12 (26%)	11 (23%)	2 (4%)	0 (0%)
Disabled (%)	19 (56%)	25 (74%)	10 (29%)	3 (8%)	17 (50%)	16 (47%)	5 (15%)	13 (38%)	0 (0%)	3 (9%)
MHD (%)	18 (60%)	23 (77%)	10 (33%)	2 (7%)	16 (53%)	14 (47%)	4 (13%)	7 (23%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
χ^2 (2, <i>N</i> =111)	10.06**	3.75	0.95	0.19	2.37	0.05	2.34	2.59	-	-

Note. As participants could select several reasons, row percentages total more than 100%.

** $p = .007$

Only reason for studying psych which significantly differed across groups was 'wanted to be a psychologist' - nondisabled participants less likely to give this as a reason than disabled students or those with MHD

Extent to which disability affected choice to study psychology

- No difference between disabled & MHD group in extent to which their disability affected their choice to study psychology, ($t(2) = -0.50, p = .62$), two-tailed
 - *Ms (& SDs)*: 2.56 (1.24) for disabled group, 2.76 (1.56) for MHD group
 - Overall *M* of 2.63 (*SD* = 1.35), where 1 = *not at all*, 5 = *totally*
- Means for participants who gave ‘Wanted to be a psychologist’ as a reason for studying psychology, & those who did not, significantly differed, ($t(47) = -2.02, p = .049$), two-tailed
 - *Ms (& SDs)*: 2.93 (1.44) for those who wanted to be a psychologist, & 2.16 (1.07) for those who did not

Extent to which studying psych improved understanding of own disability

- Means for disabled group & MHD group members significantly differed, ($t(24) = 10.34, p = .0001$), one-tailed
 - *Ms (& SDs)*: 2.53 (1.46) for disabled group, & 3.50 (1.18) for MHD group

Discussion

- Decision to study seems to be a more focused & deliberative one for disabled students
- Those with experiences of disabilities & MHD seem to have a greater desire to become a psychologist
 - Due to higher age of disabled students? Though MHD group were significantly younger
- Only moderately felt that their condition influenced their decision to study psych, though stronger feelings reported in those wanting to be a psychologist

Discussion (cont)

- Why do participants with disabilities & mental health difficulties show greater desire to be a psychologist than do non-disabled participants, yet do not believe their disability or MHD plays a very important part in them choosing to study psychology?
- Perhaps wish to be identified as a (prospective) psychologist rather than as someone with a disability or MHD studying psych?
- Many of the participants with MHD did not consider themselves to be disabled, although 29% of those seeing themselves as non-disabled actually reported having a MHD, with 14% of these having had this professionally diagnosed