



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