Correlates of Attitudes Toward the Sexuality of the Disabled Person in Selected Health Professionals

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ABSTRACT: The attitudes of health professionals toward sexuality and disability have recently been under much scrutiny. These attitudes have been characterized as essentially negative. This study was undertaken in an attempt to clarify the relationship between attitudes toward sexuality, attitudes toward disability and attitudes toward the sexual behavior of the disabled.

Fifty-three health professionals from three rehabilitation centers served as subjects. Subjects completed a research packet that included the Attitude Toward Disabled Persons Test, Sex Knowledge and Attitude Test and a researcher-designed Attitude Toward Sexual Behavior of the Disabled semantic differential.

It was found that attitudes toward disability did not correlate with sex knowledge, attitudes or with attitudes toward the sexual behavior of the disabled. Attitudes toward the sexual behavior of the disabled is best predicted by attitudes toward premarital and extramarital sex and attitudes toward autoeroticism.

The data indicate that attitudes toward the sexual behavior of the disabled are associated more with fundamental sex attitudes than with attitudes toward disability. Sex knowledge is not related to attitudes toward sexual behavior of the disabled. It was recommended that programs designed to change attitudes toward sexual behavior of the disabled should focus on attitudes as opposed to knowledge.

Attitudes toward the disabled have been studied in relation to their components, correlates, and effects on the disabled. The body of the literature indicates that the disabled are viewed as "other" than the nondisabled. In Goffman's terms, the disabled are

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stigmatized. This stigmatization of the disabled is not only limited to the general public but also is evident in the health professionals. Of particular importance is the attitude of health professionals toward the disabled in general and toward the sexual behavior of the disabled. Little is known about the nature or interrelationship of these attitudes although current rehabilitation training is aiming at modifying them.

Recent work by Cole and others at the University of Minnesota Medical School has focused on changing attitudes of health professionals and disabled people toward sexuality of the physically limited. It was the purpose of this study to examine the relationship between attitudes toward sexuality, disability and sexual behavior of the disabled.

**Literature Summary**

Social-psychological theory suggests\(^2,^3\) that disabled people as a group have minority status similar to that of Blacks and Jews. In the late forties Barker\(^4\) described the physically disabled as a minority subject to role conflicts, stereotyping and lower social status position. Research\(^5,^6\) has indicated a relationship between negative attitudes toward traditional minority groups and negative attitudes toward the disabled.

It may reasonably be assumed that stigmatization of the disabled would not occur in rehabilitation facilities where professional health workers, trained to understand and assist the disabled, would display attitudes of acceptance and equality toward their patients. This apparently, however, is not the case. Gellman,\(^2\) in his extensive study of the roots of prejudice against the disabled, stated:

> Separation of patients from rehabilitation personnel parallels segregation of disabled from the nondisabled in the outside world. Both within and without the facility, impairment serves as a symbol of exclusion from the dominant group. (p. 6)

Greer\(^7\) refuted the common assumption that rehabilitation professionals are more tolerant and understanding of the disabled. He further asserted that the attitudes of professionals have “considerable impact upon those with whom such professionals work” (p. 182). McDaniel,\(^8\) a noted authority on the psychological adjustment of the disabled, asserted that the attitudes of rehabilitation workers toward disabled clients are probably the most