

ATTITUDES AND SOCIAL DISTANCE TOWARDS PERSONS WITH PHYSICAL DISABILITIES

STAVOVI I SOCIJALNA DISTANCA PREMA OSOBAMA SA TJELESNIM INVALIDITETOM

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this study was to examine the attitudes of the wider public towards persons with physical disability and determine the situation and the level of social distance towards this population of people with physical disabilities. The aim of the research was to determine the difference in the attitudes and the state of social distance in relation to age of persons covered by this study. The sample (N = 339) consisted of people of different ages, gender, qualifications and occupations chosen randomly from the territory of Bosnia and Herzegovina. The only criterion for the selection of the sample implies that these are people who have no personal or professional contact with persons with disabilities. The scale of social distance (Ouellette-Kuntz, Burge, Brown, Arsenault, 2010) for the purpose of this study was adapted in the sense that the required statements and opinions of respondents to people with physical disabilities, rather than to people with intellectual disabilities. Research data were processed by methods of non-parametric statistics. Frequencies and percentages were calculated. To investigate the influence of age on the respondents' attitudes towards persons with physical disabilities, cross - tabulation analysis was used, and for testing the significance of differences between the studied variables chi-square tests were used. The research results indicate that the majority of respondents showed a positive attitude and a low level of social distance towards persons with physical disabilities, although there is a smaller percentage of respondents who expressed negative attitudes and high levels of social distance. From the results of cross-tabulation analysis and chi-square test, it can be seen that there was no statistically significant difference in attitudes towards people with physical disabilities in relation to age of the respondents. With the increasing intimacy in the sentence or statement of the scale, the level of social distance among the respondents was increased too.

Key words: attitudes, the level of social distance, people with physical disabilities

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SAŽETAK

Predmet ovog istraživanja obuhvata stavove i nivo nivo socijalne distance prema osobama sa tjelesnim invaliditetom kod pripadnika šire društvene javnosti. Problem istraživanja predstavlja generalno ne poznavanje stavova šire društvene sredine prema osobama sa tjelesnim invaliditeom i vrstu i intenzitet mjera koji je potrebno preduzeti kako bi se javnost senzibilizirala i educirala o mogućnostima i pravima osoba sa tjelesnim invaliditeom. Cilj ovog rada bio je ispitati stavove šire društvene javnosti o osobama sa tjelesnim invaliditeom i utvrditi stanje i nivo socijalne distance prema ovoj populaciji osoba sa invaliditetom. Takođe, cilj istraživanja je i utvrditi razliku u stavovima i stanju socijalne distance u odnosu na dob osoba obuhvaćenih ovim istraživanjem. Uzorak ispitanika (N=339) činile su osobe različite dobi, spola, stručne sprema i zanimanja izabran metodom slučajnog izbora sa područja Bosne i Hercegovine. Jedini kriterij kod odabira uzorka je taj da su to osobe koje nemaju nikakav lični, niti profesionalni doticaj sa osobama sa invaliditetom. Skala socijalne distance (Ouellette-Kuntz, Burge, Brown, Arsenault, 2010) za potrebe ovog istraživanja adaptirana je u tom smislu da se traže tvrdnje i mišljenja ispitanika prema osobama sa tjelesnim invaliditetom, umjesto prema osobama sa intelektualnim teškoćama. Podaci istraživanja obrađeni su metodama neparametrijske statistike. Izračunate su frekvencije i postotci. Za ispitivanje uticaja dobi na stavove ispitanika o osobama sa tjelesnim invaliditetom korištena je cross - tabulation analiza, a za ispitivanje značajnosti razlika između ispitivanih varijabli korišten je Hi kvadrat test. Podaci su obrađeni u statističkom paketu SPSS 16. for Windows. Rezultati istraživanja ukazuju da je većina ispitanika pokazala pozitivne stavove i nizak nivo socijalne distance prema osobama sa tjelesnim invaliditetom, iako postoji i manji postotak ispitanika koji su iskazali negativne stavove i visok nivo socijalne distance. Iz rezultata cross-tabulation analize i hi-kvadrat testa može se vidjeti da nije nađena statistički značajna razlika u stavovima prema osobama sa tjelesnim invaliditetom u odnosu na dob ispitanika. Sa povećanjem intimnosti na ponuđenim tvrdnjama povećavao se i nivo socijalne distance kod ispitanika.

Ključne riječi: stavovi, nivo socijalne distance, osobe sa tjelesnim invaliditetom

INTRODUCTION

American sociologist R. E. Park (1924) defined social distance as the various degrees of understanding and sense of intimacy that occur in different personal and broader social relationships. The concept of social distance was developed by E. Bogardus, in order to explore attitudes and prejudices towards ethnic minorities. He points out that social distance to members of different ethnic groups depends mostly on existing prejudices and generalizations, and lastly on the individual experiences (Bogardus, 1925; according to Šlezak & Šakaja, 2012). Such a concept of questioning attitudes and prejudices soon found its application in research that addressed people with disabilities, especially people with intellectual disabilities. Social distance is a concept that reflects attitudes and is defined by “the will to recognize, live close to or be connected to a particular group of persons” (Harth, 1971).

Social distance is a term often used to describe attitudes toward stigmatized groups and was originally described by Bogardus as a “degree of sympathy and understanding” between individuals or groups (Bogardus, 1959; according to Ouellette-Kuntz, Burge, Brown & Arsenault. 2010). It evolved from the realization that physical distance was not adequate to measure closeness between people. For example, although two neighbours live close to each other geographically, their social distance depends on the level of emotional intimacy or social prejudice they have towards each other (Angermeyer & Matschinger, 1997).

People feel more comfortable with those who consider themselves similar and maintain a closer social distance with them. Conversely, if a person finds one's behaviour unusual or abnormal, he or she will establish a greater social distance between himself or herself and that person in terms of reservation or fear (Parillo & Donoghue 2005).

Each individual is a part and product of their social environment, including the disabled individuals. The patterns of relationships of this individual with people, attitudes and behaviours are the result of harmonious and disharmonious relationships with family members, friends, community members, work colleagues, employers, partners, etc. It is tragic, however, that persons with disabilities are less handicapped because of their own disability, but more because of the attitudes of society. The disabled person is, like any other person, a social being. The irony, however, is that a person with a disability is not accepted by society as it is. In the perception of a person with a disability, society focuses on its disabilities and limitations, rather than opportunities and potential. For decades, research findings have shown that people without disabilities avoid contact with people with disabilities because they are unsure how to behave in their presence (Thompson, 1982; Yamoto, 1971). Goffmann (1963), a sociological analyst of stigma and its effects on socially marginalized groups, has often been cited in the literature dealing with disability. Goffman's (1963) thesis states that relationships between persons with disabilities and persons without disabilities are strained, full of misunderstanding and interference. Murphy (1990) described disability as a “disease of social relations”, further stating that “social relations between persons with disabilities and persons without disabilities are tense, strange and problematic. This is something that every handicapped person knows.” Summarizing the results of their research, Murphy et al. (1988) concluded that “handicapped persons claim that non-handicapped persons behave as if the first group was contagious.” Yazbeck et al. (2004) found that younger individuals with higher levels of education and more contact with people with intellectual disabilities had more positive attitudes toward these individuals and inclusion. Quoting other authors (Horner-Johnson et al. 2000; MacLean & Gannon, 1995), they pointed out that educational attainment, by itself, has no greater influence on attitudes, but the type of profession has. Students of health sciences, pedagogical sciences, social work and natural sciences had less discomfort with contact with people with intellectual disabilities than students of economics, technical sciences and natural sciences. A national survey of public attitudes towards persons with disabilities in Ireland (2011) was conducted by the National Disability Authority on a sample of 1039 people older than 18 and without disabilities and 265 people older than 18 and with disabilities.

The results showed that attitudes did not change significantly compared to previous studies (2006), and that attitudes related to inclusion of children with disabilities even worsened. 68% of respondents think that in some situations persons with disabilities should be prioritized (compared to 80% in 2006), 50% of respondents think that persons with disabilities have the same educational rights as persons without disabilities, 20% of respondents think that persons with disabilities have equal rights to employment, 30% of respondents believe that persons with disabilities receive sufficient assistance from the state. Non-disabled respondents are relatively less willing to accept a disabled person as a co-worker or neighbour.

The aim of this research is to examine the attitudes of the general public in Bosnia and Herzegovina towards persons with physical disabilities and to determine the status and level of social distance towards this population of persons with disabilities in relation to the age of the respondents.

RESEARCH MATERIAL AND METHODS

Sample of respondents

The sample of respondents (N = 339) consisted of persons of different ages, genders, qualifications and occupations selected by the random selection method from the territory of Bosnia and Herzegovina. The only selecting criterion of the sample entails that respondents never had any personal or professional contact with persons with disabilities. The age of the respondents in the sample ranged from 13 to 74. Most respondents were 13-24 years old (51.04%), then 25-44 years old (99 or 29.60%), 45-64 years old (17.11%), and 9 respondents (2.65%) were older than 64. In the examined sample, there were 139 males (41.00%) and 200 females (59.00%).

Method of conducting research

The survey was conducted over a period of one month, during which trained interviewers interviewed people from their environment using the method of anonymous survey questionnaire.

Measuring instruments

The Social Distance Subscale (Harth, 1971), a subscale of the Multidimensional Attitude Survey on Mental Retardation (MASMR; Antonak & Harth 1994), derived from Mental Retardation Attitude Inventory (1981), was used for the purposes of this research, although both terms can still be found in the literature for the same scale (Ouellette-Kuntz, Burge, Brown, & Arsenault, 2010). The Social Distance Subscale (Ouellette-Kuntz, Burge, Brown, & Arsenault, 2010) has been adapted for the purposes of this research to seek the statements and opinions of respondents towards persons with physical disabilities rather than persons with intellectual disabilities.

On a four-point Likert-type scale, the respondents marked the level of agreement (I absolutely agree, I agree, I am not sure, I disagree and I absolutely disagree) with seven statements representing certain situations that imply a level of intimacy, and through their answers, respondents determined the level of social distance they would prefer in such situations.

The scale contains both positive and negative statements. Negative statements are coded to the contrary during the analysis.

The sample of variables defined for the purposes of this research is:

- Age of the respondent
- Gender of the respondent
- „I would let my child attend a birthday party of a child with a physical disability“
- „I would like my child to be close friends with children with physical disabilities“
- „I have nothing against a friendship between children with physical disabilities and children without disabilities“
- „I'd rather not have a person with a physical disability for dinner with friends“
- „I would not get into a pool when there is a person with a physical disability“
- „I'd love to introduce a person with a physical disability to my friends and neighbours“
- „I would rather not live in the same building with a person with a physical disability“

Data processing methods

The survey data were processed using non-parametric statistics methods. Frequencies and percentages were calculated. Cross - tabulation analysis was used to examine the effect of age on the respondents' attitudes towards persons with physical disabilities, and the chi-square test was used to test the significance of differences between the examined variables.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

From the results presented in Table 1, one can see the positive attitudes orientation towards persons with physical disabilities of respondents from the sample. No statistically significant difference between the age groups was found in any of the variables tested. In the UK public opinion survey (Staniland, 2009), conducted on around 3600 respondents, no significant difference was found with respect to age. Research conducted to determine the impact of age and number of contacts with persons with disabilities has largely confirmed that older people with more contacts with persons with disabilities also have more positive attitudes towards persons with physical disabilities (Ingstad and Whyte, 1995; Heyer, 2000a, 2000b; Beckwith and Matthews, 1995; Brigham and Malpass, 1985; Altman, 1981; Makas, 1989, 1990). Considering that one of the criteria for defining the sample of this research implied that the respondents had no close personal or professional contacts with persons with physical disabilities, the impact of the number of contacts does not exist. According to Yasbeck et al. (2004), on the other hand, younger respondents show less social distance to persons with disabilities than older respondents.

Table 1. Cross-tabulation analysis of the impact of age on the variable „I would let my child attend a birthday party of a child with a physical disability“

			„I would let my child attend a birthday party of a child with a physical disability“					
			I absolutely disagree	I disagree	I am not sure	I agree	I absolutely agree	Total
age	13-35	N	4	9	21	91	112	237
		%	1,7%	3,8%	8,9%	38,4%	47,3%	100,0%
	36-74	N	4	2	8	32	56	102
		%	3,9%	2,0%	7,8%	31,4%	54,9%	100,0%
	Total	N	8	11	29	123	168	339
		%	2,4%	3,2%	8,6%	36,3%	49,6%	100,0%
Chi-square Test			p=0,389					

Although there is no statistically significant difference between the age groups from the results of the cross-tabulation analysis, it can be seen that older respondents show more positive attitudes towards the variables: „I would let my child attend a birthday party of a child with a physical disability (Table 1), „I would like my child to be close friends with children with physical disabilities“ (Table 2) and „I have nothing against a friendship between children with physical disabilities and children without disabilities“ (Table 3).

Table 2. Cross-tabulation analysis of the impact of age on the variable „I would like my child to be close friends with children with physical disabilities“

„I would like my child to be close friends with children with physical disabilities“								
			I absolutely disagree	I disagree	I am not sure	I agree	I absolutely agree	Total
age	13-35	N	7	11	77	99	43	237
		%	3,0%	4,6%	32,5%	41,8%	18,1%	100,0%
	36-74	N	3	10	23	41	25	102
		%	2,9%	9,8%	22,5%	40,2%	24,5%	100,0%
	Total	N	10	21	100	140	68	339
		%	2,9%	6,2%	29,5%	41,3%	20,1%	100,0%
Chi-Square Test		p= 0,139						

The results indicate that the level of social distance increased in both the younger and older respondents with an increase in intimacy on the measuring instrument. 59.90% of younger respondents (Table 2) *agree or absolutely agree* on the variable „I would like my child to be close friends with children with physical disabilities“, 32.5% of younger respondents answered with *I am not sure*. At the same time, 74.7% of younger respondents *agree* and *absolutely agree* with the statement „I have nothing against a friendship between children with physical disabilities and children without disabilities“, while 21.5% of the same respondents answered with *I am not sure*. 64.7% of older respondents *agree or absolutely agree* with the statement „I would like my child to be close friends with children with physical disabilities“, and 22.5% of the older respondents answered with *I am not sure*. 79.4% of older respondents *agree or absolutely agree* with the statement „I have nothing against a friendship between children with physical disabilities and children without disabilities“, and 16.7% of the older respondents answered with *I am not sure* (Table 3).

The research conducted by Olkin, Howson and Leslie (1994) showed that the negative attitudes towards persons with physical disabilities increase with the increase of the level of intimacy on measuring instruments.

Table 3. Cross-tabulation analysis of the impact of age on the variable „I have nothing against a friendship between children with physical disabilities and children without disabilities“

		„I have nothing against a friendship between children with physical disabilities and children without disabilities“					Total
		I absolutely disagree	I disagree	I am not sure	I agree	I absolutely agree	
age 13-35	N	3	6	51	110	67	237
	%	1,3%	2,5%	21,5%	46,4%	28,3%	100,0%
36-74	N	2	2	17	49	32	102
	%	2,0%	2,0%	16,7%	48,0%	31,4%	100,0%
Total	N	5	8	68	159	99	339
	%	1,5%	2,4%	20,1%	46,9%	29,2%	100,0%

Chi-Square Test $p=0,836$

The increase in social distance with increasing intimacy of the statements can also be seen in Tables 4 and 5, where on the variable „I'd rather not have a person with a physical disability for dinner with friends“ 10.8% of older respondents and 6.4% of younger respondents answer with *agree* and *absolutely agree*, while social distance decreases for the statement „I'd love to introduce a person with a physical disability to my friends and neighbours“, where 3.8% of younger respondents and 4% of older respondents answered with *I absolutely disagree* and *I disagree*.

Table 4. Cross-tabulation analysis of the impact of age on the variable „I'd rather not have a person with a physical disability for dinner with friends“

			„I'd rather not have a person with a physical disability for dinner with friends“					
			I absolutely disagree	I disagree	I am not sure	I agree	I absolutely agree	Total
age	13-35	N	3	12	49	100	73	237
		%	1,3%	5,1%	20,7%	42,2%	30,8%	100,0%
	36-74	N	1	10	16	46	29	102
		%	1,0%	9,8%	15,7%	45,1%	28,4%	100,0%
Total		N	4	22	65	146	102	339
		%	1,2%	6,5%	19,2%	43,1%	30,1%	100,0%

Chi-Square Test p=0,446

Table 5. Cross-tabulation analysis of the impact of age on the variable „I'd love to introduce a person with a physical disability to my friends and neighbours“

			„I'd love to introduce a person with a physical disability to my friends and neighbours“					
			I absolutely disagree	I disagree	I am not sure	I agree	I absolutely agree	Total
age	13-35	N	3	6	51	110	67	237
		%	1,3%	2,5%	21,5%	46,4%	28,3%	100,0%
	36-74	N	2	2	17	49	32	102
		%	2,0%	2,0%	16,7%	48,0%	31,4%	100,0%
Total		N	5	8	68	159	99	339
		%	1,5%	2,4%	20,1%	46,9%	29,2%	100,0%

Chi-Square Tests p=0,836

The level of social distance towards persons with physical disabilities in different social situations, such as the use of swimming pools (Table 6) and housing in the same building (Table 7), is low in both age groups. Both older and younger respondents expressed highly positive attitudes towards this population of persons with disabilities in everyday social situations. As can be seen from the results of the Chi-square test, there is no statistically significant difference between the age groups for the observed variables.

Table 6. Cross-tabulation analysis of the impact of age on the variable „I would not get into a pool when there is a person with a physical disability“

„I would not get into a pool when there is a person with a physical disability“								
			I absolutely disagree	I disagree	I am not sure	I agree	I absolutely agree	Total
age	13-35	N	8	14	33	99	83	237
		%	3,4%	5,9%	13,9%	41,8%	35,0%	100,0%
	36-74	N	3	6	9	45	39	102
		%	2,9%	5,9%	8,8%	44,1%	38,2%	100,0%
	Total	N	11	20	42	144	122	339
		%	3,2%	5,9%	12,4%	42,5%	36,0%	100,0%
Chi-Square Tests		p=0,766						

Table 7. Cross-tabulation analysis of the impact of age on the variable „I would rather not live in the same building with a person with a physical disability“

„I would rather not live in the same building with a person with a physical disability“								
			I absolutely disagree	I disagree	I am not sure	I agree	I absolutely agree	Total
age	13-35	N	11	5	8	63	150	237
		%	4,6%	2,1%	3,4%	26,6%	63,3%	100,0%
	36-74	N	3	6	9	33	51	102
		%	2,9%	5,9%	8,8%	32,4%	50,0%	100,0%
	Total	N	14	11	17	96	201	339
		%	4,1%	3,2%	5,0%	28,3%	59,3%	100,0%
Chi-Square Tests		p=0,029						

CONCLUSION

The research results indicate that the majority of respondents expressed positive attitudes and low levels of social distance towards persons with physical disabilities, although there is also a smaller percentage of respondents who expressed negative attitudes and high levels of social distance. The results of the cross-tabulation analysis and the chi-square test show that no statistically significant difference was found in attitudes towards persons with physical disabilities in relation to the age of the respondents. Although the results of this study show that the majority of respondents show a low level of social distance to persons with physical disabilities, it was observed that this level varies with the level of intimacy of the questions or statements offered.

Questions and statements that implied a greater level of intimacy increased the level of social distance towards persons with physical disabilities. For example, respondents showed a lower level of social distance on the statement „I have nothing against a friendship between children with physical disabilities and children without disabilities“, but this attitude changed for most of the respondents on the statement „I would like my child to be close friends with children with physical disabilities“, where social distance would increase. The above mentioned points to the need to design such questionnaires to assess attitudes toward persons with disabilities that would include questions with varying levels of intimacy (for example, related to marriage, work colleagues, sports activities, etc.). This would give a more realistic picture of the real acceptance of persons with disabilities in society. Also, future research should explore attitudes towards different types of disabilities in order to compare attitudes and levels of social distance to them, as well as attitudes and levels of social distance of persons with disabilities themselves towards persons without disabilities and society in general.

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