



Review article

Attitudes towards individuals with disabilities as measured by the Implicit Association Test: A literature review



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ABSTRACT

Research investigating attitudes towards individuals with disabilities has largely focused on self-reported explicit attitudes. Given that factors such as social desirability may influence explicit attitudes, researchers have developed tools which instead assess less consciously controllable implicit attitudes. Considering research on implicit attitudes thus seems pertinent. A review of studies measuring implicit attitudes towards individuals with physical disabilities (visual, motor or hearing) or intellectual disabilities via the Implicit Association Test (IAT; Greenwald, McGhee, & Schwartz, 1998) was carried out. Systematic searches of PsycINFO, CINAHL, EMBASE, ERIC, MEDLINE, PUBMED, Scopus and Web of Science databases identified relevant articles published between January 2000 and September 2012. Seventeen articles (reporting on 18 studies that employed the IAT) were identified. These investigated implicit attitudes towards individuals with; physical disabilities ($N=13$), intellectual disabilities ($N=3$), both physical and intellectual disabilities ($N=1$), and ‘unspecified disabilities’ ($N=1$). Across all studies, moderate to strong negative implicit attitudes were found and there was little to no association between explicit and implicit attitudes. Individuals’ beliefs about the controllability of their future, sensitivity to the concept of disease, and contact with individuals with disabilities appear to be associated with implicit attitudes. A consistent pattern of moderate to strong negative implicit attitudes towards individuals with disabilities was evident. These studies provide a starting point, but methodological issues related to sampling and the employed IATs limit the generalizability of these results. Further research investigating implicit attitudes towards specific disability types, with a wider subject pool are necessary as well as further investigation of factors that contribute to these attitudes.

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1. Introduction

The recently published World Report on Disability ([World Health Organisation and World Bank, 2011](#)) suggests there are approximately one billion people across the globe with some form of disability, representing around 15% of the world's population. This is a sizeable increase from the last World Health Organisation estimate of around 10% in the 1970s ([World Health Organisation and World Bank, 2011](#)).

Over the last few decades there has been considerable work towards achieving equality for individuals with disabilities, e.g., inclusion within local communities, education and equal opportunities within work contexts. Many national and international strategies and pieces of legislation have these principles at their core (e.g., [Americans with Disability Act, 1990](#); [Disability Discrimination Act of Australia, 1992](#); [Disability Discrimination Act of the UK, 1995, 2005](#); [United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, 2008](#)). There is evidence to suggest that to some extent these principles have been implemented within communities, education settings and workplaces (e.g., [Favazza, Phillipson, & Kumar, 2000](#); [Riches & Green, 2003](#); [Schwartz & Armony-Sivan, 2001](#)). One factor which remains a barrier to these goals being fully achieved concerns negative attitudes held towards individuals with disabilities (e.g., [Department of Work and Pensions, 2002](#); [National Coordinating Agency for Population and Development, 2008](#); [National Disability Authority, 2011](#); [Office of Disability Issues, 2011](#)).

1.1. Attitudes towards individuals with disabilities

Within the last 30 years, there has been increasing interest in researching attitudes towards individuals with disabilities, factors that influence such attitudes, and potential approaches to changing negative attitudes (e.g., [Brillhart, Jay, & Wyers, 1990](#); [Daruwalla & Darcy, 2005](#); [Hunt & Hunt, 2004](#); [Paris, 1993](#); [Strohmer, Grand, & Purcell, 1984](#)). Researchers have largely focused on measuring explicit attitudes, i.e., attitudes which are consciously accessible and controllable ([Prestwich, Kenworthy, Wilson, & Kwan-tat, 2008](#)). These are often measured via self-report questionnaires.

Public awareness of the need for equal opportunities and rights for individuals with disabilities has been heightened in campaigns by disability rights groups. Given this greater awareness one may question how accurate self-reported attitudes are and whether other factors may be influencing the attitudes reported in such studies. [Antonak and Livneh \(2000\)](#) suggest that measuring explicit attitudes towards individuals with disabilities poses several risks to validity. One such risk is respondent reactivity, where respondents realise their attitudes are being measured and attempt to alter their responses. This can result from a number of factors, but perhaps one of the most important to consider here is the effect of social desirability, i.e., when an individual is motivated to endorse responses which they believe to be the most socially appropriate ([Antonak & Livneh, 2000](#)).

1.2. Implicit attitudes

In view of the risks of response biases, such as socially desirable responding, researchers have developed a variety of measures for assessing implicit attitudes, i.e., attitudes which are automatically activated and occur without effort or intention ([Prestwich et al., 2008](#)). One such measure is the Implicit Association Test (IAT; [Greenwald et al., 1998](#)).

The IAT is a computer based task that measures the relative strength of association between pairs of concepts and works by using four different groups of images/words presented on the screen ([Lane, Banaji, Nosek, & Greenwald, 2007](#)).

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