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Social inclusion of individuals with intellectual disabilities in the military

Shirli Werner^{*,a}, Yael Hochman^b^a Paul Baerwald School of Social Work and Social Welfare, Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Mount Scopus, Jerusalem, 91905, Israel^b Sapir Academic College, School of Social Work, Sederot, Israel

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ABSTRACT

Background: Despite policies advocating the social inclusion of persons with disabilities in all settings that are a part of everyday life within society, individuals with intellectual disabilities (ID) are usually excluded from service in the military.

Aims: This study examined the meaning of service in the military for individuals with ID from the perspective of various stakeholder groups.

Methods and procedures: Semi-structured qualitative interviews were conducted with 31 individuals with ID, 36 relatives, and 28 commanders. The recent model for social inclusion developed by Simplican et al. (2015) served as the basis for analyses.

Outcomes and results: Findings suggest a successful social inclusion process for individuals with ID, which resulted in them feeling as an integral part and as contributing members of the military unit and of society at large. Social inclusion in the military was described with reference to two overlapping and interacting domains of interpersonal relationships and community participation.

Conclusions and implications: The interaction between interpersonal relationships within the military and community participation has led to positive outcomes for soldiers with ID. Recommendations are provided for the continued inclusion of individuals with ID in the military and in other everyday settings.

What this paper adds?

While previous research has shown that social inclusion is of utmost importance for the wellbeing of individuals with intellectual disabilities, these individuals remain excluded from many settings. One such setting is military service which in some countries is still fundamental in life. This article is the first to explore the meaning and implication of social inclusion in the military for individuals with intellectual disabilities. Most importantly, it examined this meaning by focusing on various stakeholder groups in order to obtain a holistic understanding of the topic and using a recent theoretical conceptualization of the concept of social inclusion.

1. Introduction

In most Western countries, legislation and policies concerning persons with disabilities advocate full and effective social inclusion and community participation (Officer & Groce, 2009; UN General Assembly, 2007; Wearing, 2011). One area of life from which individuals with intellectual disabilities (ID) are frequently excluded is military service. The present study examined the meaning of

* Corresponding author at: Paul Baerwald School of Social Work and Social Welfare, Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Mount Scopus, Jerusalem, 91905, Israel.
E-mail address: shirli.werner@mail.huji.ac.il (S. Werner).

participating in military service for the social inclusion of individuals with ID.

1.1. Social inclusion

Social inclusion is a comprehensive concept that refers to full engagement in social institutions, or arenas for community participation, including education, employment, recreation, and civic engagement (White, Simpson, Gonda, Ravesloot, & Coble, 2010). Despite its importance, social inclusion remains a somewhat obscure concept that has many, often overlapping, definitions.

For example, within the mental health field, Wong and Solomon (2002) have argued that physical presence can not be the sole criterion for inclusion. Rather social relationships with others in the community and sense of community belonging are highly important. Thus, they use the term ‘social integration’ and describe it as having three dimensions: physical inclusion which refers to the amount in which an individual takes part in activities outside the home and uses community services according to his needs and desires; social inclusion which refers to interactions with others in the community and receiving social support according to the cultural norm; and psychological inclusion which refers to an individual feeling of being part of the community (Wong & Solomon, 2002).

An additional definition to social inclusion is that provided by Hall (2009) who identified six dimension for this concept: (1) being accepted and recognized as an individual beyond the disability; (2) having personal relationships with family, friends, and acquaintances; (3) being involved in recreation, leisure and other social activities; (4) having appropriate living accommodations; (5) having employment; and (6) having appropriate formal (service system) and informal (family and caregiver) supports.

More recently, Cobigo et al. (2012) have conceptualized inclusion within an ecological approach to emphasize the importance of the interactions between personal and environmental characteristics. According to them inclusion refers to: (1) a series of complex interactions between environmental factors and personal characteristics that provide opportunities to (2) access public goods and services, (3) experience valued and expected social roles of one’s choosing based on age, gender and culture, (4) be recognized as a competent individual and trusted to perform social roles in the community, and (5) belong to a social network within which one receives and contributes support.

The present article is based on the definition of Simplican et al. (2015), stating that social inclusion must be understood within an ecological model similar to the social model that views disability as a product of individual, environmental, and social factors (Luckasson & Schalock, 2013). We selected this model as it seems to provide a comprehensive and coherent model that encompasses the complex array of factors that affect social inclusion by conceptualizing it as the interaction between two important life domains: interpersonal relationships and community participation (Simplican et al., 2015).

Interpersonal relationships (Fig. 1) have three characteristics: (a) *category*, which identifies the type of people in the social network; (b) *structure*, which refers to the length of the relationship, the frequency of contact, and its location; and (c) *function*, which refers to the types of social support provided by the relationships. Community participation also has three characteristics: (a) *category*, which identifies the types of community activity; (b) *structure*, which refers to the settings in which the activity takes place and which can range from segregated to mainstream; and (c) *level of involvement* in the community, which varies from only being physically present without having any deep participation to being a full participating member. According to this model, there is an interaction between interpersonal relationships and community participation. Specifically, more community involvement should increase and strengthen a person’s social network while having strong interpersonal relationship should increase the access and opportunities for involvement in the community as well as the level of involvement (Petry, Maes, & Vlaskamp, 2005). Additionally, there is an overlap across domains, as members in the social network are some of the same people we engage with in the community (Simplican et al., 2015).

Social inclusion is of utmost importance for the wellbeing of people with ID (Buntinx & Schalock, 2010) because it enhances their sense of belonging (Cobigo, Ouellette-Kuntz, Lysaght, & Martin, 2012) and enables them to become contributing members of society (Overmars-Marx, Thomése, Verdonshot, & Meininger, 2014). It has been shown that social inclusion improves quality of life (Johnson, Douglas, Bigby, & Iacono, 2012; Mahar, Cobigo, & Stuart, 2014; Mansell, Elliott, Beadle-Brown, Ashman, & McDonald, 2002), self-esteem, confidence, mental health (Forrester-Jones et al., 2006), independence (Mansell et al., 2002), and decision-making capacity (Johnson et al., 2009). Nevertheless, one realm of life in which individuals with ID have rarely been included is military service.

1.2. Importance of military service in israeli society

The Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) form an integral part of everyday life in the Israeli society and are an important setting for inclusion. Military service is a mandatory civil obligation for all citizens over the age of 18 (inclusive of women), with the exception of non-Druze Arab citizens, exceptions on physical or psychological grounds and on the basis of marriage, pregnancy and religious grounds among women (Security Service Act, 1986). Although conscription has been on the decline in many countries, Israel’s IDF is still utilizing conscription given the country’s unique history and strategic location. It produces a “melting pot” for diverse ethnic and social groups that would otherwise have little contact with each other (Peled, 1998).

Nevertheless, until recently, individuals with ID were automatically exempt from service in the IDF (Security Service Act, 1986) based on their medical profile. Undoubtedly, this exemption reinforces the exclusion of individuals with ID from society. The “Equal in Uniform” project was initiated to minimize this exclusion.

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