Attitudes towards the sexuality of men with intellectual disability: the effect of social dominance orientation

Graziella Di Marco a *, Orazio Licciardello a, Manuela Mauceri a, Roberta M.C. La Guidara b

a Department of Educational Sciences, University of Catania, via Biblioteca 4, Catania, 95125, Italy
b Pedagogical and Psychological Sciences Department, University of Messina, via Concezione 6/8, Messina, 98122, Italy

Abstract

Usually, people with ID (intellectual disability) have been deprived of the right to live in the community, receive an education, work, marry, and procreate. The aim of this study was to investigate the attitudes of 122 university students towards the sexuality of men with ID. We hypothesized that Social Dominance Orientation (SDO) should hinder an open attitude towards the sexuality of men with ID. Results showed that attitudes are generally passably positive and that students high on SDO were more oriented to reject sexual rights for men with ID than students scoring lower on this factor.

Keywords: Sexuality, Social model of disability, Disability rights, ASQ-ID.

1. Introduction

Disability is often considered as a “world apart”, especially by non-professionals. However, even among disability-professionals, there are distorted and misleading attitudes about the disability, as shown by some researches (Licciardello & Di Marco, 2010).

Disability requires to consider that someone helps the disabled individual to do something or everything. Disabled people, hence, regardless their specific impairment, are affected by social attitudes that enable them to live a whole and satisfactory life, regardless of actual limitations.

Thus, the Social Model of Disability (Oliver, 1981) suggests to think disability as the consequence of a disabling attitude of the society, that doesn’t allow a good development, according to own specific characteristics and needs.

If there is one group which has historically been denied the dignity and value attached to the status of being human, it would have to be people with Intellectual Disabilities (ID) (Herr et al., 2003). Usually, people with ID have been deprived of the right to live in the community, receive an education, work, marry and procreate (Griffiths et al., 2003).
For this reason, we think that it’s very important to investigate prevalent attitudes and beliefs about the ID. Furthermore, if we consider the specific field of sexuality and affectivity, the theme is complicated and complex. As in researches of Aunos and Feldman (2002), sexuality of disabled people evokes discomfort, mostly in parents, who try to suppress sexual expression of their children and generally oppose the idea that they can live an autonomous adult sexuality.

Thus, if the beliefs of caregivers can influence the development of sexual identity of disabled people and their real possibilities of living an adult sexuality (Swango-Wilson, 2008), disabled people are often kept from realizing their own sexuality, in the way they would like to do. Moreover, denying the possibility to live their own sexual life, disabled individuals are denied to exist as “desiring” human beings (Gousset, 2010). Regarding the issue of sexuality, it seems that society perceives adults with ID as asexual beings (Milligan & Neufeldt, 2001); however, it doesn't accept socio-sexual expression of persons with ID. In effect, attitudes to the intimate relationships of adults with ID are one reflection of the inclusiveness of a community (Cuskelly & Gilmore, 2007).

It seems that the topic is very difficult, delicate and complex, and it’s necessary for professionals to be flexible, because they should learn to put the needs of patients before their own ideological system.

In this study, we address to university students, as citizens, because, regardless of professional interests, they may raise or lower barriers about autonomy, freedom and quality of life of disabled people.

We have considered only the attitudes towards the sexuality of men with ID, in order to deal with the issue by a specific point of view.

2. Social Dominance Orientation And Disability

People characterized by the Social Dominance Orientation (SDO; Sidanius & Pratto, 1999) think that reality is characterized by a continuous competition between groups, and encourage/promote a social stratification into dominant and inferior groups (Pratto et al., 1994). This kind of personality has been studied concerning especially ethnical prejudice (Ekehammar et al., 2004). A very little attention has been given to prejudice towards other minority groups, for instance disabled people (Vezzali et al., 2010). In this regard, Zachariae and Frindte (2002) considered different because of some features.

Furthermore, Vezzali and colleagues (2010) maintain that little researches (e.g. Bäckström & Björklund, 2007; Brandes & Crowson, 2009) considered and deepened the link between SDO and attitudes towards disabled people. Bäckström e Björklund (2007), for instance, found that high levels of SDO positively correlate with the prejudice towards disabled people. Moreover, Brandes and Crowson (2009) found that the SDO and the discomfort felt in interaction with a disabled person are the major causes of negative attitudes towards disability.

Other studies showed that this orientation is diriment in the management of intergroup interactions and attitudes (Mari et al., 2007). From these researches, we can see that SDO reduces the positive evaluation and emotions towards outgroup, increasing the perception of differences and negative feelings. Then, SDO is an important part of all variables measured when we want to consider the complexity of social condition of disabled people (and minority groups, in general).

3. Method

3.1. Aims and Hypothesis

This study explored the attitudes of university students towards the sexuality of men with ID, considering also the effect of SDO on these attitudes.

Our hypothesis was that levels of SDO should hinder an open attitude towards the needs of men with ID.
3.2. Participants and Materials

Participants were 122 university students (men \( n = 63 \), women \( n = 59 \)). The mean age of the sample was 23.41 years (SD=2.97; range=18-30 years).

The questionnaire included:
- Three Semantic Differentials (Osgood et al., 1957), composed of 5 pairs of bipolar adjectives evaluating on a 7-point Likert scale about: “The person with intellectual disability”, “The person without intellectual disability” and “Me, as I am”.
- ASQ-ID, The Attitudes to Sexuality Questionnaire: Individuals with an Intellectual Disability (Cuskelly & Gilmore, 2007). It is composed of 28 items; participants responded on a 6-point Likert scale, from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree”. We used the version of the scale regarding men with intellectual disability. Cuskelly and Gilmore (2007) identified four meaningful subscales: Sexual Rights (13 items, including “sexual intercourse should be permitted between consenting adults with ID”), Parenting (7 items, such as “with the right support, men with ID can rear well-adjusted children”), Non-Reproductive Sexual Behavior (5 items, e.g., “Consenting adult men with ID should be allowed to live in a homosexual relationship if they desire”), and Self-Control (3 items, including “Men with ID are more easily stimulated sexually than people without ID”)
- SDOS, Social Dominance Orientation Scale (Sidanius, Pratto et al., 1994), in the Italian version by Aiello et al., (2005), is composed of 16 items (e.g. “Some groups are simply inferior to other groups”). Participants responded to the items on a 7-point Likert scale, from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree”.

3.3. Results and Discussion

The representation of the disabled person (“The person with intellectual disability”; \( M = 4.48 \), sd=1.08), investigated using Semantic Differentials, was just above the intermediate point (=4). On the contrary, the Self (“Me, as I am”; \( M = 5.50 \), sd=.95) and the normal person (“The person without intellectual disability”; \( M = 5.11 \), sd=.95) representations were more positive oriented. Our students assessed themselves more positively than normal person and, especially, than disabled people \([F(2,242)=36.36; p<.001]\).

Concerning the sexuality, investigated by ASQ-ID, moderate positive attitudes emerged, with some statistically significant differences between the means of the domains of the scale \([F(3,363)=5.54, p=.001]\).

In fact, students were more favorable towards Non reproductive sexual behaviors \((M=4.53, \text{sd}= .82)\) than Parenthood \((M=4.22, \text{sd}= .98)\) \([t(121)=3.03, p=.003]\) and Sexual rights \((M=4.34, \text{sd}= .57)\) \([t(121)=3.04, p=.003]\). Moreover, students responded that men with ID are more able to manage their own sexual arousal (Self-control) \((M=4.46, \text{sd}= .92)\) than to bring up children (Parenthood) \((M=4.22, \text{sd}= .98)\) \([t(121)=3.17, p=.002]\). All results are shown in Table 1.

|                        | Mean   | SD    | Alpha |
|------------------------|--------|-------|--------|
| SDO                    | 2.80   | .83   | .83    |
| Sexual rights          | 4.34   | .57   | .73    |
| Parenthood             | 4.22   | .98   | .85    |
| Non-reproductive sexual behaviors | 4.53   | .82   | .76    |
| Self-control           | 4.46   | .92   | .66    |
| “The person with ID”   | 4.48   | 1.08  | .82    |
| “The person without ID”| 5.11   | .95   | .84    |
| “Me, as I am”          | 5.50   | .95   | .83    |
Regarding SDO, results showed that it played an important role on the students’ attitudes towards sexuality of men with ID. To verify effects of SDO on investigated aspects, for each measure a regression analysis has been applied.

Concerning the representation of “the person with ID”, SDO had a significant effect on the representation of “the person with ID”: the higher was the belief that some groups are better than others, the lower evaluation of disabled person (β = -0.44, p < .001).

In addition, for a higher SDO, there’s a lower sensibility to sexual rights of men with ID (β = -0.40, p < .001). The belief that society should be hierarchically organized and that not all groups should have the same rights affects even on the consideration about parenthood of disabled men (β = -0.44, p < .001). Furthermore, for a stronger SDO we see a lower esteem of Self-control ability of men with ID (β = -0.42, p < .001). SDO had no influence on self-representation, on the representation of the person without ID and on “non-reproductive sexual behaviors” of men with ID.

Considering the aspects valued in the general attitude towards sexuality of men with ID scale, we can see that social dominance orientation negatively correlates with the general attitude towards sexuality of men with ID (β = -0.29, p = .002): people, who strongly believe that some social groups are inferior to others, are less inclined to think that disabled men have sexual abilities, rights and needs. All results are shown in table 2.

Table 2. Effects of SDO

|                        | SDO | t   |
|------------------------|-----|-----|
| Sexual rights          | -.41*** | -5.00 |
| Parenthood             | -.44*** | -5.32 |
| Non-reproductive sexual behaviors | -.18 | -2.06 |
| Self-control           | -.42*** | -5.11 |
| “The person with ID”   | -.44*** | -5.37 |
| “The person without ID”| .14  |  1.52 |
| “Me, as I am”          | .001 | .01  |

4. Conclusions

Sexuality is a very complex and problematic issue. In our study, there were some data that seem to be really important.

First of all, in line with our hypothesis, we can see that if students are more oriented to dominance, they are less inclined to the acceptance and the comprehension of sexual needs of men with ID. From the results obtained with the semantic differentials, the less positive representation of the disabled people (outgroup) and the more positive connotation of normal people (ingroup) increase by considering rightful the social inequalities.

In our study, the SDO plays a negative role on the attitudes of students towards the sexuality of men with disability. This negative role reverberates in what they can really do, as citizens, towards affective and sexual needs of disabled men. In fact, the «general public attitudes» (Karellou, 2003, p.81), in many ways, help to build opportunities for disabled people who, as disabled, depend on the chances given by the society, as we said before.

For this reason, in fact, we think that it’s very important to work on the social and political aspects, in order to make youth capable to perceive as unjust the unequal society, in which not all have/not everybody has the same rights and equal opportunities.

Thus, from our study (not really exhaustive), we’ve tried to understand a little bit more about the matter, with respect to disabled men. It would be interesting to see if (and in that case how) these attitudes change towards sexuality of disabled women.

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