

2013 North American Society for Sport Management Conference (NASSM 2013)

Prejudice Against Persons With Disabilities in the Fitness Context

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Diversity

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**20-minute oral presentation
(including questions)**

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According to the US Census Bureau, approximately one in five Americans has a disability, and the likelihood of having a disability increases as one ages. Despite their prevalence in society, persons with disabilities regularly face prejudice and discrimination. Within the sport context, most researchers have examined the experiences of and opportunities for sport participants (for illustrative examples, see DePauw & Gavron, 2005; Hums & MacLean, 2009; Legg et al., 2009). This research shows that athletes with disabilities, relative to their able-bodied counterparts, face negative attitudes from others related to their sport participation, have a number of barriers limiting their full engagement in sport, and because of these issues, continually face accessibility issues in their quest to be physically active.

While there is growing research related to athletes with disabilities, comparatively little research has examined the prejudice and discrimination employees with disabilities face within the sport context. It is possible, though, to draw from national statistics to examine trends. According to the US Census Bureau, relative to their able-bodied counterparts, persons with disabilities are less likely to finish high school, are more likely to be unemployed even when they are able to work, and are paid less, even when having comparable educational attainment. These data are consistent with research conducted outside the sport context showing that persons with disabilities face negative stereotypes about their performance potential (Ren et al., 2008; Stone-Romero et al., 2007) and experience backlash when requesting accommodations (Baldrige, 2005).

The purpose of this study was to extend this research by examining people's attitudes toward job applicants with disabilities. Fiske et al.'s (2002) model of stereotype content helps inform the investigation. Specifically, they suggested two dimensions capture stereotypes: one focusing on warmth and the other on competence. People who are similar to the self (i.e., in-group members) are generally considered both warm and competent, and as a result, there are associated feelings of pride and admiration toward those persons. Other groups fall into different quadrants, however. For example, their research shows that persons with disabilities (along with the elderly) are generally considered warm but as not competent. As a result, people usually express sympathy or pity toward persons with disabilities—a finding Fiske and colleagues have observed across contexts and cultures (for a review, see Fiske et al., 2010). We suspect stereotypes related to competence (or lack thereof) likely influence the poor work experiences persons with disabilities have (see Ren et al., 2008; Stone-Romero et al., 2007).

We drew from Fiske et al.'s (2002) research in our current study, which is set in the fitness club context. As a brief overview, we developed job applications for the job of personal trainer, employing the same format as past researchers (Sartore & Cunningham, 2007). We varied the applicant's ability status (with a disability or able-bodied) and qualification (low or high). After reviewing the application packet, the participants were then asked to respond to a questionnaire related to the job applicant's employment prospects. In drawing from the aforementioned literature, we suspected applicants with a disability would be rated as less competent than would able-bodied applicants (Hypothesis 1). We also suspected that job qualifications would moderate this effect, such that the negative effects of disability status would be offset by being highly qualified (Hypothesis 2). Finally, we predicted competence ratings would be positively associated with perceived fit for the position (Hypothesis 3) and employment recommendation (Hypothesis 4).

Data will be collected from 200 students enrolled in physical activity classes at a large, public university in the United States. We will review the purpose of the study (to understand people's attitudes toward personal trainer job applicants) with the participants and then ask them to (a) review the job application packet for at least one minute, and (b) respond to a questionnaire related to the applicant's job prospects. Participants will be randomly assigned to one of four experimental conditions, crossed by ability status (with a disability or able-bodied) and qualification (low qualifications or high qualifications). We varied ability status by altering various activities in which the applicant was

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engaged (e.g., student representative of the Wheelchair Sports Foundation versus student representative of the Amateur Athletic Union; three such activities were varied). We altered qualifications by varying the degree (exercise science versus general studies), certifications (strength and conditioning certification versus no certification), and additional information (athletic accolades versus member of spirit clubs). After they review the materials, participants will be asked to respond to a questionnaire measuring their warmth and competence (Fiske et al., 2002), fit with the role of personal trainer (Sartore & Cunningham, 2007), and hiring recommendations (Sartore & Cunningham, 2007). We will also ask participants to provide their sex, race, age, and exercise habits.

We will examine the hypotheses through a structural equation modeling using AMOS 19.0. We will follow March et al.'s (2004) recommendations for testing interactions. Specifically, ability, qualifications, and the ability-by-qualifications interact term will serve as exogenous variables. Warmth, fit perceptions, and hiring recommendations will all be specified as latent variables that are endogenous. We will use the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) and comparative fit index (CFI) to examine model fit and then investigate the significance of the structural paths to test the hypotheses.

Results have the potential to shed new light on diversity research in sport management. As previously noted, most researchers have examined the experiences and opportunities of athletes with disabilities. As a result, prejudice and discrimination directed toward employees with disabilities have been overlooked. Thus, the findings from this study will provide sport management practitioners and scholars with a better understanding of the prejudice and discrimination employees with disabilities face.