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Reducing Able-bodied Entitlement: The Effects of Education, Privilege Acknowledgment, and Inter-group Contact

Remy Frost

Too often, socially privileged individuals act in ways that display entitlement, ignorance, or disregard for marginalized people, even when they are educated about the dynamics of oppression and privilege. Because education alone may not be sufficient to reduce prejudices held by the privileged, it is necessary to determine which additional factors most effectively motivate privileged individuals to embody support for the marginalized in their everyday actions. One such factor identified as influential in the cultivation of inter-group harmony is inter-group contact. In this research, I focus on able-bodied people and their sense of entitlement to their surroundings; specifically, I examine whether meaningful inter-group contact between people with disabilities and able-bodied people who have been educated about disability issues and who acknowledge their able-bodied privilege affects their appropriation of amenities designed for people who use mobility devices. My findings have implications for policies and programs: initiatives that incorporate both educational and interactional components are better equipped to foster disability-friendly climates than are single-axis approaches.

LITERATURE REVIEW

A vast body of research has described the effects of education, privilege acknowledgment, inter-group contact, and combinations thereof on privileged individuals' actions and attitudes toward marginalized populations. For example, Lopez Bunyasi (2015) studied the relationship between white Americans' privilege acknowledgment and their racial attitudes. The author collected survey data from large samples of nationwide telephone polls conducted between 2000 and 2009 and used logistic regression analysis to identify factors that influenced white Americans'

support for policies that benefit Americans of color (2015:210-215). She reported that whites who acknowledged their privilege or expressed “color-blindness” were more likely than those who viewed their whiteness as a detriment to support affirmative action, reparations for racial inequality, and antidiscrimination laws (2015:217).

Researchers have also investigated discrete catalysts for privilege acknowledgment: formal education about oppression, for example, may lead individuals to recognize their social privilege(s) and to modify their behavior accordingly (Hochschild et al. 2014; Nunn et al. 2016). Nunn et al. analyzed essays written by 159 undergraduates enrolled in four courses on LGBTQ-specific topics and found that completion of the course increased students’ perception of heterosexual and cisgender privilege and improved their attitudes toward LGBTQ people (2016:1684): at the beginning of the semester, 18.2% of students denied the existence of heterosexual privilege in their essays, compared to 11.9% at the end of the semester (2016:1689).

However, some researchers have debated the efficacy of educational measures in engendering privilege acknowledgment and reducing prejudiced attitudes and actions (Ballard et al. 2015; Seider 2011). Seider (2011) examined the role of education about homelessness on the civic engagement of economically privileged adolescents. He administered surveys to 83 high school seniors in an affluent Massachusetts suburb at the start and end of a class on social justice in literature (2011:338). Surprisingly, at the end of the semester, although students did come to attribute homelessness to situational rather than individual factors, they also developed “naturalizing” explanations to justify both homelessness and their own economic privilege (2011:350). This research reveals that paradoxically, education about privilege may in fact strengthen privileged individuals’ prejudices and foster defensive attitudes.

In response to research on formal education and the abstract knowledge it confers, many researchers have argued instead that frequent, intimate, and positive inter-group contact may be more likely than education to reduce privileged individuals' prejudices and improve inter-group relations. Such research analyzes inter-group relations through the lens of contact theory, which posits that privileged individuals who interact frequently with marginalized peers are more likely to develop sympathetic, sensitive, and positive attitudes than those who engage in comparatively little intergroup contact (Folkman Gleditsch and Berg 2017:107). Folkman Gleditsch and Berg administered an online survey to 63 white professors at a Midwestern university and found that white faculty members who interacted frequently with students and colleagues of color, grew up in racially diverse neighborhoods, and/or had friends from diverse racial backgrounds were more likely to engage in "pro-minority behaviors" (such as choosing to serve as advisors for students of color) than white faculty with little interracial contact experience (2017:112).

Based on the effects of education and inter-group contact individually, many have drawn the natural conclusion that the two approaches would work best in conjunction with each other (Seaman et al. 2009; Wozencroft et al. 2015). Wozencroft et al. measured the effect of experiential learning on able-bodied college students' attitudes toward people with disabilities. The authors administered a survey to a convenience sample of 84 students enrolled in a Recreation and Sport Management program that required them to work as camp counselors at a weeklong retreat for youth with disabilities (2015:130). The program involved twelve weeks of intensive, multidisciplinary education about campers' various disabilities, followed by the weeklong camp session itself. In order to determine which component — education, direct interaction, or a combination of the two — had the greatest effect on students' attitudes toward people with disabilities, the authors administered the Scale of Attitudes toward Disabled Persons (SADP) on

the first day of classes, on the last day of classes just before the first day of camp, and after the camp's end (Wozencroft et al. 2015:133). Using one-way repeated measures ANOVA and mixed-model ANOVA, the authors found a significant difference in counselors' attitudes toward people with disabilities between the beginning and end of their coursework ($p < 0.001$), and an even more significant improvement between the first day of class and the completion of the entire program ($p < 0.000$) (2015:134). Interestingly, they found no significant difference in counselors' attitudes between the end of coursework and the completion of the camp ($p < 0.227$) (2015:134), which appears to downplay the influence of inter-group contact. One explanation for this finding is that students had been so "thoroughly exposed" to disability issues in the classroom (including a preparatory degree of contact involving guest lectures from previous campers and home visits with prospective campers) that their interactions with campers complemented their learning experience but did not drastically alter it (Wozencroft et al. 2015:136). Nonetheless, intensive experiential education is certainly beneficial for creating positive inter-group relations.

It is important to note the limited generalizability of the research discussed above. Many of the studies mentioned rely on relatively small convenience samples of students and faculty from high schools and universities (Folkman Gleditsch and Berg 2017; Seider 2011; Wozencroft et al. 2015; Nunn 2016), which may not be representative of the wider U.S. population.

METHOD

Procedure

Sampling protocol. In November 2017, all Sociology 601 students fielded an 80-item survey to a convenience sample of 523 UNH undergraduates. We sent email requests to other students in our social networks, with each email containing a link to the survey, administered via Qualtrics. Participants gave their consent at the beginning of the survey; however, because the risk

of physical discomfort and psychological stress was negligible and because we were not collecting highly personal information, written consent and signatures were not required. Responses were recorded anonymously and participants were not offered compensation.

Statistical analysis. I interpreted my data using univariate and bivariate statistical analysis. Descriptive statistical analysis involved a summary of the sample demographics, as well as frequency distributions representing participants' responses to the individual survey questions used to assess my independent and dependent variables. I then cross-tabulated my independent and dependent variables and ran a chi-square test in order to determine whether the relationship between the two was statistically significant at an alpha level of 0.05.

Measures

Independent variable: inter-group contact. I operationalized the independent variable, inter-group contact, with the question, "Do you have any close friends, family members, colleagues, or coworkers who use a mobility device?"

Dependent variable: able-bodied entitlement. My dependent variable, able-bodied entitlement, is difficult to define and undoubtedly takes numerous concrete and abstract forms. For the purpose of this study, I conceptualized "entitlement" as able-bodied people's disregard for the existence and needs of people with disabilities, manifested in their appropriation of amenities designed for people who use mobility devices. Although there are numerous such amenities, many of them are designed for multiple purposes (for example, elevators aid both people with disabilities and cargo transportation throughout multi-story buildings), so in order to rule out extraneous uses of accessible amenities, I limited my operationalization of entitlement to able-bodied people's use of the larger stalls in multi-stall public restrooms, since it is common knowledge that these stalls are specifically designated to accommodate wheelchairs and other similar mobility devices. An

able-bodied person who deliberately uses one of these stalls when others are available displays a casual disregard for the presence and needs of people who use mobility devices. Thus I operationalized able-bodied entitlement with the question, “Have you ever used the large stall in a multi-stall bathroom on campus?”

Filters. Because I only intended to measure able-bodied people’s use of accessible amenities, I included the filter question, “Do you use a mobility device (such as a wheelchair, walker, or cane)?” and excluded respondents who answered “yes” from the cross-tabulation of the independent and dependent variables.

Additionally, I only measured the effects of inter-group contact on able-bodied people who had both received education about disabilities and who acknowledged their able-bodied privilege. I operationalized “education” with the question, “Have you ever taken a class (or a unit of a class) that focused on disability issues?” and only included those who answered “yes” in the cross-tabulation. Similarly, I operationalized privilege acknowledgment with the question, “If you do *not* have a physical disability, do you consider not having a disability to be an advantage, a disadvantage, or neither?” and only included those who answered “advantage” in the cross-tabulation. Considering these filters, my null and alternative hypotheses were:

H₀: Among able-bodied people who have taken a class about disability issues and who acknowledge their able-bodied privilege, those who have close relationships with people who use mobility devices are just as likely to appropriate accessible amenities as those who do not have such close relationships.

H₁: Among able-bodied people who have taken a class about disability issues and who acknowledge their able-bodied privilege, those who have close relationships with people

who use mobility devices are significantly less likely to appropriate accessible amenities than those who do not have such close relationships.

RESULTS

Sample Characteristics

The majority of the respondents were female, about a third were male, and a few (less than 1%) marked their gender as “other.” Juniors and seniors each comprised about a third of the sample (37% and 32.06%, respectively), and sophomores and freshman comprised the final third (sophomores: 20.63%; freshmen: 10.31%).

Frequency Distributions of Independent and Dependent Variables

Table 1. Contact with People Who Use Mobility Devices

		Frequency	Percent
Do you have any close friends, family members, colleagues, or coworkers who use a mobility device?	Yes	160	36.78%
	No	275	63.22%
	Total	435	100%

Table 2. Able-bodied Entitlement (Use of Accessible Amenities)

		Frequency	Percent
Have you ever used the large stall in a multi-stall bathroom on campus?	Yes	380	87.36%
	No	55	12.64%
	Total	435	100%

Most respondents reported that they did not have close relationships with anyone who uses a mobility device, and the overwhelming majority reported having used the large stall in a multi-stall bathroom. Specifically, 63.22% of respondents do not have any close friends, family members, colleagues, or coworkers who use mobility devices, compared to 36.78% who do. Additionally, while 87.36% of respondents have used a large stall in a multi-stall bathroom, only 12.64% have not.

Main Results

Table 3. Effect of Inter-group Contact on Able-bodied People’s Use of Accessible Amenities (Filtered for Disability Education and Privilege Acknowledgment)

		Do you have any close friends, family members, colleagues, or coworkers who use a mobility device?		
		Yes	No	Total
Have you ever used the large stall in a multi-stall bathroom on campus?	Yes	14 77.78%	30 96.77%	44 89.80%
	No	4 22.22%	1 3.23%	5 10.20%
	Total	18 100.00%	31 100.00	49 100.00%

		Do you have any close friends, family members, colleagues, or coworkers who use a mobility device?
Have you ever used the large stall in a multi-stall bathroom on campus?	Chi Square	4.48
	Degrees of Freedom	1
	p-value	0.03

Of able-bodied people who possess knowledge of disability issues (including both formal education and privilege acknowledgment), those who also have close relationships with people who use mobility devices are significantly less likely to use the large stall in multi-stall public bathrooms than those with comparatively little inter-group contact. 77.78% of able-bodied people who are familiar with disability on both intellectual and interpersonal axes have used the large stall and 22.22% have not, whereas 96.77% of able-bodied people who are familiar with disability *only* on intellectual axes and who are not interpersonally familiar with people who use mobility devices have used the large stall, and only 3.23% have not. The p-value of the chi square test statistic is 0.03, so at an alpha level of 0.05, I can reject my null hypothesis and confirm with 95% confidence that among able-bodied people who are intellectually familiar with disability issues, close interpersonal interaction with mobility device users considerably reduces able-bodied people's appropriation of amenities designed for wheelchair accessibility.

Interestingly, although one might expect that privilege acknowledgment would decrease able-bodied entitlement (Lopez Bunyasi 2015), it may in fact either slightly increase entitlement or have only a negligible effect (Ballard et al. 2015, Seider 2011). The following cross-tabulation

is filtered only to include able-bodied people who have taken a class about disability and does not account for acknowledgment of privilege.

Table 4. Effect of Inter-group Contact on Able-bodied People’s Use of Accessible Amenities (Filtered for Disability Education Only)

		Do you have any close friends, family members, colleagues, or coworkers who use a mobility device?		
		Yes	No	Total
Have you ever used the large stall in a multi-stall bathroom on campus?	Yes	41 77.36%	65 95.59%	106 87.60%
	No	4 22.64%	3 4.41%	15 12.40%
	Total	53 100.00%	68 100.00%	121 100.00%

		Do you have any close friends, family members, colleagues, or coworkers who use a mobility device?	
		Chi Square	
Have you ever used the large stall in a multi-stall bathroom on campus?	Chi Square	9.11	
	Degrees of Freedom	1	
	p-value	0.00	

Table 3 is filtered only to include able-bodied respondents who have both taken a class about disability issues and who reported that they consider their able-bodiedness an “advantage”; Table 4, on the other hand, is filtered to include only able-bodied respondents who have taken a class about disability issues, irrespective of privilege acceptance or denial. 77.78% of able-bodied people who have taken a class about disability, acknowledge their privilege, and have intimate relationships with people with disabilities have used a large stall, whereas an incrementally smaller percentage (77.38%) of able-bodied people who have taken a class about disability and have intimate relationships with people with disabilities but who do not necessarily recognize their privilege have used a large stall. The same pattern is true for able-bodied people who do not report interpersonal familiarity: 96.77% of able-bodied people who have taken a class about disability and who acknowledge their privilege but do not have close relationships with people with disabilities have used a large stall, compared to 95.59% of able-bodied people who do not have close relationships with people with disabilities, have taken a class about disability, and do not necessarily acknowledge their privilege. As the test statistic for Table 4 shows, the relationship between close inter-group contact and the use of accessible amenities for able-bodied people who have taken a class about disability is more statistically significant (p-value 0.00) than the relationship between close inter-group contact and the use of accessible amenities for able-bodied people who have taken a class about disability *and* who consider their able-bodiedness an advantage (p-value 0.03). This paradoxical finding may be consistent with Seider’s observation that privileged individuals, when educated about their privilege, may accept and acknowledge this new information but may also become defensive about their privileged position and act in ways that justify their privilege as “deserved.” However, due to the small sample size, it is difficult to make generalizations, especially given the infinitesimal differences in percentages.

CONCLUSION

Summary of Findings

My research indicates that among able-bodied people who possess formal knowledge of disability and able-bodied privilege, those who also have close relationships with people who use mobility devices are significantly less likely to appropriate accessible amenities than those who do not. Additionally, privilege acknowledgment may either paradoxically increase able-bodied people's appropriation of amenities or may have only a negligible effect in comparison to education and inter-group contact. These findings demonstrate the value of meaningful interaction in conjunction with formal education about disability issues. In order to actively dismantle the casual ableism that allows able-bodied people to act with disregard for the welfare of people with disabilities, it is necessary to create disability justice initiatives that incorporate both educational and interactional elements.

Limitations

Like much of the published research on this topic, my data is drawn from a small convenience sample of college students and therefore may not be generalizable beyond the University of New Hampshire undergraduate population. Additionally, as mentioned previously, abstract concepts such as "entitlement" are difficult to define and measure objectively. I limited the conceptual definition to the appropriation of accessible amenities in general and to the appropriation of wheelchair-accessible stalls in public bathrooms in particular, and excluded other possible manifestations of entitlement. As a result, I was not able to assess all aspects of entitlement, and subsequently my findings may be low in content validity. A more comprehensive measure of able-bodied entitlement would not only address able-bodied people's use of other

accessible accommodations, but would also assess attitudinal indicators of ableism, such as opinions on public policy and genetic engineering.

Implications for Future Research

An interesting area for future studies on this topic is an investigation into the nuances of privilege acknowledgment. Some researchers have observed that privilege acknowledgment improves inter-group relations; some have denied any substantial effect; still others have found that it sows the seeds of identity politics and creates division and defensiveness. However, perhaps the source from which people learn about privilege affects their understanding and use of the concept. For example, audiences may interpret information about disability differently depending on the identity of their educator: a disability justice advocate who *has* a disability may impart a message very different from that of an able-bodied (or able-minded) philanthropist or medical professional. Therefore, in order to more thoroughly illuminate the dynamics of inter-group relations, researchers and activists require a nuanced and intersectional approach that accounts for the multiple relational identities of all involved parties. A truly comprehensive understanding of these dynamics may in turn guide practical strategies for fostering climates of accommodation and respect.

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