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Disability in Islam: Challenging Saudi Disabled Teachers’ Perspectives

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to critically explore how do Saudi disabled teachers perceive the nature of disability in relation to Islamic teachings, as this impacts on themselves as disabled teachers and how they interact, treat and teach their disabled students. The two primary sources of Islamic teachings – the Qur'an and the Sunnah of Prophet Muhammad (i.e. Hadiths)- were used to conceptualise this inquiry and ground it in the literature. These sources examined to understand how they approach disability in relation to disabled participant teachers' understandings and to understand how Islam interprets disability. Disability-first language was used in this study because it puts the problems of disability on society rather than disabled people (Aldakhil, 2020). Data were generated through conducting in-depth semi-structured telephone interviews with ten disabled teachers. Findings show critical contradictions between teachers' understanding of disability and Islamic teachings, as Miles (2007) puts it, it is true that the views of people of a particular faith often do not reach the standards taught by that faith. The study also show that the right interpretation of Islamic teachings has the potential to promote an affirmative model of disability that could challenge the unquestioned assumptions of disability presented by participant teachers.

Keywords: Disability, Islam, Teachers, Saudi Arabia.

INTRODUCTION

The term disability does not exist in the two primary sources of Islamic teachings – the Qur'an and the Sunnah of Prophet Muhammad (i.e. Hadiths) (Bazna & Hatab, 2005; Rispler-Chaim, 2007; Hassanien, 2015). However, central to disability is how the Qur'an and the Sunnah conceptualise 'human perfection'. These sources reveal that Islam understands people as "biologically limited beings, we cannot possibly consider the idea of 'absolute' perfection, because the Absolute belongs to the realm of Divine attributes alone" (Asad, 1999, p. 21). In line with this, there is no definitive statement that could characterise what perfection of humans' bodies, minds and psychology actually means (Bazna & Hatab, 2005; Goodley, 2014), and "to suppose that all human beings should, or even could, strive towards one and the same 'type' of perfection" would be unreasonable (Asad, 1999, p. 22). As Asad (1999, p. 22) states, "If perfection were to be standardized to a specific 'type'... human beings would have to give up, or change, or suppress, all their individual differentiations", which is arguably impossible (Aldakhil, 2017). Therefore, Islam requires all Muslims irrespective of dis/ability to make the best of [themselves] so that they might honor the life-gift which [their] Creator has bestowed upon [them]; and to help [their] fellow-beings, by means of [their] own development, in their spiritual, social and material endeavors. But the form of [one's] individual life is in no way fixed by a standard. (Asad, 1999, p. 23).

Islam, in this sense, acknowledges impairments as morally neutral (Bazna & Hatab, 2005; Rispler-Chaim, 2007) and that people have different abilities and possibilities which is something positive and influential in how they interact with each other and with their society (Aldakhil, 2017).

The Qur'an and the Sunnah include narratives of people having different bodies and minds (Bazna & Hatab, 2005). However, they recognise these differences neither as a punishment nor as a blessing (Bazna & Hatab, 2005; Blanks & Smith, 2009), but as part and parcel of human beings' diversity and experiences and that it is the responsibility of society to make sure that each individual's requirements are met (Milles, 2001; Bazna & Hatab, 2005; Rispler-Chaim, 2007; Al Khatib, 2017). On the other hand, Islam does not represent disability as a wrath or punishment from Allah or as a result of a person's own or parental sins because these narratives are absent from the writings and teachings of Islam (Rispler-Chaim, 2007). The evidence of Islam's representation of disability as a 'normal' aspect of human beings' experience is shown in how and to what extent Muslims are required to collectively participate in compulsory and optional activities such as daily prayers and pilgrimage (Hajj) irrespective of dis/ability, colour or social status (Milles, 2001; Rispler-Chaim, 2007; Hasnain, Shaikh &

Ahanawani, 2008). In Islamic religious activities, individuals are given the right to perform them in the way, time and to the extent that corresponds to their individual requirements in terms of dis/ability, age and gender. As the Qur'an states, "God does not burden any human being with more than he is well able to bear" (Al-Baqarah, v. 286, as translated by Asad, 1980).

Islam promotes inclusion in all aspects of life regardless of differences (Rispler-Chaim, 2007; Al Katib, 2017), particularly in religious activities (Asad, 1999; Blanks & Smith, 2009). As Rispler-Chaim (2007) points out, inclusion is promoted in Islam as a result of its positive recognition of people's differences as 'normal' aspects of human diversity. Milles (2001) supports this when arguing that disabled people are treated as full members in Muslim communities. Islamic history contains many examples of disabled people who were included and had prominent social status (Aldakhil, 2017). For example, during the period when Islamic civilization flourished, from the 8th to the 13th century,

a significant number of [people labelled] blind, deaf or physically disabled [...] played notable roles as philologists, transmitters of the law, teachers, poets, and social commentators, outstanding among whom were Abu'l Ala al-Ma'arri, Abu Uthman Amr bin Bahr (Al-Jahiz), Bashshar ibn Burd, Ibn-Sirin, Muwaffaq al-Din Muzaffar, and Atta Ibn Abi Rabah. (Guvercin, 2008, para. 8)

Moreover, in our current era in Saudi Arabia, disabled people have been appointed to influential positions such as the labelled blind Abdulaziz Al Ash-Sheikh, who holds the most influential religious position; Professor Nasser Al-Mousa, also labelled with blindness, a member of the Consultative Assembly of Saudi Arabia and holds a BA and an MA from San Francisco State University and a PhD in special education from Vanderbilt University in the US (Aldakhil, 2017).

Although this is not often the case, there are many disabled people who are discriminated against, excluded and oppressed in Muslim society and Saudi Arabia is no exception (Aldakhil, 2017). The religion of Islam forbids this behaviour and asserts that all human beings deserve love, respect, support, protection and quality education (Bazna & Hatab, 2005; Hassanien, 2015; Al Khatib, 2017). An example of this is Islam's opposition to defining and calling disabled people by their impairments (Milles, 2001) and its emphasis on the provision of accommodations and support to make sure that everyone is actively involved in society (Bazna & Hatab, 2005; Blanks & Smith, 2009). This supports the argument of Bazna and Hatab (2005) and Al Khatib (2017) that Islam emphasises the right of disabled people to full inclusion in society and stresses that it is the responsibility of society to make sure that this happens. As Hassanien (2015) and Al Khatib (2017) point out, inclusion is valued and encouraged in Islam but prejudice against and exclusion of any group is forbidden. This argument is supported by the Qur'an prohibiting, for example, discriminatory language against any human beings: "...neither shall you defame one another, nor insult one another by [opprobrious] epithets" (Al-Hujurat, v. 11, as translated by Asad, 1980). This prohibition does not change in the face of dis/ability, gender and background. The conclusion is that Islam does not judge human beings' worth based on their minds, bodies, skin colour, gender or material achievements, but on their humanity, moral values and spiritual maturity. There can be no doubt because Prophet Muhammad explicitly states, "Verily, God does not look at your bodies or your appearances, but looks into your hearts" (Muslim, 1990, Hadith 2564) and the Qur'an points out, "O [people!]...Verily, the noblest of you in the sight of God is the one who is most deeply conscious of Him. Behold, God is all-knowing, all-aware" (AlHujurat, v. 13, as translated by Asad, 1980). However, the beliefs and practices of people of a particular faith often do not reach the standards taught by that faith (Miles, 2007). Therefore, this study aims to explore how do Saudi disabled teachers perceive the nature of disability in relation to Islamic teachings, as this affects how they interact, treat and teach disabled students.

Research Methods

Participants

This study involved 10 disabled participant teachers (5 males and 5 females). They were all purposively chosen because they are themselves disabled and teachers of disabled students in mainstream schools. Participants with these characteristics could provide the most valuable data because the phenomena are of mutual interest between them and the researcher (Willington, 2015; Denscombe, 2007). Participants were given codes (i.e., P1, P2, P3, P4 until P10) to ensure that their identity is being disguised (see Table 1 for more information about the participants).

Data Collection

This issue was explored through conducting in-depth semi-structured telephone interviews. The interviews were originally designed to be face-to-face, but it became necessary to redesign them to telephone interviews to comply with the Saudi precaution procedures of the Coronavirus (Covid 19). As Irvine (2010, p. 6) carefully puts it, “ethical motivations for using telephone interviews may be reason enough to justify that mode”.

This study depended on in-depth interviews because interviews “reach the parts which other methods cannot reach...interviewee’s thoughts, values, prejudices, perceptions, views, feelings and perspectives” (Wellington, 2015, p. 137). This was also relevant to researcher’s epistemological and ontological assumptions which view knowledge as socially constructed and evolves through a dialogue (Kvale, 1996; Bryman, 2012). Semi-structured interviews, in particular, were used because it is “may be more manageable than unstructured ones, while avoiding the inflexibility of the fully structured approach” (Hammond & Wellington, 2013, p. 92). It also often generates rich and detailed answers to the issue under exploration (Bryman, 2012). Interviews lasted between 29.10 (shortest) minutes and 40.22 (longest) minutes (see Table 1).

Table 1. Summary of interviewees and interviews.

Participant Code	Gender	Type of Disability	Age	Teaching Speciality	Qualification	Teaching Experience	Interview Length
P1	F	Physical Disability	30-35	Special Education	BA in Education	8 years	00:29:30
P2	F	Physical Disability	35-40	Special Education	BA in Education	9 years	00:35:02
P3	F	Hearing Disability	40-45	Special Education	BA in Education	11 years	00:32:10
P4	F	Visual Disability	30-35	Special Education	BA in Special Education	6 years	00:39:07
P5	F	Visual Disability	30-35	Special Education	BA in Special Education	6 years	00:30:30
P6	M	Hearing Disability	40-45	Special Education	BA in Special Education	9 years	00:33:01
P7	M	Physical Disability	30-35	Special Education	BA in Special Education	7 years	00:29:59
P8	M	Visual Disability	35-40	Special Education	BA in Special Education	10 years	00::40:22
P9	M	Visual Disability	30-35	Special Education	BA in Special Education	6 years	00:30:23
P10	M	Visual Disability	30-35	Special Education	BA in Special Education	6 years	00:29:10

All interviews were audio-recorded using an iPhone6s-recording system Voice Memos after gaining the permission of each participant. This digital system was a good choice because it includes the superior recording and sound quality and ease of importing the audio-recorded interviews onto a mac computer. During the process of transcription and translation, researcher could start and stop the recording and use the replay function as often as required to decipher any unclear and/or garbled parts which proved very helpful.

Ethical Considerations

This research project was ethically approved by Majmaah University ethical review panel (see appendix 1). In regard to this, all ethical considerations were taken into account, including voluntary, anonymity, confidentiality, privacy, written and signed informed consent, permission of interviews’ recording and the right of withdrawing from the study at any time and without reason.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis phases suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006, p. 87) were used to analyse data. These intersected phases include familiarising yourself with your data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report.

Presentation of Findings

Each participant in this study was given the chance to express his or her opinion. The thematic analysis process generates three repeated themes: 1) disability can be a punishment from Allah; 2) disability can be a mercy, a gift or abtila (test) from Allah; 3) disability can be a consequence of the evil eye. These themes led to answering the research question: How do Saudi disabled teachers perceive the nature of disability in relation to Islamic teachings? as this impacts on themselves as disabled teachers and how they interact, treat and teach their

disabled students. This question was followed by the following probing questions: How, why, what and can you give an example. The common generated themes are presented in detail below and then discussed after that.

Disability can be a Punishment from Allah

Some participant teachers in this study made a connection between people's sins and disability. They believe it is possible that Allah punishes a disabled person or a family which has a disabled person as a consequence of disobeying Allah. P1, P3 and P7 clearly stated that they 'believe disability can be a punishment from Allah as a result of sins committed by the person or his [her] parents'. P3 argued:

Being disabled as a consequence of Allah's punishment is possible. To confirm this, I will tell you a story. I know an elderly woman who prayed against a couple because they oppressed her. As a result, they had a disabled child. Allah punished them through their child because they oppressed her

Similarly, P7 pointed out that "disability can be a punishment from Allah through a car accident or biological and medical reasons".

P9 found it difficult to judge whether a disability can be a punishment from Allah or not. He preferred not to talk about this, as he put it, "I think it is difficult to identify whether a disability is a punishment from Allah or not. I would rather not to talk about this as such an issue is complicated".

The rest of participant teachers, however, rejected this claim, they stressed that disability cannot be a punishment from Allah because Allah does not punish his servants. P10 stated that "such a view is completely contradicted with our faith [Islam]". Also, P2, P4, P5, P6 and P8 were clear about their personal rejection of this claim, but acknowledged that such belief exists among some Saudi people.

Disability can be Mercy, a Gift or Abtila (test) from Allah

Participant teachers who rejected disability being a kind of punishment from Allah, connected it to other cultural and religious beliefs which include disability being a gift, mercy and abtila (test) from Allah and/or a result of an evil eye. I will present participants' responses about the first now and the other in the coming sub-section.

These participants believed that disability is a grace from Allah, not a punishment. For example, P2 said:

Everything that occurs to us is predestined. If a person has a disability, this is not a punishment but a grace from Allah as Allah will reward him [or her] by removing his [or her] sins in the hereafter

Similarly, P9 said, "...disability is not a punishment from Allah, but an abtila, a gift and a mercy". Further, P4, P5, P6, P8, P9, P10 viewed disability as an abtila (test) from Allah to test people's patience, love and faith in Allah. They believed that a disabled person and his/her family will be rewarded for this when they are in desperate need of Allah's rewards (الأجر).

Disability can be a Consequence of the Evil Eye

All participant teachers believed that the evil eye is real and can lead to a person being disabled. As P7 argued: I believe a person's disability can be a consequence of an evil eye. As both Muslim and Albukhari (two Islamic scholars) reported, Prophet Mohammed, peace be upon him, said, eye is real.

P4 reported a story of his brother becoming disabled as a consequence of the evil eye. He stated:

... as a consequence of an evil eye, God protect us! my older brother became disabled 'hemiplegia' when he was a year and half of age. However, being disabled doesn't prevent him from being a success. He has completed his BA and MA degrees in Business and now he heads a department at [...] company

In a similar sense, P8 recounted a hadith (i.e. a saying of the Prophet Mohammed) and provided a story to support her argument:

Prophet Mohammed, peace be upon him, said 'Evil eye puts a man into the grave and a camel into the cooking pot'. [She also reported a story saying,] an evil eye hit one girl in our school after she did an awesome performance at the end of the school year's celebration. As a consequence, the girl became physically disabled the day after, God preserve us!

DISCUSSION

It is important to know that what is no longer acceptable in a particular society is still acceptable and practiced in other societies today (Parmenter, 2001). Therefore, cultural and religious understanding of disability was a central theme emerging in this study. This is because cultural and religious beliefs form the basis of many people's thinking in Saudi Arabia, disabled teachers no exception. As Oliver (1990), Shakespeare (1994), Ingstad and Whyte (1995) and Ghia (2015) argue that the culture and ideology of a particular society have a great influence in how professionals construct their understanding of disability. Bryant (2012) supports this when stating that culture and religion are intertwined in constructing people's thinking. This view was also emphasised by Vygotsky (1978) when stressing the central role of an individual's culture and community in the process of making meaning and interpreting a certain phenomenon.

The findings of this study agree with this literature as participant teachers acknowledged the predestination of disability and interpreted disability as punishment, abtila (test), gift or the evil eye. Acknowledging disability as

predestination was not surprising because this reflects a fundamental principle in Islam—to believe that everything that happens is according to God’s will. As stated in the Holy Qur’an, “Nothing will happen to us except what Allah has decreed for us: He is our protector: and on Allah let people! put their trust” (Al-Taubah, v. 51, as translated by Asad, 1980). In fact, the word Islam denotes ‘peace and submission to the will of Allah’. However, disagreement and sometimes contradictions among participant teachers were present when it came to interpreting predestination in respect to disability as a consequence of punishment, mercy, gift, abtila (test) from Allah, or the evil eye. As Hassanein (2015, p. 2) puts it, “although Islam lays down certain beliefs and principles, their application is subject to interpretation”. In a similar sense, Miles (2002) points out, that in many parts of the world, some people might understand disability as ‘given’ for a particular purpose as a punishment for sins, mercy, gift, test, an inescapable consequence and a statistically probable consequence. On the other hand, one participant decided not to interpret disability in relation to Islam. She believed this topic is too slippery and complicated and may affect their relationship with God if they interpreted it unsatisfactorily. Miles (2002) captures the essence of this belief when she says that questions considering disability in respect to religion are sensitive because both phenomena are delicate issues.

In my view, these conceptions are superstition and not a true interpretation of how Islam views disability and disabled people. As Alajmi (2005, p. 10) puts it, “Saudi Arabia is a nation heavily influenced by tradition”. Bazna and Hatab (2005) as well as Hassanein (2015a) support this, arguing that the beliefs and practices of any religion are usually affected by cultural superstitions. Miles (2007) is in agreement with this when she states that it is true that the beliefs and practices of people of a particular faith often do not reach the standards taught by that faith. She further points out that religious beliefs and practices are usually conflated with secular ones which do not belong to that faith. The fact is that Islam does not represent disability as a consequence of God’s wrath, punishment for sins, the evil eye or similar superstitious concepts (Rispler-Chaim, 2007). Bazna and Hatab (2005) examine the position and attitudes of the Qur’an and Hadith (the two primary sources of Islamic teachings). Their findings are consistent with Rispler-Chaim (2007). They concluded that in Islam disability is “neither a curse nor a blessing” but a part of human beings’ diversity (Bazna & Hatab, 2005, p. 24). To be specific, impairment is considered morally neutral in Islam (Bazna & Hatab, 2005; Rispler-Chaim, 2007). Furthermore, Islam recognises all human beings as equal and fights for people who are oppressed and marginalised (Ahmed, 2007; Blanks & Smith, 2009). Disabled peoples’ rights are a common theme in the writings of Islamic jurisprudence (Blanks & Smith, 2009; Hassanein, 2015a). These writings stress disabled peoples’ equal opportunities, inclusion, education, dignity, and personal freedom as well as their protection from all forms of harm and discrimination (Fahmi, 1998; Bazna & Hatab, 2005; Hasnain, Shaikh & Shanawani, 2008; Blanks & Smith, 2009; Al Khatib, 2017). As Al Khatib (2017) succinctly puts it, “Islam calls for accepting all people and encourages including them. Prejudice against and exclusion of any group of people are opposed” (p. 85). Therefore, Islamic activities are mostly performed in a collective and inclusive manner, in which all Muslims (whether labelled disabled or normal) are required to participate to the extent of their potential. The Holy Qur’an states that:

O{people!} Behold, We have created you all out of a male and a female, and have made you into nations and tribes, so that you might come to know one another. Verily, the noblest of you in the sight of God is the one who is most deeply conscious of Him. Behold, God is all-knowing, all-aware (Al-Hujurat, v. 13, as translated by Asad, 1980).

The emphasis in this verse on creating all human beings out of one male (Adam) and female (Hawa) intimates the equal origin of all people (Hassanein, 2015) and the verse ‘Made you into nations and tribes’ is meant to emphasise the value of diversity and the importance of mutual interaction, understanding and appreciation of each other regardless of differences of race, colour and/or dis/abilities (Asad, 1980). Moreover, Almusa and Ferrell (2004) and Bazna and Hatab (2005) state that Islam calls people to respect and support each other and to appreciate the ability and possibility of each individual, and that this reality is stable whether the individual is black or white, male or female, disabled or non-disabled. It is stated in the Holy Qur’an that “God does not burden any human being with more than he is well able to bear (Al-Baqarah, v. 286, as translated by Asad, 1980). Further, the Holy Qur’an bans any teasing and contemptuous language or behaviour directed at a particular person:

...No men shall deride [other] men: It may well be that those [whom they deride] are better than themselves; and no women [shall deride other] women: it may well be that those [whom they deride] are better than themselves. And neither shall you defame one another, nor insult one another by [opprobrious] epithets... (Al-Hujurat, v. 11, as translated by Asad, 1980).

This interpretation suggests that Islam has the potential to promote an affirmative model of disability instead of the individualised model of disability which was constructed through the wrong interpretation of Islamic teachings.

Limitations

Limitations exist in any research project regardless of how well it was designed and conducted (Bryman, 2012;

Wellington, 2015). Therefore, the limitations of this study include: First, the use of one method to generate data, if two or three methods were used, this would inform the data and provide in-depth understanding of the phenomenon in question. Second, the results cannot be generalised. The study is qualitative and qualitative research is often not meant for generalisation as per quantitative research. As Polit and Beck (2010) put it, most qualitative studies do not aim to generalise their results because they often seek to explore the understandings and experiences of limited number of participants about certain issues rather than generalisation. Third, the sample was small and purposively chosen and did not include other stakeholders such as disabled students and parents of disabled people, which if they were involved, would inform the data and maybe express different opinions about the phenomenon in question. Fourth, the researcher was the analyser and the translator of data from Arabic to English (to publish the study in a western journal), to minimise the impact on the data and to ensure the conceptual equivalence of nuanced meanings of words and phrases when translating (Hennink et al, 2011; Bryman, 2012).

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Superstitious conceptions around Islam and disability have resulted in individualised understanding of disability. In fact, the interpretation of Islam and the behaviour of Muslims does not often represent Islam. Islam is clear and innocent from these narratives (Miles, 2001; Almusa & Ferell, 2004; Bazna & Hatab, 2005; Rispler-Chaim, 2007; Blanks & Smith, 2009; Hassanein, 2015a; Al Khatib, 2017). All human beings are equal in the sight of Allah irrespective of race, colour and dis/ability (Ahmed, 2007) and Islam views impairments as a part of human beings' diversity (Bazna & Hatab, 2005; Rispler-Chaim, 2007). Islam does not judge or differentiate human beings based on their physical appearance or mental superiority but on their spiritual maturity and moral values (Almusa & Ferell, 2004; Hasnain, Shaikh & Shanawani, 2008; Hassanein, 2015). As Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him, clearly says, "Verily, God does not look at your bodies or your appearances, but looks into your hearts" (Sahih Muslim, 1990, Hadith 2564).

Saudi teacher education and professional development programmes should challenge the common wrong interpretations of Islam in relation to disability. These programmes should change the mentality of education officials, school personnel and policy-makers regarding how they understand disability. It is important to stress that such programmes must be anti-ableist and anti- normative (Lalvant & Broderick, 2013; Goodley, 2014, 2017) to encourage disabled and non-disabled school personnel to critically rethink their individualised understanding of disability and disabled people (Valle & Connor, 2010; Goodley, 2017). Moreover, the programmes should focus on interpreting the teachings of Islam in a way that respect the ability and possibility of each individual and recognise disability as part of human beings' diversity which can't be changed but society can. As Ware (2001) puts it, changing people's conception of disability must be based on the understanding of disability as part of the human experience and disability as social constructed phenomenon.

The Saudi Ministry of Education should also contribute in challenging the common wrong conceptions of disability through exposing Saudi education officials, teachers and principals to new and different theories and views about disability and disabled people. This can be accomplished through offering them opportunities to attend, participate in and organise local and international seminars and conferences as well as to join disability and disabled people's organisations. This would expose school personnel and education officials to different debates and views about disability, to different disability-related legislation, and to disabled people's rights in different nations and contexts.

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