

“It’s not OK to talk to anyone this way”: Responding to Disability-Based Hate Crime.

Introduction

It is only recently that disability hate crime was recognized as a specific crime, rather than an act of “bullying”. Now, reports of disability-based hate crime are increasing globally. We know that hate crime has negative effects on its targets, who may later experience social isolation or mental ill health. However, so far, studies that examine disability-based hate crime have not looked at how people perceive this specific type of crime across countries with different hate crime laws, nor have they examined the reasons why disabled and nondisabled people who witness disability hate crime may choose to help the target.

Summary of Research

We surveyed 467 adults online and asked them to read disability-based hate crime scenarios. There were two versions of the scenario, and participants read one of these. They either read about a hate crime where a deaf person, or where a wheelchair user, was the target. Our survey was conducted in Hungary, Italy, Denmark, Sweden, Finland and Scotland. We measured how people thought they would respond, and how they would feel, if they were to witness this incident. We measured how much time they spend with disabled people, whether they identify as disabled, and the reasons for their responses.

Summary of main findings

Participants’ responses were similar regardless of whether the hate crime scenario they read about targeted a wheelchair user or a deaf person.

Across the different nations, participants from Italy reported spending more time with disabled people compared to other nations. Italians also perceived less discrimination towards disabled people in society, showed lower empathy than UK participants. Nordic participants reported less anger than UK participants in response to the scenarios. There were no other notable differences.

Participants who self-identified as disabled reported that there was more discrimination towards disabled people than did nondisabled people, spent more time with disabled people and felt less anxiety about approaching a disabled person.

What was associated with wanting to help the target in the scenario, or to avoid them? Our analysis focused on what would be associated with helping the target or avoiding the incident, if you were witnessing it. Our analysis showed that spending more time with disabled people was linked with less anxiety about approaching a disabled person and more anger at the situation in the scenario. In turn, this led to more desire to help the target and less desire to avoid acting in this kind of situation.

Why would participants choose to help the target or avoid the situation? Our qualitative analysis identified five main clusters of reasoning behind wanting to help the target or avoid the situation.

1. *Prior Experience and Emotional Response:* Prior experience with disabled people, or being disabled, significantly impacted participants' willingness to help. Participants with prior experience of disability expressed more empathy with the target and anger about the scenario, which motivated intervention, while those without experience often avoided involvement.
2. *Perception of the Situation.* Those who said that they would help said that they saw the intervention as a moral duty, emphasizing solidarity and support for equality. Some said that they would avoid over-protection of the target, by checking if help was wanted before intervening, while those who said that they would avoid the

situation said that they would hesitate due to concerns over lack of personal experience or seeing discrimination as trivial.

3. *Reluctance to Act*: Some participants explained reluctance to intervene in terms of fears for personal safety, embarrassment, or escalation. Participants often felt more willing to help if the disabled target was a friend or in an obvious struggle.
4. *Strategies for helping*: For those who chose to help, strategies included ensuring support was desired by the disabled person and confronting discriminatory attitudes of the perpetrator. This contrasted with those who said they would avoid the situation, who had a tendency to view discriminatory comments as harmless or typical, revealing an normalised acceptance of ableism.

In summary, these findings highlight how direct experience, emotional response, and regional attitudes shape responses toward people with disabilities. Helping intentions were often motivated by empathy, anger about discrimination, and moral responsibility, while avoidance was linked to normalization of ableism and fear of escalation.

Main Implications

For Policy, Practice and Campaigning around Disability Hate Crime

The marked differences in responses based on the amount of time participants have spent with disabled people means that interventions to support targets of disability-based hate crime in the moment rest on knowledge of disability and disabled people, and anger about the situation.

Our findings showed some cross-national differences in perceptions of disability discrimination and emotional responses to disability-based hate crime. Policy makers then need to be aware of the specific cultural, media, and historical factors that could underline discourse around disability-based hate crime in their own nation. Such

knowledge could enhance understanding of how this discourse affects societal responses and might inform public awareness campaigns aimed at reducing hate crimes against disabled people globally.

For theory and research

The marked differences in responses based on time spent with disabled people, suggests a need for further research into the psychological mechanisms through which personal identification with disabled people affect perceptions of discrimination and responses to hate crimes.

Our findings may not extend to hate crimes targeting intellectual disabled people, where reactions may be influenced by different social and moral norms. Research should explore hate crimes against intellectually disabled targets to investigate whether different biases, such as perceived vulnerability, affect responses.

Find out more

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Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC):

<https://www.equalityhumanrights.com/>) in the UK: Provides data, reports, and guidance on hate crimes targeting disabled people.

European Disability Forum (EDF: <https://www.edf-feph.org/>): EDF publishes reports and briefs on disability hate crime across Europe, often with a focus on advocacy and policy recommendations.