

Concepts of Disability as a Hub for the Study of Cognitive Development

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Concepts of Disability as a Hub for the Study of Cognitive Development

Take a moment to consider the most important aspects of your identity. Then, consider how you would describe your closest friends. If you or your friends are *not* disabled, then ability status (e.g., being “able-bodied” or “typically-developing”) was likely overlooked. Indeed, ability status is *often* forgotten or neglected by persons when considering dimensions of human identity and diversity (e.g., Bacon & Lalvani, 2019). Yet, as of 2023, persons with disabilities collectively constitute 27% of U.S. adults (Centers for Disease Control, 2023). Moreover, approximately 1 in 6 children in the United States receive services under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) (National Center for Education Statistics, 2023). Recently, there has been considerable social progress in how people with disabilities are recognized and treated, yet they remain socially disadvantaged in ways that extend beyond the immediate limitations of their disabilities. Adults and children with disabilities are often the targets of discrimination (Equality and Human Rights Commission, 2020; Koller et al., 2018; Rose & Gage, 2016), and may develop fewer or lower quality relationships than TD persons (Diamond et al., 1993); these social ramifications negatively impact disabled persons’ lives in many ways (National Alliance on Mental Illnesses, n.d.). Thus, although one may take ability status for granted, how one thinks about disabilities and disabled persons can have major social implications.

Similar to studying concepts of race, gender, sexuality, and religion (e.g., Chalikh et al., 2017; Haslam et al., 2002; Mandalayawala et al., 2019; Taylor & Gelman, 2009), studying concepts of disability is important in its own right as such work may inform efforts to create a more inclusive society (e.g., Bacon & Lalvani, 2019; Lalvani, 2015; Lalvani & Broderick, 2013; Ware, 2001). Such work also promises to enrich our understanding of cognitive development, especially social-cognitive development, in unique ways, given that these concepts may be

informed by children's developing naïve theories of biology and psychology, essentialist intuitions, moral intuitions, and sense of group membership (Bartsch & Wellman, 1995; Gelman, 2004; Hatano & Inagaki, 1994; Over, 2018; Turiel, 2006). As well, exposure to persons with disability, and one's own experiences with disability, might inform children's naïve theories, essentialist intuitions, moral intuitions, and sense of group membership. Yet, published research that examines children's concepts of disability is still uncommon, and may be considered niche. That is, the general tendency to forget or neglect disability status in our everyday lives is found as well in how we have studied children's concepts of people.

This special issue was developed with an eye towards bringing research on concepts of disability into the mainstream. This collection of empirical and theoretical pieces provide new data and new perspectives on the development of disability concepts, and help to provide clear examples of how research on this theme can have important theoretical and practical implications. Topics of focus include how children conceptualize the causes of disability, children's essentializing of disability, children's concepts of specific types of disability, and children's beliefs about how persons with disabilities should be treated.

At the close of this special issue, we review and integrate existing work on children's concepts of disability, incorporating papers featured in this special issue. We also highlight important future directions in the developmental study of disability concepts.

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