A Cross-Cultural Study on Chinese Students’ Attitudes Towards People with Intellectual Disabilities

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ABSTRACT

Attitudes towards persons with disabilities have been one of the foci in disabilities studies. However, the majority of studies have been conducted in western countries, and it is uncertain whether the findings of those studies can be generalized to non-western countries. This study focuses on a Chinese cultural context, attempting to provide insights into how different people of varying cultural backgrounds perceive disabilities. In order to determine the influence of living and studying in the U. S. on Chinese graduate students’ attitudes toward persons with intellectual disabilities, an empirical investigation was conducted through an attitude survey of two groups of graduate students: Chinese graduate students at Bowling Green State University (BGSU) in the U. S. and Chinese graduate students at Shandong University (SDU) in the mainland of China. The two institutions were chosen based on their comparable characteristics and long-term sister relationship since 1991. The present study concludes that there was no significant difference in attitudes toward persons with intellectual disabilities between BGSU and SDU participants. This may be attributed to the low rate of Chinese international graduates’ acculturation due to academic and social challenges and barriers in adapting to their lives in the U.S., and the increasingly favorable attitudes of Chinese graduates in China along with some positive Chinese legislative policies concerning people with disabilities. This paper provides foundation for further research on Chinese Americans' attitudes toward disabilities and contributes to rehabilitation literature in a cultural context.

INTRODUCTION

Disabilities studies have extensively researched attitudes toward persons with disabilities. Over the past decades, the majority of the research on attitudes has focused on three areas: psychometric assessment of attitudes towards persons with intellectual disabilities, factors
influencing those attitudes, and methods or policies targeted to alter negative attitudes toward this marginalized group. However, the majority of studies have been conducted in western countries, and it is uncertain whether the findings of those studies can be generalized to non-western countries.

The present study addresses all three of the aforementioned areas, and it emphasizes a cultural context, attempting to provide insights into how different people of varying cultural backgrounds perceive disabilities. Although there have been cross-cultural studies on attitudes toward people with disabilities, few have focused on an acculturative perspective to explore the influences of acculturation on attitudes toward those with disabilities. Acculturation is a process of immigrants adopting the values, beliefs, and attitudes of mainstream culture and maintaining those of the heritage culture (Huang, 2007). This study seeks to determine the difference of attitudes toward persons with intellectual disabilities between Chinese graduates studying in the U.S. and their counterparts in China. It also examines the factors which may affect Chinese graduates’ attitudes toward those who have intellectual disabilities. Intellectual disability, traditionally called “mental retardation,” is a disability characterized by significant limitations both in intellectual functioning (learning, reasoning, and problem solving) and in adaptive behavior (conceptual skills, social skills, and practical skills). This disability typically manifests before the age of 18 (Turnbull, Turnbull, & Wehmeyer, 2008).

The Research Questions

The following research questions are the focus of this empirical study of attitudes toward people with intellectual disabilities held by a group of Chinese graduate students in the U. S. and those in China:
1. Are attitudes toward persons with intellectual disabilities significantly different between Chinese graduate students in the U.S. and China?

2. What are the factors that might affect Chinese graduate students’ attitudes toward persons with intellectual disabilities?

3. What factors might affect Chinese international students’ acculturation regarding their attitudes toward persons with intellectual disabilities?

Hypothesis

This study will focus on the effects of the American sociocultural context on Chinese international graduate students' attitudes toward persons with intellectual disabilities. The following hypothesis will be tested (H1): experience in the U.S. has significant influence on Chinese international graduate students' attitudes toward persons with intellectual disabilities, and Chinese graduate students in the U.S. have more positive attitudes about such persons compared with their counterparts in China who have never been to the U.S.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Previous studies have found that some traditional Chinese values may have a negative impact on these attitudes. An examination of some Chinese cultural beliefs and traditions which may influence the perception of disabled people in China is, therefore, warranted. Confucianism is the dominant philosophy in Chinese society. Mcloughlin, Zhou, and Clark (2005) states that Confucianism encourages tolerance, obedience, virtue, and courtesy. Confucian philosophy classifies people into three categories according to their intelligence: people of ‘great wisdom’, people of ‘average intelligence’, and people of ‘little intelligence’ (Zhang, 1988, p. 3). It emphasizes discrimination between people on the basis of individual merits and personalities. On the one hand, this philosophy encourages people to work hard and contribute to the development
of society. On the other hand, it has contributed to an elitist social system with social stratification and “structural segregation” (McLoughlin et al., 2005, p. 275), which ignores individual needs and stifles the desires of people with disabilities.

Moreover, according to Hampton (2000), Confucianism puts the focus on the harmony of society. The harmony of a Confucian society is based on the stability of the hierarchical structure and the fact that the authorities maintain power. This philosophy can encourage people to sacrifice their individual interests for the common good of society and keep society in harmony. At the same time, it causes a negative impact on people with disabilities because it ignores individual rights and special needs. Individuals with disabilities, therefore, are often neglected under this philosophy.

Another significant value system in Chinese culture is Buddhism. According to Bui and Turnbull (2003), Buddhism encourages self-restraint, self-deprivation, self-abnegation, self-effacement, and humbleness. Consequently, these cultural values create barriers to the development of people with special needs because they are encouraged to accept their social role as a marginalized population. The perception that disabled persons are inferior to others prevails in China, and persons with disabilities mostly accept their stigmatized roles in society. In addition, Hampton (2000) argues that Buddhists’ belief in *karma* also affects their perception of persons with disabilities. *Karma* is the belief that good deeds will cause positive consequences and bad deeds will bring about negative consequences. *Karma* teaches that if a family has a child born with a disability, the family must have behaved negatively or the family must have bad spirits (Bui & Turnbull, 2003). According to Chiang and Hadadian (2007), Chinese people generally perceive the birth of a child with disabilities as a sign of their parents’ bad *karma* or a curse from their ancestors. Therefore, the concept of *karma* usually makes people with
disabilities feel ashamed of being disabled and makes their family members feel ashamed of having such a disabled relative.

As stated by Hui and Triandis (1986), when a majority of the population is collectivist, the society is labeled collectivist. Chinese society is widely viewed as collectivist (Hampton, 2000; Hui & Triandis, 1986; Gardiner & Kosmitzki, 2008). In a collectivist culture such as China, conformity is highlighted and the evaluation of a person’s worth is often based on how much he/she contributes to the society (Hampton, 2000). In such a society, to have a person with a disability is not a personal issue, and the person with a disability is not only worried about the consequences of being disabled, but also the influence of his/her disability on the family. The individual may be concerned about whether he/she would become a burden to the family or whether he/she had brought shame to the family.

McCallion, Janicki, and Grant-Griffin (1997) conducted an empirical study on parental perceptions of disabilities in a broad range of ethnic groups, which further demonstrated the difficulties that Chinese culture presents to disabled people. Among African Americans, Chinese Americans, Haitian Americans, Hispanic/Latino Americans, and Korean Americans, they found that Chinese and Korean parents were more likely to consider disabilities to be shameful, and they “felt uncomfortable acknowledging their child’s disability and their need for services in their own communities” (p. 354). In extreme cases, some parents may try to hide their children who have disabilities.

Disabilities in the U.S.

In 1975, the U.S. Congress passed the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EAHCA) which is now referred to as the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA). It enhanced the role of the federal government by employing incentives and sanctions as inducements for
states to insure the educational rights of children with disabilities. The law requires that all children with disabilities between the ages of three and 21, as long as their disabilities are qualified for a certain level of education, are provided a free and appropriate public education (FAPE) in the least restrictive environment (LRE) (IDEA Regulations, 34 C. F. R. 300. 13).

The concept of a least restrictive environment means that children who have disabilities should have the opportunity to study with their peers who are without disabilities to the maximum extent possible. As a result of IDEA, children with disabilities can study in a mainstream environment as much as possible. The majority of children with disabilities are being included into general education environments (U.S. Department of Education, 2007).

After the EAHCA, the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) may be the most significant piece of disability legislation. ADA was passed by the U. S. Congress in 1990, and it was meant to eliminate discrimination against individuals with disabilities (Chiang & Hadadian, 2007). The ADA covers five major areas to ensure that individuals with disabilities enjoy opportunities and accommodations. These areas include: employment, public services, public accommodations, and services operated by private entities, telecommunications, and miscellaneous provisions (Hadadian & Duncan-Malone, 1994).

Another significant piece of legislation which has influenced the development of special education in the U.S. is the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) act which was enacted in 2002. The federal government sought to ensure quality education through the enactment of NCLB. NCLB requires that only when all schools within a state act in accordance with the general education provisions, can they obtain funds from the federal government (Kalaei, 2008). Kalaei (2008) also states that NCLB requires standardized testing but allows for reasonable adaptations and
accommodations for students with disabilities. In this way, Congress intends to find suitable
testing standards for students with disabilities of various categories and degrees.

The aforementioned legislative policies have contributed to a comparatively positive
environment for people with disabilities in the U.S. This may influence the attitudes and
acculturation experience of Chinese people who live in the U.S. toward the marginalized group.

Acculturation and Chinese Students’ Attitudes toward People with Disabilities

Some previous studies have demonstrated that the experience of acculturation affects
international students’ attitudes toward people with disabilities. Tseng (1972) conducted a
cross-cultural study on Asian students’ attitudes toward the disabled in terms of cultural
orientation, anxiety, and locus of control. Tseng found that anxiety and the length of time the
Asian students stayed in the U.S. were significant factors influencing their attitudes toward
people with disabilities. Tseng concluded that the higher the students’ anxiety level, the more
negative their attitudes toward the disabled; and, the longer they stayed in the U. S., the more
positive their attitudes toward the disabled.

There are very few studies on how acculturation influences Chinese students’ attitudes
toward persons with disabilities, and among these studies there are even less focused on Chinese
students. The only significant studies on the subject focus on Korean students and Greek students
studying in the U. S. Although they do not directly address Chinese students, their findings and
insights can at least facilitate a better understanding of the influence of acculturation on
international students’ attitudes toward persons with disabilities in the U. S. Choi and Lam
(2001) investigated the effects of acculturation on Korean students’ attitudes toward people with
disabilities. They conducted a comparative study among Korean students and Korean-American
students and found that Korean-American subjects showed more positive attitudes toward people
with mental disabilities than their Korean counterparts. One explanation for the negative attitudes held by Korean students is that in Korea, people with mental disabilities are not legally classified as people with disabilities. They are very likely to be institutionalized, which constitutes the high stigmatization of persons with mental disabilities. Another reason is the belief that mental illness is a punishment for sin, which is commonly believed in most East Asian cultures. The authors explained the reason why Korean-American students held more favorable attitudes was that the process of acculturation played an important role in influencing Korean students’ attitudes toward people with disabilities.

Similarly, Zaromatidis, Papadaki, and Gilde (1999) conducted a comparative quantitative study on the attitudes of 101 Greeks and 98 Greek-Americans toward persons with disabilities, and found that Greek-American subjects had more positive attitudes than Greek subjects. They offer two explanations for their findings. One is that Greek society is categorized to be collectivistic, which is a type of society that emphasizes group membership and the benefits of the community as a whole. Persons with disabilities are regarded as threats to the family and community, so Greeks are likely to feel ashamed about their disabled family or community members and try to hide them. The reason why Greek-Americans hold more favorable attitudes is that they have adapted more of the values of the individualistic American society. The authors’ second argument to explain their results is that the amount of contact with disabled people would positively influence attitudes toward persons with disabilities. The more contact with people with disabilities, the more positive attitudes toward them. Due to a more favorable social environment for people with disabilities in the U.S., there are more opportunities to interact with others who have disabilities in the U.S. than in Greece. Therefore, Greek-Americans, in general, have more positive attitudes toward the disabled than Greeks.
Even though they are one of the major ethnic groups of international students in the U.S., Chinese students’ attitudes toward persons with disabilities have not drawn enough attention in previous studies. This present research study, therefore, is intended to fill this gap.

METHODOLOGY

The overall goal of this study is to determine the influence of living and studying in the U. S. on Chinese graduate students’ attitudes toward persons with intellectual disabilities. In order to answer this main research question, a quantitative study has been conducted through an attitude survey of two groups of graduate students: Chinese graduate students at Bowling Green State University in the U. S. and Chinese graduate students at Shandong University in the mainland of China.

Both universities are public comprehensive research universities providing extensive academic programs at both undergraduate and graduate levels. They have been sister institutions since 1991 (Y. Wang, personal communication, June 11, 2010). Bowling Green State University has a total student population of more than 20,000 among whom around 160 are Chinese graduate students (P. Hoffmann, personal communication, May 24, 2010). Shandong University has almost 60,000 students including about 14,500 graduate students in various disciplines (http://www.sdu.edu.cn). I created an introductory email and embedded the survey link within it for the willing respondents to use. A total of approximately 300 students were approached, while 145 students completed the survey with 58 responses obtained from BGSU and 87 from Shandong University.

Participants were asked to complete a short demographic questionnaire which included some questions related to their gender, age, educational institutions, and educational levels. It also covered their possible previous contact or experience with persons with intellectual
disabilities. Following the demographic section, a survey based on the Attitudes Toward Disabled Persons Scale (ATDP) Form B (Yuker, Block, & Young, 1966) and the Disability Social Relations Generalized Disability (DSRGD) scale (Hergenrather & Rhodes, 2007) was conducted.

Theoretical Framework

Vygotsky’s theory of Mediated Activity and the Zone of Proximal Development is used to analyze the effects of Chinese graduate students’ cognitive development on their perception of disabilities. Vygotsky’s theory stresses that learning and development occur during interaction when those with more capability, such as adults, guide the actions of a child within the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) to do some things that are beyond his/her independent efforts, until the child is able to accomplish the task by him/herself (Harry, Rueda, & Kalyanpur, 1999). This process is referred to as “scaffolding” (Wood, Bruner, & Ross, 1976). Although Vygotsky never used this term, his ideas about interactional support and the process by which adults mediate children’s efforts to learn new things are similar to the notion of “scaffolding”.

According to Elliott, Kratchowill, Littlefield Cook, and Travers (2000), Vygotsky claims that a child’s cognitive development is achieved through social interactions with others. As stated in Kozulin (1998), in the opinion of Vygotsky, a learning process is a Mediated Learning Experience (MLE), and sociocultural influences serve as the mediation in the learning process. The three major mediators proposed by Vygotsky include “material tools, ‘psychological tools,’ and other human beings” (Kozulin, 1998, p. 62). This theory serves as a framework to discuss and analyze the findings of the study and will facilitate a deeper understanding of Chinese graduate students’ attitudes toward persons with intellectual disabilities.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION
Major findings can be summarized as follows. First, there was no statistically significant difference in attitudes toward persons with intellectual disabilities between BGSU and SDU participants. This may be attributed to the low rate of Chinese international graduate students’ acculturation in the U.S., due to linguistic hurdles and sharp cultural difference (Ye, 2006; Wang & Mallinckrodt, 2006; Ying, Han, & Wong, 2008; Wei, Heppner, Mallen, Ku, Liao, and Wu, 2007). Another reason might be that in China, graduate students have increasingly favorable attitudes along with some positive Chinese legislative policies concerning people with disabilities. Second, statistically significant differences exist in responses to specific questions, and all the items are under the subscale of Relationships. These differences indicated that compared with Chinese graduate students in the U.S., their counterparts in China are more concerned about what others think about their relationships with persons who have intellectual disabilities. This finding seems to be consistent with the studies about the collectivism of Chinese culture and the individualism of American culture.

The process of acculturation of Chinese international graduate students is actually a learning process by which they get to know American culture and gradually internalize some of its values. Vygotsky proposed that the learning process is a Mediated Learning Experience (MLE), and it is facilitated by three mediators: 1) material tools; 2) ‘psychological tools’; and, 3) other human beings. A detailed analysis of these three mediators will be explored in respect to this present study context.

First, when Chinese international graduate students begin to acculturate to American society, there are many material tools involved. For example, in a study conducted by Lai and Ishiyama (2004), the Chinese American subjects they interviewed always talked about their improved lifestyle. In this case, all the available resources that have made them feel their
lifestyle improved served as tools for their acculturation. Those resources include things they own and things they see or hear about. Any equipment which provides access for handicapped individuals serves as a material tool, such as a sign for handicapped parking, a handicap-accessible elevator, and Braille signs posted near doorways. These material tools help newly arrived Chinese international students learn more about the environment for people with disabilities in the U.S. Parette, Chuang, and Huer (2004) mention that abundant educational and community resources are available for people with disabilities in the U.S., and those resources also serve as material tools to mediate Chinese international students, learning about people with disabilities in American society and culture. Consequently, those material tools helped change Chinese international students’ perception of disabilities, and they feel more favorable toward those who have disabilities.

Second, according to Kozulin (1998), those material tools which have symbolic representation are called “psychological tools.” In the cross-cultural context of this paper, one typical psychological tool is language, a “higher-order symbolic mediator” (p. 63), as emphasized in Vygotsky’s theory. According to Gardiner and Kosmitzki (2008), language was proposed by Vygotsky as one of the major elements in the human developmental process. If a Chinese American can speak fluent English, the rate of his acculturation can be accelerated due to his proficiency of language as a mediator. If a Chinese American cannot speak English, then there is a deficiency of an important psychological tool because the English language cannot serve as a mediator. Instead, language becomes a barrier which separates him from American culture. As mentioned in Chapter II, although English competency is usually a prerequisite for Chinese students’ academic admission, especially at the graduate level, English still poses a hindrance to their social adaptation into U.S. mainstream culture (Ying, Han, & Wong, 2008).
This will affect the rate of Chinese international students’ acculturation and possibly result in the lack of statistically significant effects in the present study.

Besides language, legislation can be another important psychological tool. U.S. legislation provides legal protection for people with disabilities (Chiang & Hadadian, 2007; Parette, Chuang, & Huer, 2004). If the laws highlight individual rights of people with disabilities, Chinese graduate students in the U.S. are more likely to change their old schema which ignores individual rights of people with disabilities, and accept more positive attitudes about the individual benefits and development of the disabled.

The last mediator is other human beings. In this context, they include professionals, teachers, friends, and classmates of Chinese international graduate students. What these people believe will be reflected in the way they behave, which in turn, will affect the belief system of Chinese students through their interpersonal communication. For example, a respondent from BGSU stated that after seeing a young lady leading a group of people with intellectual disabilities in efforts to clean trash bins on campus, he realized that disabled people are able to contribute to society and deserve equal rights and opportunities to benefit from the society.

Vygotsky’s Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) — the distance between a person’s actual ability and his/her potential ability is also applicable to the context of this study. According to Kozulin (1998), during the process for people to develop from their actual level to their potential level, appropriate assistance and guidance are necessary. In children’s learning process, parents, teachers, or caretakers should guide their learning activities, so they may achieve a higher developmental level. In modern education, teachers who adhere to Vygotsky’s ZPD theory are encouraged to try to teach new skills before children show their readiness to develop their higher-level potential.
In the context of Chinese international students’ attitudes toward persons with intellectual disabilities, the zone that they are already familiar with is Chinese perceptions, and public attitudes toward people with intellectual disabilities in American culture are the zone into which they can potentially adapt. In order to help Chinese graduate students achieve the adaptation, professionals should serve as mediators, thus promoting more accepting attitudes and practices toward people with intellectual disabilities. This process is also referred to as “scaffolding” by Wood, Bruner, and Ross (1976). Examples of scaffolding can be a training session about people with special needs in campus orientation for Chinese graduate students, a course on the subject for Chinese students, and some required volunteer hours for Chinese students to work with people who have intellectual disabilities. Scaffolding plays a very important role in acculturation of international students, and, as Vygotsky explains, it can enhance their ability to adapt to the mainstream American culture.

The above analysis demonstrates that acculturation is not a mere process of natural cognitive development; as there are many cultural and social factors influencing its speed and direction. This influence can be positive assistance and guidance, and it can also be negative barriers and deficiency of tools. With better cultural understanding and appropriate assistance through mediation, Chinese graduate students in the U.S. can more easily adapt to the new environment of American society, and their attitudes toward individuals with intellectual disabilities are more likely to be influenced by their experience in the U.S.

Implications for Future Researchers

Based on the findings of this study, it is possible to make several suggestions about future research about Chinese students’ attitudes toward people with disabilities.
First, attitudes are affected by numerous factors. The present study found that cultural factors can affect people’s attitudes toward the disabled, and more efforts to explore what factors may affect these attitudes is warranted. Future studies may investigate more precise and concrete factors which may affect people’s attitudes toward persons with disabilities, such as age, major, amount of knowledge about disabilities, and quality of contact with disabled people.

Second, the result of this study suggests that lack of knowledge is an issue among Chinese graduate students in China. Since publicizing more information about people with disabilities may help people change their previous perceptions about the disabled and cultivate favorable attitudes toward these often marginalized people, I would suggest that future researchers may consider exploring and assessing some programs or activities to promote Chinese students’ knowledge and awareness about individuals with disabilities.

Finally, Chinese international students’ acculturation to the host culture is a gradual process that may take many years. Therefore, longitudinal research on international students’ experience of acculturation is recommended.

REFERENCES


Individuals with Disabilities Education Act Regulations, 34 C. F. R. 300. 13 et seq.


