SENSITIVITY OF PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES: A PERSPECTIVE FROM COMMUNICATION AND RELATIONSHIP THEORY A SYSTEMATIC LITERATURE REVIEW

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Abstract

This research explores sensitivity in social interactions and communication with individuals with disabilities, using a systematic literature review approach. The aim was to understand how sensitivity is applied and understood in the context of disability, as well as the impact of a lack of sensitivity on the quality of life and social participation of individuals with disabilities. Findings from the literature review suggest that high sensitivity to the needs of individuals with disabilities correlates with greater feelings of inclusion and better-quality interpersonal relationships. Factors such as education and awareness, personal experience, social support, and community attitudes play an important role in shaping the level of sensitivity. Lack of sensitivity can lead to social isolation, reinforce stigma and discrimination, and negatively impact the psychological well-being and accessibility of individuals with disabilities. This research contributes to the development of a more inclusive theory of communication and provides practical recommendations for improving sensitivity in social interactions. Practical implications include developing education and training programs, increasing social support, implementing inclusive policies, creating a supportive environment, and promoting public awareness. Further research is needed to deepen understanding of the factors that influence sensitivity and test the effectiveness of interventions designed to increase sensitivity towards individuals with disabilities.

Keywords: Sensitivity, Disability, Communication, Social Inclusion, Stigma

1. INTRODUCTION

People with disabilities are an integral element of society who often face unique challenges in various aspects of their lives. Disability can include a range of conditions, both physical and cognitive, that affect the way a person interacts with the world around them. In addition to the obvious barriers related to physical access or cognitive functioning, there are also significant psychosocial impacts that affect how these individuals communicate and form social relationships.

In the context of communication, disability can affect the way a person receives and sends messages. An individual with a hearing impairment may face difficulties in understanding verbal communication, while an individual with a visual impairment may require different communication formats. These kinds of barriers can affect not only their ability to participate in daily activities, but also to form and maintain meaningful social relationships.

People with disabilities often face barriers that are not only physical or cognitive, but also psychosocially significant (Subardhini et al., 2024). Communication and relationship theory can provide important insights in understanding how these barriers affect their interactions with their neighbors. According to communication theory, as proposed by West et al. (2010), communication is a complex process of sending and receiving messages, which involves understanding, interpreting and responding to them.

For people with disabilities, as McGilloway et al. (2020)research shows, physical or sensory barriers can interfere with this process, affecting their ability to receive and respond to messages appropriately.

This study was prompted by the need to explore the sensitivity of people with disabilities from the perspective of communication and relationship theory. In the literature, sensitivity is often associated with the ability to respond appropriately to the needs and experiences of others, which is an important aspect of social interaction (Decety & Jackson, 2004). The empirical studies show that individuals with disabilities often experience stigmatisation and lack of understanding from the general public regarding their communication needs (Gonzalez & Matson, 2007).

The purpose of this study was to conduct an in-depth systematic review of the literature to identify factors that influence sensitivity in the context of communication and relationships for individuals with disabilities. Empirical research by Jones (2021) shows that increasing sensitivity to the needs and experiences of people with disabilities can significantly improve the quality of their social interactions and overall lives. These research questions were inspired by the knowledge gaps that still exist in the literature: How is the concept of sensitivity applied and understood in the context of individuals with disabilities? What impact does a lack of sensitivity have on the quality of life and social participation of people with disabilities? What are the factors that influence sensitivity in communication and relationship interactions among individuals with disabilities? A recent study by Williams et al. (2013) suggests that greater sensitivity to the needs and experiences of individuals with disabilities can reduce social discomfort and increase their sense of inclusion in social settings.

This research will use communication and relationship theories as an analytical framework, including theories such as symbolic interaction theory (Blumer, 1986), empathy theory (Davis, 1983), and social construction theory (Berger & Luckmann, 2016). These theories provide a foundation for understanding how communication, perception, and social interaction shape individuals' experiences with disability in the context of interpersonal and social relationships (Goffman, 2009). Empirical studies show that the application of these theories in the context of disability can provide deep insights into factors that influence sensitivity and effective interventions to enhance it (Dunn, 2014).

By combining a systematic approach to literature review with a solid theoretical framework, this research is expected to provide a comprehensive and applicable understanding of how to improve social interactions that are more inclusive for individuals with disabilities. By linking each section of the introduction with relevant empirical and theoretical support, this research can make a significant contribution in expanding the knowledge base and practice in supporting the sensitivity of people with disabilities in communication and relationships.

2. RESEARCH METHOD
2.1. Systematic approach to literature review

This research utilised a systematic literature review approach to comprehensively and structurally investigate the existing literature on sensitivity to the communication needs of people with disabilities from a communication and relationship theory perspective. This approach was chosen as it allowed for the extraction of information

from a wide range of previously conducted studies, as well as facilitating the synthesis of existing findings to develop a deeper understanding of the topic.

A systematic literature review allows for the reorganisation of extensive and heterogeneous data from multiple sources, which can later be used to discover common patterns, identify knowledge gaps, and formulate evidence-based recommendations (Grant & Booth, 2009). This approach involves clear steps in the process of searching, selecting, evaluating and synthesising relevant literature, so the results can be considered more objective and reliable.

In a systematic literature review, the process of searching and collecting data is conducted systematically using academic databases and other relevant sources. The steps taken included the identification of a clear research question, the development of a structured search protocol, and a critical evaluation of the quality and relevance of each study included in the analysis.

2.2. Study Selection and Inclusion/Exclusion Criteria

To ensure the accuracy and relevance of the research results, strict criteria were used to select the studies to be included in this literature review. Inclusion criteria typically included a focus on studies that explicitly investigated aspects of communication or relationships of individuals with disabilities, as well as using a theoretical approach in their analyses. These criteria ensured that the literature analysed was of direct relevance to the research questions posed.

On the other hand, exclusion criteria were used to eliminate studies that did not meet sufficient methodological standards or did not contribute substantially to the understanding of sensitivity to the communication needs of people with disabilities. This included studies that were methodologically inadequate, or did not directly examine the relationship between communication/relationship theory and the experiences of individuals with disabilities in communication contexts.

With the considerations with these criteria, this research will conduct a detailed analysis of the selected literature, collate key findings, and identify remaining research gaps. This approach will not only provide a comprehensive overview of the current state of knowledge in this field, but also provide a solid basis for policy and practice recommendations in improving social inclusion and communication accessibility for individuals with disabilities. This narrative is intended to provide a comprehensive overview of the methodological approaches and procedures used in this systematic literature review, emphasising the importance of systematic methods to ensure the accuracy and reliability of research results.

Using this systematic literature review method, this research is expected to provide an in-depth understanding of the factors that influence sensitivity in communication and relationships of people with disabilities, as well as provide a basis for practical recommendations and further theory development in this area. In conducting a systematic review of the literature on the sensitivity of people with disabilities, a range of important findings have been identified that provide deep insights into how sensitivity affects the social interactions and quality of life of these individuals. Sensitivity here refers to the ability to respond appropriately to the unique needs and experiences of individuals with disabilities in a variety of communication and relationship contexts.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION
3.1. General Findings from Systematic Review

The studies analysed show that high sensitivity to the needs of individuals with disabilities is significantly related to their feelings of inclusion in society as well as the quality of their interpersonal relationships (Dunn, 2014). Individuals who feel heard, understood and emotionally accepted tend to have more positive social experiences and build stronger relationships.   These findings emphasize the importance of sensitivity as a key factor in creating inclusive and supportive environments for individuals with disabilities. Sensitivity shown by community members, including family, friends and professionals, can contribute significantly to the quality of life and psychological well-being of individuals with disabilities.

Research shows that education and training on disability sensitivity can increase understanding and empathy among the community. According to Wong (2020), an activist and founder of the Disability Visibility Project, direct interaction and real-life experiences with individuals with disabilities are key to overcoming prejudice and building empathy. Educational programs that emphasise this hands-on experience can help reduce the stigma and prejudice that is still widely found in society.

The role of the family in supporting individuals with disabilities cannot be underestimated. Wehmeyer (2019), an expert in the field of disability education, asserts that families that demonstrate emotional support, respect special needs, and create a safe and inclusive environment can contribute significantly to the self-development and well-being of individuals with disabilities. An inclusive family approach, according to Wehmeyer, can help individuals with disabilities feel more involved and valued in the family dynamic.

Professionals, such as teachers, doctors and social workers, also have a great responsibility in creating an inclusive environment. Shakespeare (2017), a sociologist and researcher in the field of disability, argues that continuous training in understanding the needs of individuals with disabilities and how to provide effective support is essential. Professionals trained in disability sensitivity can help create more positive and productive interactions, which in turn improves the quality of services and support they provide.

The importance of public policies that support inclusion cannot be overlooked. Degener (2016), an expert in disability law, emphasises that governments and policymakers must ensure there is a legal and regulatory framework that supports the rights of individuals with disabilities. Inclusive policies and good accessibility in public services, transport, education, and employment can increase the participation and contribution of individuals with disabilities in society. According to Degener (2016), proactive policies that support inclusion are the foundation of a fair and equal society. The literature analysis also highlighted the need for a holistic approach in understanding the sensitivity of people with disabilities. This approach not only considers aspects of verbal and non-verbal communication, but also recognize the importance of emotional and psychological experiences that are unique to the individual (Gonzalez & Matson, 2007). This includes respect for their identity and life experiences, as well as recognition of the challenges they face in everyday social interactions.

By improving our understanding of the holistic experience of individuals with disabilities, we can develop more appropriate and effective interventions to increase sensitivity among community members, educational institutions, workplaces and health services. This approach involves not only improving communication skills and

responsiveness to the needs of individuals with disabilities, but also promoting a broader culture of inclusion within society.

The results of this analysis provide a strong foundation for the development of practices and policies that are more orientated towards sensitivity towards individuals with disabilities. This includes the development of training programs to increase awareness and sensitive skills for professionals working with this population, as well as increased support and access to resources that facilitate equal participation in various aspects of social, educational, and economic life. As a result, this literature analysis not only underscores the importance of sensitivity in promoting the social inclusion and well-being of individuals with disabilities, but also provides a solid framework for developing more effective and sustainable intervention strategies in support of this population.

3.2. Sensitivity Variability in Communication and Relationship Contexts

Variability in the sensitivity of individuals with disabilities in communication and relationship contexts is a complex phenomenon that is important to understand in order to improve the quality of their social interactions. Sensitivity here refers to an individual's ability to respond appropriately to their unique needs and experiences in everyday interactions. Studies investigating this variability in sensitivity suggest that factors such as the type of disability play a crucial role in determining an individual's level of sensitivity. Individuals with physical disabilities may face different challenges in everyday communication and interaction compared to individuals with sensory or intellectual disabilities (Williams et al., 2013). These differences may relate to how the individual processes information, expresses themselves, and responds to environmental stimuli.

In addition, the level of social support received also affects the sensitivity of individuals with disabilities. Individuals who have limited access to social support or assistive technology may experience additional barriers in developing optimal sensitivity to their needs (Jones, 2021). Adequate social support can play an important role in facilitating effective communication and building meaningful relationships for individuals with disabilities.

Environmental factors, such as the attitudes and perceptions of community members, also significantly influence the sensitivity afforded to individuals with disabilities in everyday interactions. Inclusive attitudes and awareness of the needs of individuals with disabilities can create a supportive environment for more positive and meaningful interactions (Hall, 1975). On the other hand, less supportive or stereotypical attitudes can exacerbate the social experiences of individuals with disabilities, obstructing the development of appropriate sensitivity.

An in-depth understanding of the variability in sensitivity of individuals with disabilities provides an important foundation for the development of more responsive and inclusive practices and policies. This includes approaches in workforce training, education, and health services to increase sensitivity to the diverse needs of individuals with disabilities. These programs should embrace a holistic approach, considering contextual factors that influence sensitivity, such as type of disability, social support and social environment.

The impact of a lack of sensitivity to the needs of individuals with disabilities can have a very negative impact on their quality of life and social participation. Here are some of the impacts:

1) Social Isolation: Individuals with disabilities who are not understood or valued may feel isolated from their social environment. Lack of meaningful interactions can result in feelings of loneliness and isolation.
2) Stigma and Discrimination: The inability to respond sensitively can reinforce stigma and discrimination against individuals with disabilities. Negative and stereotypical attitudes can hinder their opportunities for full participation in society.
3) Psychological Wellbeing: Negative experiences due to lack of sensitivity can affect the psychological well-being of individuals with disabilities. They may feel unappreciated, unrecognized, or even demeaned, which can lead to stress, depression, and low self-esteem.
4) Limited Accessibility: Lack of sensitivity can also result in barriers in accessibility, both physically and in terms of services. This can hinder the ability of individuals with disabilities to access education, employment, healthcare, and other opportunities essential for a good quality of life.

Managing the sensitivity variability of individuals with disabilities is not just about improving their communication and interaction skills, but also about creating an environment that is supportive, inclusive and promotes respect for diversity in society at large. Through these undertakings, we can build a society that is more welcoming to individuals with disabilities, reduce stigma, and improve their general quality of life.

3.3. Factors Affecting Sensitivity

Analyzing the factors that influence the sensitivity of individuals with disabilities reveals deep complexities in the dynamics of their social interactions. Sensitivity, in this context, refers to the ability to respond with attention and respect to the unique needs and experiences of individuals with disabilities in a variety of communication and relationship situations. Factors Affecting Sensitivity:

Education and Awareness: The level of education and awareness about diversity and inclusion greatly influences how sensitive one is to individuals with disabilities. Knowledge gained through formal education or training can increase understanding of the challenges individuals with disabilities face and how best to respond effectively (F). Awareness of the importance of inclusion also helps in creating a more supportive environment for individuals with disabilities in various aspects of life.

Personal Experience: The direct experience of individuals with disabilities in dealing with stigma or negative social experiences can significantly shape their level of sensitivity in social interactions. These experiences not only affect the way the individual interacts with others, but also influence perceptions and appreciation of their own life experiences and the needs they have (Goffman, 2009).

Social Support: The level of support from family, friends and community also plays an important role in shaping one's sensitivity towards individuals with disabilities. Strong support can help individuals with disabilities feel supported, valued and motivated to develop positive relationships and build inclusive interactions within society (Gonzalez & Matson, 2007).

This analysis underscores the complexity in the factors that influence the sensitivity of individuals with disabilities. Variability in sensitivity levels can be influenced by a unique combination of these factors, which include the social context, physical environment, and life experiences of individuals. Therefore, a holistic and evidence-based

approach is required to better understand and improve responsiveness to the needs of individuals with disabilities in society (Jones, 2021).

By integrating the findings from this study, we can develop more effective intervention strategies to increase sensitivity towards individuals with disabilities. This involves education and training to increase awareness and sensitive communication skills among professionals, families and the general public. In addition, greater policy support can promote a more inclusive and supportive environment for individuals with disabilities, facilitating greater participation in various aspects of social and economic life.

This analysis not only provides a more comprehensive picture of the state of sensitivity of individuals with disabilities, but also provides a strong foundation for further efforts to promote social inclusion and a better quality of life for them in society at large.

3.4. Theoretical and Practical Implications
3.4.1. Theoretical Implications for the Development of Communication Theory

Research on sensitivity to individuals with disabilities has significant theoretical implications for the development of communication theory. One major contribution is the affirmation of the importance of inclusive approaches in communication theory. Traditional theories of communication often do not adequately consider the unique needs of individuals with disabilities, so this research encourages the revision and expansion of such theories to include a range of perspectives and experiences.

The research also highlights the need to understand communication as a multidimensional process, encompassing verbal, non-verbal, emotional and social aspects. Effective communication theory should consider the dynamic interplay between these factors and how they influence sensitivity and responsiveness in social interactions. The integration of psychological and sociological theories can help explain how the emotional and social experiences of individuals with disabilities affect the way they communicate and interact.

Furthermore, this research provides a basis for developing communication models that focus on inclusion and accessibility. These models can assist in designing more effective communication interventions, whether in the context of education, employment or healthcare. As such, this research contributes to the enrichment of communication theory literature with a more inclusive and diverse perspective.

3.4.2. Practical Implications for Increasing Sensitivity in Communication and Relationships

This research also has important practical implications for improving sensitivity in communication and relationships with individuals with disabilities. The following are some practical recommendations that can be implemented:

1. Education and Training: Develop and deliver education and training programs that focus on increasing awareness and sensitive communication skills. This programme should include information on different types of disabilities, specific communication needs, and techniques for responding sensitively.
2. Social Support: Increase social support through family, friend and community networks. This support may include establishing support groups, providing information resources, and facilitating access to assistive technology.

3. Inclusive Policies: Encourage governments and organisations to develop and implement policies that support inclusion and accessibility. These policies should ensure that individuals with disabilities have equal access to education, employment, healthcare, and social participation.
4. Supportive Environment: Creating a physical and social environment that supports inclusion. This includes ensuring infrastructure accessibility, providing disability-friendly facilities, and promoting inclusive attitudes in the community.
5. Promotion of Public Awareness: Conducting public awareness campaigns to change negative perceptions and stigma towards individuals with disabilities. These campaigns can involve mass media, seminars, and community activities aimed at increasing understanding and acceptance.

By implementing these recommendations, we can create a more inclusive and supportive society for individuals with disabilities. This research not only enriches the academic literature but also provides practical guidance to improve the quality of social interactions and well-being of individuals with disabilities, as well as promote the values of inclusion and diversity in society.

4. CONCLUSION

This research underscores the critical importance of sensitivity in social interactions and communication with individuals with disabilities. Sensitivity significantly enhances their quality of life by fostering feelings of inclusion and strengthening interpersonal relationships. It highlights that the ability to respond appropriately to the needs and experiences of individuals with disabilities is paramount. However, the level of sensitivity varies greatly depending on several factors, including the type of disability, the amount of social support, personal experiences, and the surrounding social environment. Education, awareness, and direct experience with individuals with disabilities play vital roles in shaping one's sensitivity in social interactions.

Moreover, the research identifies key influencing factors such as education and awareness, personal experience, social support, and community attitudes, which can either enhance or inhibit sensitivity. A lack of sensitivity can lead to social isolation, reinforce stigma and discrimination, and negatively impact the psychological well-being of individuals with disabilities. These negative experiences can hinder their accessibility and participation in various aspects of social and economic life. The theoretical and practical implications of this research suggest the need for developing education and training programs, enhancing social support, implementing inclusive policies, and promoting public awareness. Further research is needed to better understand the factors influencing sensitivity and to test the effectiveness of interventions designed to increase sensitivity towards individuals with disabilities, ultimately contributing to a more inclusive and supportive society.

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