

# A LINE ON LIFE

1/7/96

## Stereotyping the Handicapped\*

David A. Gershaw, Ph.D.

As we begin a new year, we can be thankful if we have no severe limitation with vision, speech, hearing, or movement. When these limitations become obvious to others, "*physically challenged*" people become stereotyped and stigmatized. A **stereotype** is a very rigid, biased view of all members of a group. If anyone belongs to that group, they will be perceived as having all the qualities attributed to the group.

How does having a disability affect the way a person is perceived? In 1989, psychologist Catherine Fichten and her associates conducted a study to explore the perceptions of students at Dawson College. Three groups of students — *able-bodied students, visually impaired students, and wheel-chair users* — were given questionnaires. Their answers indicated their self-concept, dating behavior and anxiety in social situations. After they gave their own opinions, Fichten asked them to fill out the same questionnaires from the viewpoint of students in the other two groups.

As you might expect, able-bodied and handicapped students had very stereotyped views of each other. Able-bodied students thought those with physical limitations were more anxious about dating and dated less. They also judged handicapped persons as more "*nervous, unaggressive, insecure, dependent, and unhappy*." On the positive side, handicapped people were also viewed as being more "*quiet, honest, softhearted, nonegotistical, and undemanding*."

Handicapped students also had stereotypes about those who were able-bodied. They looked upon able-bodied students as being more "*demanding, argumentative, overconfident, phony, and complaining*."

Most of these stereotypes are based on **myths**. For example, able-bodied persons stereotyped the handicapped as having problems with dating. In contrast, Fichten found no differences among the three groups in the self-reported number of dates or with their anxiety level about dating. The handicapped students are stereotyped as having lower self-esteem than able-bodied students. Questionnaire scores in this area indicated no differences in self-esteem among the three groups.

However, there is an ironic twist in the results. As expected, neither able-bodied nor disabled students judged their own group in a stereotyped way. Even so, many challenged students seemed to share the stereotypes about disabled students with other types of limitations! In other words, the wheelchair students had stereotyped images of the visually impaired students. Likewise, visually impaired students judged the wheelchair students in a stereotyped way.

In 1990, the **Americans with Disabilities Act** was passed to help disabled people to gain access to work and public environments. (In Yuma, this is evident in the current renovation of curbs to make sidewalks more accessible for wheelchair users.) Other laws have been passed to guarantee rights of the disabled to education, employment and recreation. However, Civil Rights legislation alone cannot stop prejudice and stereotyping.

If you are able-bodied, how do you react when you see someone who is not? Is your reaction the same as it is to other able-bodied persons? Is it hard for you to see beyond their condition?

---

**Rather than accentuating differences between others and ourselves,  
it is better to emphasize our similarities.**

---

If someone is noticeably "*different*" from us, we tend to stereotype them and emphasize their differences. It doesn't matter if the difference is the color of a person's skin, the way they dress, how they speak — or if they are in a wheelchair or have a red and white cane. We emphasize the differences in other people. All we see is the cane or the wheelchair. We stigmatize those people and tend to ignore their other qualities.

This is a reason why disabled people dislike the label of "*handicapped*". By emphasizing the "*handicap*", we focus on what the person *cannot* do. We ignore the capabilities that person may have. Likewise, by focusing on the wheelchair — or other signs of disability — we fail to see the person who is there. We stigmatize the person as a "*cripple*" -- ignoring the talents and positive qualities of that person. We rarely see the person. Usually, we only see the disability.

In the beginning of this new year, I would recommend two resolutions.

- First, we can resolve to lessen our attention to differences between us and others.
- Second, we can focus on the qualities we share with other people — including our common humanity.

---

\* Adapted from Benjamin B. Lahey's *Psychology: An Introduction*, W. C. Brown and Benchmark Publishers, 1995, page 629.