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The Influence of Accessibility on Perceptions of People with Disabilities

Influence de l'accessibilité sur la perception des personnes handicapées

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Abstract

Prejudice and discrimination against people with disabilities can be masked through seemingly benign expressions such as communications of pity and provision of unwanted help. Such forms of paternalism have been theorized to arise in response to social conditions that fail to highlight people's competencies. Following this logic, the present study assessed how the accessibility of an environment shapes perceptions of competence of, and feelings of pity toward, people with disabilities. Undergraduate students (N= 111) read vignettes that described a person with one of three disabilities (related to mobility, sight or hearing) in either an accessible or an inaccessible environment and subsequently reported their perceptions of, and reactions to, the target person. In support of the hypothesis, non-disabled people viewed people with disabilities more positively in an accessible compared to an inaccessible environment. Specifically, they perceived disabled people as more competent and warm, and pitied them less, compared to in inaccessible or neutral (control) environments. The more positive responses to the disabled targets in accessible environments compared to inaccessible environments was largely consistent across disability types, although the deaf target was uniquely viewed as equally positive in the neutral (control) environment and the accessible one. These findings indicate that provision of appropriately accessible environments can be a tool of prejudice reduction.

Résumé

Des comportements apparemment bénins comme des commentaires évoquant la pitié et l'imposition d'une aide non désirée peuvent masquer les préjugés et la discrimination à l'égard des personnes handicapées. Des théories ont avancé que de telles formes de paternalisme peuvent résulter des conditions sociales qui omettent de mettre en valeur les compétences des personnes. En suivant cette logique, la présente étude a évalué la manière dont l'accessibilité d'un environnement façonne la perception des compétences des personnes handicapées et le sentiment de pitié envers elles. Des étudiant·es de premier cycle (N = 111) ont lu des mises en situation qui présentaient une personne ayant un handicap (lié à la mobilité, à la vue ou à l'ouïe, selon la vignette) évoluant dans un environnement accessible ou inaccessible. Ces participant·es ont ensuite rapporté leurs perceptions et leurs réactions à l'égard de la personne présentée dans la mise en situation. Comme l'a avancé notre hypothèse, les personnes sans handicap percevaient les personnes handicapées de manière plus positive lorsqu'elles étaient dans un environnement accessible que lorsqu'elles étaient dans un environnement inaccessible. Plus précisément, elles percevaient les personnes handicapées comme plus compétentes et chaleureuses, et les plaignaient moins que lorsqu'elles se trouvaient dans des environnements inaccessibles ou

neutres (contrôle). Les réponses les plus positives envers les personnes handicapées évoluant dans les environnements accessibles par rapport aux environnements inaccessibles étaient largement semblables d'un type d'incapacité à l'autre, bien que la mise en situation présentant une personne sourde ait été la seule à être considérée comme positive tant dans l'environnement neutre (contrôle) que dans l'environnement accessible. Ces résultats indiquent que la mise à disposition d'environnements adéquatement accessibles peut être un outil pour réduire les préjugés.

Keywords
Ableism*;* Accessibility; Stereotypes; Prejudice; Attitudes; Disability

Author Note
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1. Introduction: Locating the source of paternalistic abelism

It is estimated that one in five Canadians over the age of 15 have at least one disability (Morris et al., 2018). This is noteworthy for a number of reasons, one being that people with disabilities face abelism, a mix of problematic attitudes, behaviours, and systemic inequalities that disadvantage disabled people and privilege non-disabled persons (Dunn, 2019). The biases that comprise abelism range from day-to-day microaggressions to blatant forms of oppression and inequality. For example, people with disabilities routinely feel the sting of others' pity and receive unwanted help (Nario-Redmond et al., 2019). Meanwhile, violence towards people with disabilities is 2 to 2.5 times higher than violence towards people without disabilities (Cotter, 2014; Mueller et al., 2019). Despite legislation being in place to protect the rights of people with disabilities, The Canadian Human Rights Commissions' 2018 annual report listed that fifty-two percent of all violation complaints accepted by grounds of discrimination were related to

disability, which is a thirty-three percent increase from the decade's average. The present research probes the locus of common yet paternalistic forms of negative attitudes toward people with disabilities, hypothesizing that they are shaped by systemic inequality, specifically environmental (in)accessibility.

2. Literature Review: Accessibility and paternalism

Hostile forms of prejudice against persons with disabilities that are easily identified as harmful – like dehumanization and negative stereotyping -- exist and correspond with ridicule, abuse, harassment, and assault. More prevalent are a variety of subtle biases that many perpetrators may not recognize as problematic (Redmond et al., 2019). For example, implicit stereotyping involves an evaluative bias and set of associations between groups and attributes that remain outside of people's conscious awareness yet shape how people perceive others. A substantial body of evidence shows that White people who do not consciously endorse racist attitudes are nevertheless more likely to perceive Black men as threatening compared to identically positioned White men (e.g., Hall et al., 2016). Two decades of research confirm that implicit stereotypes are prevalent and they predict discrimination (for a review, see Yogeeswaran et al., 2017). Specific to the present context, meta-analytic research reveals a consistent pattern of moderate to strong negative implicit attitudes toward disabled people (Wilson & Scior, 2014), which have been increasing over the last decade despite a decrease in explicit, that is conscious and overt, ableism (Harder et al., 2019).

Similar to implicit prejudice, which exists outside conscious awareness, ambivalent forms of prejudice can be hard to recognize yet still problematic. These types of prejudice are consciously endorsed, yet can be hard for some to recognize as problematic because they function as "double-edged swords" in that they seem positive yet also contain negative

implications. Inspiration porn, glorified depictions of the successes of people with disabilities, function in this way because although they demonstrate the strengths of disabled persons, by highlighting how disability can be "overcome" they also devalue and objectify people with disabilities and locate their value in transcending some of their attributes (Grue, 2016). Similarly, people with disabilities can be perceived as inspirational when they perform average tasks such as going to school or work only if expectations of their ability to complete normal daily tasks are low to begin with (Nario-Redmond et al., 2019). Such evaluations comprise ambivalent prejudice because they contain both positive (e.g., admiration of success) and negative (e.g., low expectations) content.

The stereotype content model posits that ambivalent attitudes arise from structural relations between groups (Fiske, 2012; Fiske et al., 2002; Glick & Fiske, 2001). Specifically, information about the relative social status and interdependence of groups shape, respectively, perceptions of others' competence and warmth. Identifying capability and warmth in others is a key task of social perception because those attributes provide information about others' status relative to one's own and whether the other is "likely to be friend or foe" (Glick & Fiske, 2001, p. 281).

According to the model, social relations between groups shape how warm (well intended) and competent (able to enact intentions) others are perceived to be. When group relations are cooperative (that is, non-competitive as with homemakers and breadwinners or retired people and new employees) others tend to be perceived as warm. The social status of groups shapes how capable group members are perceived to be, with higher status groups typically perceived as more capable than lower status groups. Substantial research supports these tenets, with the large majority of stereotyped groups evaluated on the dimensions of warmth and capability (Fiske,

2012). Of note, evidence confirms that stereotypes of many groups involving capability and warmth are not rooted in evidence of actual differences, but rather merely on information about people's social standing per se (e.g., Durante et al., 2017).

Attitudes toward people with disabilities tend to reflect perceptions of cooperative interdependence between disabled and non-disabled persons and low perceived status of disabled people. The result is a paternalistic form of ambivalent prejudice that can present as positive because of the perceived warmth and likeability of the target group even though it rests in assumptions of the group's lack of capability (Fiske, 2012). Paternalism is a common form of response toward many groups, including people with disabilities, elderly people and some women (Cuddy et al., 2007). It is characterized by cognitive, affective, and behavioural components. Specifically, it includes stereotypes that a group lacks ability, emotions of pity or sympathy, and distinct behavioural responses (e.g., avoidance or provisions of unwanted help).

In a recent international survey, people with disabilities identified paternalism from nondisabled persons as particularly common in their experience (Nario-Redmond et al., 2019). The emotional component of paternalism, pity, is problematic as it arises in part from perceptions of superiority over another who is perceived to be suffering (Florian et al., 2000). Perceived superiority is inherently ableist, while the assumption that people with disabilities suffer more than those without can be challenged by findings that, on the average, people with and without disabilities report moderate life satisfaction (Marini & Brklja, 2008). Feelings of pity also predict a host of problematic behaviours, including distancing from people who evoke pity as a means of emotion regulation (Florian et al., 2000) and providing forms of help that are either passive (e.g., praying) or unwanted (Cuddy et al., 2007). People with disabilities report that providing help without consent is problematic (Nario-Redmond, et al., 2019), perhaps

because it creates a power differential that subordinates as much as it protects or assists (Nadler, 2002). From a critical perspective, acts of charity can be understood as inherently ableist. Many fundraising campaigns are designed to evoke feelings of pity by promoting perceptions of suffering that rests in a notion of disability as pathology (see Longmore, 2015; Wolbring, 2008).

For these reasons, the present research aimed to identify the locus of pity toward and perceived lesser competence of people with disabilities. The stereotype content model locates the cause in status differences between groups that lead members of dominant groups to perceive lower status groups as lacking competence; when coupled with cooperative (non-competitive) intergroup relations, the resulting attitude is paternalism (Fiske, 2012). This is loosely consistent with a social model of disability that pinpoints the cause of disability per se in environments that do not accommodate for different abilities (Oliver, 1983). Because accessible environments (e.g., those that include supports such as ramps, automated door openers, braille, and sign language interpretation) provide alternate ways to navigate the environment and are inclusive to many bodily abilities, they create greater equality than inaccessible environments. By drawing on the stereotype content model and the social model of disability, the present research sought to investigate the influence of accessibility on perceptions of competence of, and feelings of pity toward, people with disabilities, hypothesizing that when people with disabilities appear in accessible environments they are perceived as more competent and receive less pity compared to when they are in inaccessible environments.

3. Methodology

3.1 Participants

The original sample comprised one hundred forty nine students enrolled in an introduction to psychology course who were eligible to receive a small number of bonus credits

in their course for completing an assignment about their research participation. Seventeen individuals did not complete all parts of the study and so were excluded from analyses of the data. An additional 21 participants responded "yes" to the question "do you identify as someone who has a disability?" Because the hypothesis dealt with perceptions of people with disabilities among those without, the analyses focussed on the subsample (N=111) of those who reported that they did not have a disability. This sample included 21 men, 84 women, and 6 gender-unspecified participants of age range 16 to 49 (M= 19.9, SD=4.13). The majority self-identified as White/Caucasian (49%) followed by Chinese (13.5%) and Middle Eastern (2.7%). Self-reported religious affiliations were agnostic, atheist or non-religious (41.4%), Christian/Catholic (34.2%), and Islamic (12.6%).]

3.2 Materials

3.2.1 Vignettes

Nine short, emotionally neutral vignettes were prepared by the first author to describe a person with each of three disabilities (a person in a wheelchair, a person identified as blind and a person identified as deaf) in environments described as either accessible, inaccessible, or with no reference to accessibility. In the accessible condition, the target navigated the environment with an appropriate accommodation (e.g., "You are at an intersection looking to cross the street. On the opposite side of the street you see a blind person facing towards you. When the light changes, you hear a tone coming from the crosswalk sign indicating that the light has changed. The blind person hears the tone and crosses the street."). In the inaccessible condition, the lack of appropriate accommodation prevented the target from enacting the desired action (e.g., "You are at an intersection looking to cross the street. On the opposite side of the street you see a blind person facing toward you. When the light changes you begin to cross the street but they remain

waiting because there is no auditory indication that the light has changed.") In the control condition, there was no navigation of environment described in the three vignettes, only the presence of each disability type (e.g., "You see a blind person waiting for the bus as you walk by.") All vignettes are provided in Table 1.

Table 1

Vignettes for each Accessibility and Disability Type Condition

	Mobility Impaired	Blind	Deaf
Accessible Condition	On your way to class you walk behind someone who is using a motorized wheelchair. They come up to the classroom doors and push the automatic door button. The doors to the classroom open and they enter the classroom.	You are at an intersection looking to cross the street. On the opposite side of the street you see a blind person facing towards you. When the light changes, you hear a tone coming from the crosswalk sign indicating that the light has changed. The blind person hears the tone and crosses the street.	During the first lecture of your course, you see an American Sign Language interpreter at the front translating the professor's words into American Sign Language for a student in the class who is deaf.
Inaccessible Condition	On your way to class, you walk behind someone who is using a motorized wheelchair. They come up to the classroom doors and realize that there is no automatic door button. They remain outside the doors, unable to enter the classroom.	You are at an intersection looking to cross the street. On the opposite side of the street you see a blind person facing towards you. When the light changes you begin to cross the street but they remain waiting because there is no auditory indication that the light has changed.	A person who is deaf enrolls in a course you are taking. Later you learn that after the first class, they dropped out of the course because they could not find any American Sign Language interpreters available to translate during that time slot.
Control Condition	You see a person with a motorized wheelchair waiting for the bus as you walk by.	You see a blind person waiting for the bus as you walk by.	On your way to class you see two deaf people signing to each other.

3.2.2 Dependent measures

Scales were created to tap the perceived warmth and competency of the targets in the vignettes and emotional reactions, specifically pity, to them. On all scales, participants indicated their degree of agreement with statements using a 7-point response format. Four items measured perceptions of warmth (e.g., "this person is warm") and five items measured perceptions of competency (e.g., "this person is competent"). Scales of warmth and competency had reliabilities across the vignettes ranging from .84 to .91. An additional 20 items tapped the emotional reaction of pity (e.g., "I feel sorry for this person"). These items were generated based on Florian et al.'s (2000) conceptualization of pity that describes it as a mix of compassion, caring, and false superiority. As a scale, the pity items had reliabilities across the vignettes ranging from .89 to .92 (see the appendix).

3.3 Procedure

The Research Ethics Review Board of the host university approved the research. After reading a study description, those students who were interested in participating emailed the researcher to receive a link to the online survey. Participants were allocated to an accessibility condition using a random number generator. They gave consent before participating by clicking "continue" on the computer screen after reading the consent form. Participants then read and responded to three vignettes that described each disability type within the relevant accessibility condition. The order of disability type was fixed (person with a mobility disability, person described as blind, person identified as deaf). After each vignette, participants completed all dependent measures. At the end, a demographic form was provided. Once the survey was finished, participants were given a debriefing form.

4. Results

Means, standard deviations, and inter-item correlations on all dependent variables by disability type are provided in Table 2. Averaging across disability type, the targets in the vignettes were perceived as moderately capable (M = 4.70, SD = 1.30) and warm (M = 4.78, SD = 1.20). Ratings on pity were similarly near the scale mid point (M = 4.23, SD = 1.09). Competency and warmth perceptions were positively correlated, r (109) = .69, $p < .01$. Pity correlated negatively with perceived competence, r (109) = -.30, $p < .01$ and was uncorrelated with perceived warmth, r (109) = -.04, *ns*.

Table 2

Means and Standard Deviations on Competency, Warmth and Pity Ratings

	Target Disability Type		
	Mobility-Impaired	Blind	Deaf
Competency	4.57 (1.41)	4.63 (1.36)	4.91 (1.45)
Warmth	4.73 (1.27)	4.73 (1.26)	4.87 (1.35)
Pity	4.22 (1.10)	4.42 (1.45)	4.06 (1.23)

Note. Standard deviations are provided in parentheses

The hypothesis that non-disabled persons would view disabled people as more competent and warm, and pity them less, in an accessible compared in inaccessible condition, was tested with a set of 3 (disability type: mobility, blind, deaf) by 3 (accessibility condition: accessible, inaccessible, control) mixed ANOVAs with repeated measures on disability type. In each

analysis, the Mauchly's test of sphericity indicated that the sphericity assumption was violated and so the corrected degrees of freedom are reported below.

The analysis on perceived competency of the targets revealed main effects of accessibility, $F(2, 108) = 36.41$, $p < .001$, and disability type, $F(1.83, 197.24) = 9.29$, $p < .001$. In support of the hypothesis, perceived competency appeared stronger in the accessible compared to inaccessible condition for each disability type (see Figure 1). However, these main effects were qualified by a significant interaction between condition and disability type, $F(3.65, 197.24) = 8.22$, $p < .001$. Post-hoc comparisons using the Tukey test revealed that, for both the mobility and blindness disability conditions, perceived competency was significantly higher in the accessible versus control conditions, which in turn were higher than the inaccessible conditions (ps < .001). For the deaf target condition, perceived competency was as high in the control condition as it was in the accessible condition, both of which were higher than in the inaccessible condition (ps < .001).

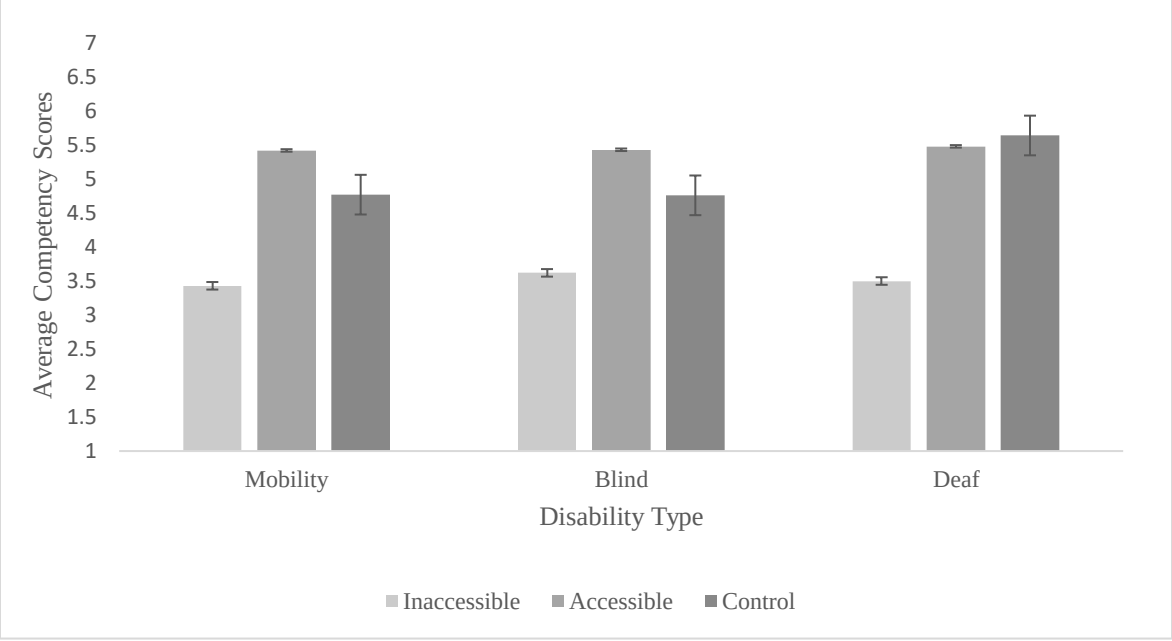

Figure 1. Competency scores by accessibility and disability type conditions. Error bars indicate standard errors.

The ANOVA on pity revealed main effects of accessibility, $F(2, 108) = 4.62$, $p = .01$, and disability type, $F(1.74, 188.24) = 4.30$, $p < .001$. For all disability types, pity was highest in the inaccessible condition, and it appeared slightly higher for the blind target compared to the mobility impaired and deaf targets, respectively (see Figure 2). However, these main effects were qualified by a significant interaction between the disability type and condition, $F(3.49, 188.24) = 2.96$, $p = .03$. For the mobility impairment, mean comparisons showed that pity scores were significantly higher in the inaccessible condition ($M = 4.64$, $SD = .97$) compared to the control condition ($M = 3.98$, $SD = 1.25$, $p = .01$). The difference between the control and the accessible condition ($M = 4.09$, $SD = .96$) and between accessible and the inaccessible condition, were not significant. For the blind target, contrasts between pity scores in the inaccessible ($M = 4.73$ $SD = 1.04$), control ($M = 4.22$, $SD = 1.36$) and accessible condition ($M = 4.33$, $SD = .97$) did not reach significance. For the deaf target, pity scores were significantly higher in the inaccessible condition ($M = 4.64$, $SD = 1.05$) compared to both the control condition ($M = 3.61$, $SD = 1.34$, $p = .01$) and accessible conditions ($M = 3.96$, $SD = 1.07$, $p = .01$).

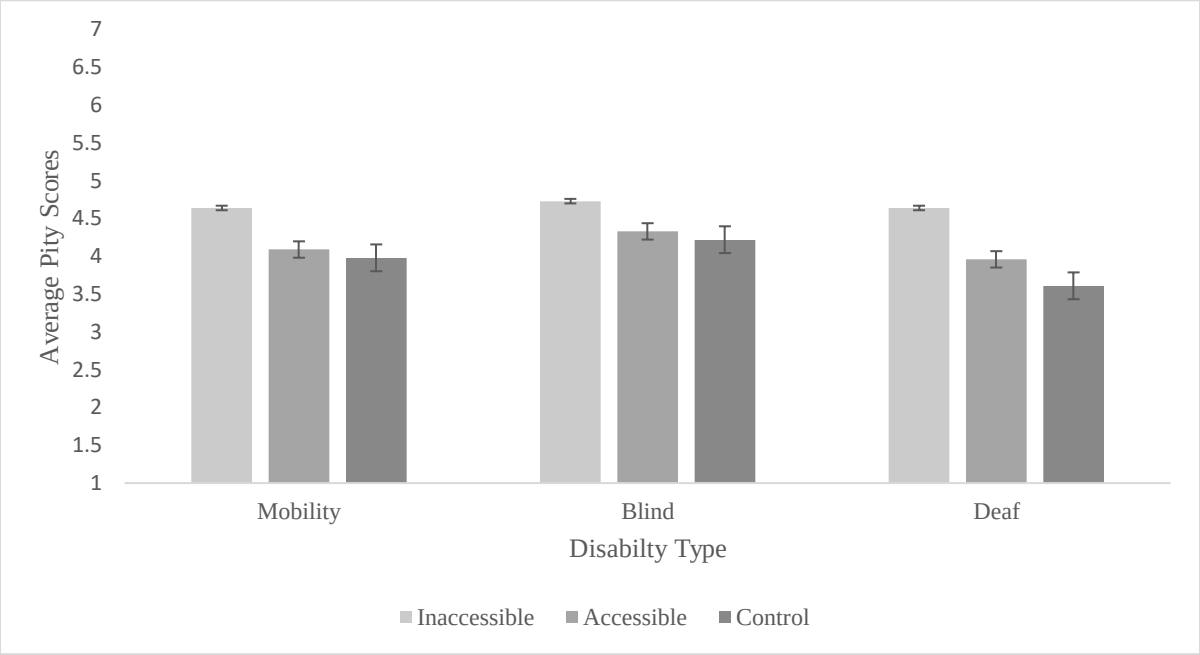

Figure 2. Pity scores by accessibility and disability type conditions. Error bars indicate standard errors.

The analysis on perceived warmth revealed a main effect of accessibility on warmth scores only, $F(2, 108) = 9.75$, $p < .001$. Post hoc comparison using the Tukey test revealed that perceived warmth was higher in the accessible ($M = 5.04$, $SD = .18$) compared to inaccessible condition ($M = 4.09$, $SD = .19$, $p < .001$). Perceived warmth was also higher in the control condition ($M = 5.14$, $SD = .18$)

5. Discussion

In support of the hypothesis, perceptions of people with disabilities were more positive in an accessible compared to an inaccessible environment. Specifically, the accessible environment gave rise to stronger perceived competence and warmth of, and less pity toward, disabled targets compared to the inaccessible or neutral (control) environments, while an inaccessible condition evoked more negative perceptions and more pity compared to the control condition. These

findings support the prediction that environmental accessibility shapes non-disabled persons perceptions of, and responses to, people with disabilities in realistic and constructive ways, whereas inaccessibility may be a source of problematic paternalism. By implication, the common assumption that equal rights follow from positive attitude changes may need to be turned on its head: respect for persons with disabilities follows from equality.

The effects of accessibility on reactions to the targets were largely comparable across disability types, except the deaf target was uniquely viewed as equally positive in the neutral (control) environment and the accessible one. In other words, whereas accessibility made perceptions of the mobility impaired and blind targets more positive and inaccessibility made them worse, perceptions of the deaf target were negatively impacted by inaccessibility only, because they were already positive in the control environment. Though a seemingly encouraging finding regarding perceptions of deaf people, this raises a concerning possibility that perceptions were positive in the control environment because the barriers faced by people who are deaf are less visible to non-disabled persons than are barriers faced by people with different disabilities. In our control vignette for the deaf target, the person was communicating using sign language. As such, the barriers faced by deaf people who must function in communities that operate largely in spoken language (e.g., the inability to easily access medical or recreational services, the extra burden of arranging translation services for work or personal interactions) may not have been salient to participants in this condition. Outside of the lab, deaf people continue to face myriad serious challenges and lack equal access to many of the services that most take for granted (e.g., De Feu & Chovaz, 2014) but a lack of alignment with the cultural stereotypes of disability may lead hearing people to perceive deaf people as without barriers (see Calder-Dawe et al., 2019). Though a speculation in need of evaluation, it is possible that the comparatively positive

perceptions of the deaf target that emerged in this research may reflect a double-edged sword faced by deaf persons who are viewed as capable at the expense of the provision of needed accessibility resources.

The core finding that accessibility shaped perceptions of, and responses to, people with disabilities is congruent with a body of evidence related to the stereotype content model. That model of prejudice locates problematic attitudes toward people with disabilities among prejudices toward several groups who face paternalism. Paternalism was the most common form of abelism reported in an international sample of people with disabilities, and involved unwanted help, overprotection, invalidation and pity (Nario-Redmond et al., 2019). Further work studying the stereotype content model shows that this form of prejudice is directed at people who are liked but not especially respected, including not only disabled people but also elderly people and traditional women. For example, similar to paternalistic abelism, a seemingly benevolent form of sexism depicts women as moral, kind, cultured, interpersonally oriented, yet weak and in need of protection (Connor et al., 2017; Glick & Fiske, 1996). Ageism also has condescending and ambivalent forms, such as the stereotype of older people as "doddering but dear" (Cuddy & Fiske, 2002, p. 3). No matter the demographic, paternalistic stereotypes are degrading but are still commonly tolerated due to their seemingly positive components.

Similar to social models of disability that describe how environmental barriers produce perceptions of disability as a deficit (e.g., Oliver, 1983), the stereotype content model demonstrates that it is social structural variables that determine the form that prejudices takes. Paternalism is common across several groups because these groups share a challenged social status. Specifically, the model predicts that groups perceived to be low in status tend to be viewed as lacking competence and so are not respected, while those whose intergroup relation

with the attitude holder is non-competitive (i.e., in that groups are not competing for the same resources) will tend to be viewed as warm and likeable. Groups who fit both perceptions are, as a result, faced with paternalism; they are liked but not respected. Because paternalism follows from social position and not actual group attributes, a logical implication of the model is that changing the social structure directly is an effective route to attitude change. The present work supported this position by showing that accessibility had a direct impact on perceptions of disabled people – it reduced paternalism.

Paternalism can be hard to challenge through conventional prejudice reduction strategies because it is disguised behind a guise of kindness and so is often construed as positive. This point is well documented in the context of gender attitudes (e.g., see Jackson, 2020). For example, recent evidence shows that women often mistake seemingly benevolent forms of sexism, such as being overprotective, for kindness and view men who express paternalism as their allies (Hopkins-Doyle et al., 2019; Rudman & Fetterolf, 2014). In reality, paternalism has been shown to correlate with serious forms of prejudice and discrimination in samples around the world (e.g., Connor et al., 2017; Glick et al., 2000; Napier et al., 2010; Nelson et al., 2016), and all isms, including abelism, predict a host of related problems such as lower health and well-being of its targets (e.g., Branco et al., 2019). Exposing the harm of paternalism through education can help to reduce it (Becker & Swim, 2012) but direct interventions to change the social structures that create it – such as improvements in accessibility -- have the added advantage of creating greater equality as well.

In summary, the results of this research show that environmental accessibility impacts perceptions of competency and warmth of, as well as responses of pity to, people with disabilities. Accessible environments foster more respectful responses whereas inaccessible

environments can contribute to negative stereotypes and condescending emotional responses. By implication, ensuring that all environments are accessible is not only a means to achieve equality of access to basic human rights, but may also be viewed as one of many strategies toward reducing paternalism toward people with disabilities and promoting respect.

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Appendix: Pity survey

Participants rated their agreement with items 1 to 19 on a scale from 1(strongly disagree*)* to 7 (strongly agree). Item 20 was rated on a scale from 1 (not at all) to 7 (a great deal).

1. This situation made me feel uncomfortable

2. I feel badly for this person

3. I am glad that I do not have the same experiences as this person

4. I am more fortunate than this person

5. This person is unfortunate

6. The other person must be miserable

7. I feel obliged to help this person

8. I want to do something to cheer this person up

9. I feel guilty

10. I feel sorry for this person

11. I can't imagine how this person's life is like

12. This person's life must be worse than mine

13. I am thankful that I am not in the same position as this person

14. I feel badly for their unfortunate situation

15. I wish I did not observe the situation

16. Fear that this situation could happen to me

17. I want to help this person

18. I want to reduce this person's suffering

19. I wish for this person's well-being

20. (Rate how much you felt the following emotion in response to the vignettes): Pity