



# Factors influencing the intention of students to work with individuals with intellectual disabilities

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## ABSTRACT

Providing adequate care to individuals with intellectual disability (ID) requires the willingness of students in various health and social professions to care for this population upon completion of their studies. The aim of the current study was to examine the factors associated with the intentions of students from various fields to work with individuals with ID, using the framework of the Theory of Planned Behavior. A structured self-administered questionnaire was completed by 512 social work, occupational therapy, speech and language therapy, special education, and nursing students. The questionnaire measured students' attitudes toward individuals with ID and toward working with this population, as well as their perceptions of subjective norms, controllability, self-efficacy, prior acquaintance with individuals with ID, and subjective knowledge about ID. Structural equation modeling showed that the students' intentions to work with individuals with ID were predicted by their attitudes and perceptions of subjective norms. Field of study and subjective knowledge were also found to be predictive of behavioral intention. The TPB proved to be a useful framework for examining students' intentions to work with persons with ID. Given the lack of education in the field of ID, as well as the prevailing stigmatic attitudes toward this population, university departments should develop programs aimed at increasing knowledge, promoting positive contact, and reducing the fear attached to working with persons with intellectual disability.

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## 1. Introduction

The “deinstitutionalization” movement has brought about a shift in the treatment and care for people with intellectual disability (ID), moving away from predominantly institutional care to less restrictive community-based approaches (Cleary, Friedman, Hunt, & Walter, 2006). This shift, along with the complex needs of individuals with ID in relation to cognitive difficulties, multiple medical conditions, and communication limitations (Taua & Farrow, 2009), have brought about the need for intensive, specialized, integrated, and long-term treatment (Davis, Barnhill, & Saeed, 2008) provided by trained professionals in various fields of specialization. In order to provide adequate care, a multidisciplinary approach is warranted, requiring the participation and willingness of professionals in all health and social care specialties to work with this population. The main aim of the current study was to identify the predictors of the intentions of students from various professions to work with individuals with ID, using the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) as a theoretical framework.

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### 1.1. *The role of different professions in the care of individuals with ID*

Studies have pointed to the importance of several professional groups for the care of individuals with ID. Social workers, for example, function as primary care coordinators for these individuals (Claiborne & Vandenburg, 2003) and their family members (Davis et al., 2008). Nurses are in charge of their activity management, nutrition, medication administration, physiological and psychological comfort, behavioral-cognitive therapy, communication and coping, and family-caregiver support (Sheerin, 2008). The role of occupational therapists lies in helping individuals to function in everyday life while providing them with the ability to perform Activities of Daily Living (Hallgren & Kottorp, 2005). The role of speech and communication disorder therapists is to improve the various aspects of communication in order to enable individuals with ID to affect the environment, make choices and state their needs (Sigafos et al., 2000). Finally, special education professionals focus on training individuals to use self-care skills in functional daily living tasks, as well as providing reading and arithmetic instruction and assistance with transportation, recreation, and social skills (Kauffman & Hung, 2009).

Researchers have shown that each of these professional groups makes its unique contribution, but it seems that some professionals have a clearer understanding of their role (Werner, 2011). For example, recent findings have suggested that students in more practical fields, such as special education, occupational therapy, and speech and language therapy, may have a clearer understanding of their role because their training includes direct and specific practical interventions with individuals with ID (Casella, 2005; Hallgren & Kottorp, 2005; Kauffman & Hung, 2009; Sigafos et al., 2000). For other professionals, their role in working with individuals with ID might be more obscured. For example, nurses and social workers may be trained in a holistic, all-inclusive approach (Rosen & Zlotnik, 2001) without clear guidelines as to their role in working with this specific population.

### 1.2. *The intention to work with individuals with ID and its predictors*

Although the socialization and training of each and all of these professionals is important to the treatment and quality of life of individuals with ID, it is known that recruiting professionals to work with this population can be difficult. Studies have found that working with this population is not the first occupational choice of newcomers to the health and social professions (Crowe & Mackenzie, 2002; Krumer-Nevo & Weiss, 2006; Limb & Organista, 2006; Stevens & Dulhunty, 1997; Werner, 2011) owing to the difficulties involved in caring for people with ID (Fang et al., 2009). Nursing students were found to hold the least positive opinion toward this population relative to medical students and other health care profession students (Tervo, Palmer, & Redinius, 2004). Another study found that a higher proportion of occupational therapy students, as compared with physiotherapy students, chose to work with people with disabilities (Stachura & Garven, 2007).

Studies have also tried to map the factors that influence the occupational choices of students. Fieldwork experience and knowledge have been identified as important factors that can influence students' preferences for their future area of practice. Studies in occupational therapy (Crowe & Mackenzie, 2002), social work (Russo-Gleicher, 2008), and nursing (Matziou, Galanis, Tsoumakas, Gymnopoulou, & Brokalaki, 2009) suggest that the desire to work with individuals with ID may be increased by an enhanced focus on both the fieldwork and the coursework in this area, as well as by carefully designed curricula.

Personal attitudes and perceptions play another important role in the reluctance of professionals to work with individuals with ID. For example, the reluctance of social work students to work with individuals with ID has been attributed to their perceptions that this group lacks potential for change (Jack & Mosley, 1997), that psychotherapy is inappropriate for these individuals, and that indirect practice is technical and professionally unchallenging (Aviram & Katan, 1991).

Despite the importance of all these findings, no study has yet examined, within a theoretically-driven empirical framework, the specific factors that are related to the intentions of students from various professional groups to work with individuals with ID following the completion of their studies.

### 1.3. *The Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB)*

The Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) was developed by Ajzen (1991) to account for the process by which individuals decide on a particular course of action (Ajzen, 1985). This theory asserts that the best predictor of behavior is the intention to perform the behavior. Behavioral intention is influenced by three factors: (1) personal attitudes toward the behavior, which are the individuals' beliefs about the outcomes of the target behavior (McKinlay & Cowan, 2003); (2) subjective norms, which are the beliefs held by the individual about significant others' attitudes toward the behavior (McKinlay & Cowan, 2003); and (3) perceived behavioral control, which refers to the perceived ease or difficulty of performing the behavior. It has been suggested that perceived behavioral control should be split into two constructs: controllability and self-efficacy. Self-efficacy refers to the confidence that one feels about performing a particular behavior (Bandura, 1986), and controllability refers to the beliefs about the extent to which performing the behavior is up to the actor (Ajzen, 2002). According to the TPB, external factors, such as demographic characteristics, knowledge, and previous experience, have no direct effect on intention, but may influence the direct antecedents of intention.

Thus, based on the TPB and the above literature, it was hypothesized that intentions to work with individuals with ID would be higher among individuals with more positive attitudes, more positive subjective norms, and stronger perceived

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