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Occupational therapy students' attitudes towards individuals with disabilities: A comparison between Australia, Taiwan, the United Kingdom, and the United States

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: Students who are enrolled in professional education programs such as occupational therapy may have inherent attitudes towards the future clients they work with. These attitudes may be influenced by the level of their professional education as well as cultural values of their country of origin.

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Purpose: The purpose of the study was to examine occupational therapy students' attitudes towards individuals with disabilities from an international, cross-cultural perspective and to investigate the possible impact of professional education on students' attitudes.

Method: 485 occupational therapy students from 11 university programs (3 from Australia, 3 from the United Kingdom, 3 from the United States, and 2 from Taiwan) completed the *Interactions with Disabled Person's* (IDP) scale.

Results: Significant differences were found between occupational therapy students from Australia, Taiwan, the United States, and the United Kingdom on the following IDP variables: overall attitude towards individuals with disabilities, 'discomfort', 'sympathy', 'uncertainty', 'coping', 'fear', and 'vulnerability'. Significant differences between first year students as a total group and final year students as a total group were found on their overall attitudes towards individuals with disabilities, 'discomfort', and 'uncertainty'.

Conclusion/implications: The attitudes towards individuals with disabilities among first year and final year occupational therapy students varies between countries and the students' year level also impacts on their attitudes towards individuals with a disability.

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1. Introduction

Students enrolled in professional education programs such as occupational therapy, may present with certain attitudes to the future client groups they will work with post-graduation. These attitudes could be influenced by the level of their professional education. For example, first year students may have markedly different attitudes, beliefs and perceptions compared to final year students who have completed fieldwork placements and hence have had more exposure to 'real life' work settings (Clouder, 2003). It is also possible that the attitudes of students completing their professional training in various countries reflect the beliefs, perceptions, and social norms of that cultural context. For example, in some Asian contexts attitudes towards individuals with disabilities is somewhat different to the attitudes espoused by some English-speaking countries such as Canada and the United States (Chan et al., 1988; Chen, Brodwin, Cardoso, & Chan, 2002). Therefore, studies investigating the attitudes of occupational therapy students from different cultural contexts would provide valuable insights for educators and practitioners. The purpose of the current study was to examine occupational therapy students' attitudes towards individuals with disabilities from an international, cross-cultural perspective and to investigate the possible impact of the year level of professional education on these attitudes.

2. Literature review

2.1. Attitudes towards individuals with disabilities

The attitudes held towards children and adults who have disabilities are said to be complex, multifaceted, and difficult to measure (Gething et al., 1997; Yuker, 1988). Pre-existing negative attitudes have the potential to lead people to become closed-minded and biased in their interactions with the person for which the attitude is held (Brehm, Kassin, & Fein, 2002; Wendt, 1999; Wilkins & Nietfeld, 2004). The manner in which an individual expresses an attitude is said to vary, with individual differences occurring in both the direction of the attitude or the strength and intensity with which a particular attitude is held (Brehm et al., 2002; Eagly & Chaiken, 1993).

The functions of attitudes are often associated with guiding new behaviors or helping individuals' to gain a greater understanding of the world around them. When negative attitudes are formed about a

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