

# Storytelling as Intervention: Implementing Experimental Design in Survey Research about Disability Stigma

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## Objective:

Stigma is an important force in the lives of people with disabilities.<sup>1,2</sup> It refers to a marginalization process that includes labelling, stereotyping, ostracization, status loss, and discrimination.<sup>3</sup> It is inseparable from the cultural and structural context in which it occurs.<sup>2,3</sup> Thus, reducing stigma is vital for improving quality of life for people with disabilities. However, stigma is a challenging topic to study because it requires potential research subjects to understand and answer questions about an abstract, complex, and multifaceted concept.<sup>4,5</sup>

The goal of this project is to understand how storytelling can be employed to reduce stigma for people with disabilities.

## Methods:

I implemented a survey design with storytelling vignettes, which is essentially an experiment within a survey. The survey uses eight stories about a hypothetical student with a disability: two stories about a student with a visible physical disability that was acquired later in life (one less impacted by her disability; one more impacted by her disability); two stories about a student with chronic illness that is not readily visible (one less impacted by her disability; one more impacted by her disability); two stories about a student with a mental illness (one less impacted by her disability; one more impacted by her disability); and two stories about a student with a developmental disorder (one less impacted by her disability; one more impacted by her disability). By utilizing stories about different types and impacts of disabilities, I can test whether or not the effect of storytelling varies by those factors. The design also has one group that receives no story at all, the control group. Thus, respondents are randomly assigned to one of these experimental groups or the control group.

Respondents in one of the experimental groups (i.e., story groups) answer questions about three concepts related to stigmatizing attitudes regarding people with disabilities—visibility, stereotypes (both positive and negative), and closeness. These questions specifically invoke the hypothetical student's name. Respondents in the control group also answer questions about the three concepts related to stigmatizing attitudes regarding people with disabilities. However, these questions are phrased in a more general way.

## Results:

Survey vignette experiments require a balance of both *personalization* and *control*. They must tell a story in a compelling way *without* naming a specific diagnosis (as this would cause the respondent to attach a label to the story and impact the experiment). Stories must be specific about the daily struggles related to an unnamed condition. They must also contain an element of the hypothetical person's perspective about their condition to help the reader see them as a multi-dimensional character with agency. At the same time, the stories must be consistent in terms of variables that are not of interest, such as gender and life stage. This consistency minimizes the risk that any observed results may be due to the fact that a certain story had an older person or a man as the hypothetical character, instead of the story itself.

### **Conclusions:**

Campaigns that utilize storytelling as a device for raising awareness seek to “put a face” on abstract concepts like disability and illness. Their primary goal is to engender empathy and raise (often monetary) support. However, it is less clear whether or not storytelling could be used to reduce stigmatization processes and promote equity for all people with disabilities. The type of disability may impact the effectiveness of storytelling as an awareness medium. It is also uncertain the degree to which reading the stories of other people with disabilities affects self-acceptance and closeness to community for those with disabilities. Survey experiments, which integrate a survey design with a randomized storytelling (vignette) element, offer an avenue for investigating how storytelling may influence stigma processes.

### **Works Cited**

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