

**Dating persons with physical disabilities: The perceptions of South Africans  
without disabilities**

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**Abstract**

There is good reason to believe that the attitudes of persons without disability towards dating a person with a physical disability might be unfavourable. However, in general, and in the Global South in particular, there is a dearth of research in this area. This study sought to take the first step in addressing this lack of enquiry, by surveying the attitudes of a general population sample in South Africa towards dating people with physical disabilities, using a vignette. Data from 1,723 survey respondents were analysed thematically. Findings reveal largely negative attitudes towards people with physical disabilities. Respondents without disability perceived numerous barriers to dating a person with a physical disability, including social stigma, anxiety, and concerns about the burden of care they believed such a relationship would place upon them. However, there was some evidence to suggest that some positive attitudes do exist, and a few respondents were open to dating a person with physical disabilities. Findings contribute to a nuancing and expanding of the 'myth of asexuality' among physically disabled people by showing that people with physical disabilities are actively desexualised by persons without disability. Future research is needed to explore how the inclusive attitudes, of which we did find evidence here, can be further cultivated.

**Keywords:** disability, dating beliefs, contact theory, social exclusion, prejudice, South Africa

## Introduction

Historically, people with disabilities have often been excluded or pitied by persons without disability in their communities, and by able-ist society as a whole. Disability has commonly been seen by persons without disability either as a personal tragedy to be borne with bravery, or a medical anomaly to be cured (Goodley 2011).

Sexuality has long been deemed the purview of the nubile normate<sup>1</sup> (Garland-Thomson 1997), evident both in attempts to ‘cure’ sexual dysfunction and lack of desire (Basson 2005; Bancroft and Graham 2011), and in popular culture’s emphasis on sex as a site of achievement (Attwood 2009; Swami, Diwell, and McCreary 2014). In the societies in which they live, people with disabilities have variously been infantilised and desexualised, or – when they do express their sexuality – often viewed as ‘oversexed perverts’ (Brown 1994, 125). Research suggests that the former stereotype is often applied to persons with physical disabilities, and the latter to persons with intellectual disabilities (Kim 2011).

In the former case, disability and sexuality are positioned as antithetical to one another: if one lacks ability (has a physical impairment), one cannot be sexual, and – equally – if one is not sexual, one has an impairment. One manifestation of the belief that disability negates sexuality are negative attitudes towards the sexuality of people with physical disabilities, specifically regarding dating people with physical disabilities. In the South African context, much of the evidence on societal attitudes towards the sexuality of people with physical disabilities tends to be anecdotal or inferred from the international literature. There has been an emergence of literature looking at disability and sexuality from the perspective of persons with disabilities themselves (e.g., Chappell 2016). The study reported in this paper addresses a gap in the research literature by looking at the attitudes of non-disabled people regarding dating people with physical disabilities.

In the following sections, we outline key theorising about disability and sexuality. Thereafter, we briefly review studies that have examined attitudes towards the sexuality of people with disabilities, focussing on beliefs about dating people with physical disabilities. We highlight the gaps in current knowledge which the present study aims to fill, and why it is

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<sup>1</sup> Garland-Thomson (1997) coins a particularly useful term, ‘the normate’, to refer to the imagined identity position held by those unmarked by identifiers of difference (including disability).

important to do so in South Africa. Finally, we examine the views of people without disability about dating people with physical disabilities, using qualitative data.

### ***Deviance-by-association and harmful stereotypes***

Negative societal attitudes towards the sexuality of people with physical disabilities can have negative sequelae for people with physical disabilities, including obstacles to maximising their sexual potential, and barriers to accessing information regarding sexual health (O'Dea, Shuttleworth, and Wedgwood 2012). Specifically, there is evidence that people with physical disabilities encounter barriers in their sexual relationships, and when such relationships do occur, they may be problematic. Recent research in Malawi has indicated that some men without disability actively pursue women with physical disabilities for sexual relations, but due to the stigma that surrounds disability, hide their sexual relationships with the women, and often mistreat their 'lower status' partners (Kvam and Braathen 2008).

There is also evidence of an elevated rate of sexual violence perpetrated against women with physical disabilities (Stromsness 1993). Furthermore, as a consequence of negative societal attitudes regarding the sexuality of people with physical disabilities, women with physical disabilities who experience sexual violence seldom disclose the violence (Astbury and Walji 2014), possibly because they would rather avoid the discomfort of inept medical and legal services (Kemp and Mallinckrodt 1996).

Against such a backdrop, attitudes towards the sexuality of people with physical disabilities are worthy of exploration (especially in contexts as marred by sexual violence as South Africa, see Meinck et al. 2017).

### ***A burden of care, discomfort, and social distance***

Research suggests that people with disabilities are often not seen as suitable partners by persons without disability (in the case of physical disability, see: Trieschmann 1988; Olkin and Howson 1994; Yoshida 1994; Marini et al. 2011; in the case of disability more generally, see: Hergenrather and Rhodes 2007; Miller et al. 2009). Whereas many people without disability would pursue friendships with people with disabilities, far fewer would consider romantic relationships (Hergenrather and Rhodes 2007; Miller et al. 2009; Marini et al. 2011). Not only might people with disabilities be regarded as lacking sexuality, but people without disability may feel awkward and uncomfortable if in a dating relationship with them, fearing being

stigmatised by association based on their closeness with a person with disabilities (Gordon, Minnes, and Holden 1990; Fichten et al. 1991; Olkin and Howson 1994; Gill 1996).

A number of factors may affect people's beliefs about what it would entail to date people with physical disabilities (Scotti et al. 1996; Wolfe 1997). This includes the belief of non-disabled individuals that it would be too much work, that it would be awkward socially, that they would not be sexually satisfied by a partner with a physical disability (Marini et al. 2011), and that the partner would be too dependent (Esmail et al. 2010). Attitudes towards people with physical disabilities may be worse than those towards persons with less visible disabilities (Esmail et al. 2010). For instance, writers such as Fiduccia (2000) and Siebers (2012) suggest that the societal inability or disinclination to reconcile disability with sexuality is particularly strong for people with physical disabilities.

Approximately 80% of all people with disabilities reside in the Global South (Hershey 2000; World Health Organization 2011), and there are over 2,870,130 people with disabilities in South Africa (about 7.5% of the population) (StatsSA 2014). In this context, dominated as it is by low- and middle-income nations, issues of access to basic services, healthcare, and education often take centre stage in disability research. Given the urgency triggered by the HIV epidemic in South Africa, research concerning disability and sexuality has mostly concerned itself with the illness (Hanass-Hancock 2009; Groce et al. 2013), although there are notable exceptions (McKenzie 2013; Chappell 2016).

There has been a dearth of research regarding the social facets of sexuality and disability in Global South contexts, including in South Africa (Lynch and Clayton 2016; Sofika and van der Riet 2016). Our study therefore sought to address this lack of inquiry by surveying beliefs about and attitudes of a general population sample in South Africa towards dating people with physical disabilities.

## **Methods**

### ***Study design***

This project involved the analysis of qualitative data from story-completion vignettes completed by 1,723 respondents (Kitzinger and Powell 1995). The vignettes formed part of a larger mixed methods survey on societal attitudes towards people with physical disabilities in South Africa. The survey included questions exploring perceptions of different facets of

physical disability and sexuality, as well as a demographic questionnaire. In the introduction to the survey, a person with physical disabilities was defined as ‘someone with a physical impairment that has a substantial and long term adverse effect on the person’s ability to perform normal day to day activities, e.g., walking, eating, going shopping’.

Gender-matched vignettes were employed to elicit participant beliefs about, discursive practices used, and ways of thinking about, dating a person with physical disabilities. The vignettes were constructed in consultation with a group of people with physical disabilities who worked with the authors on the project. The vignette read as follows for respondents who identified as female (with the equivalent for those who identified as male in brackets):

Jane (John), who is non-disabled, meets John (Jane), who has a physical disability, at a party. They have a nice chat together and seem to get along really well. At the end of the evening, John (Jane) tells Jane (John) that he really likes her, and invites her to go out on a date the following weekend. How does Jane (John) react to this? How might she (he) respond to John (Jane)? Why might Jane (John) react in this way? What are her (his) thoughts and feelings about the situation?

Projective techniques, such as this story completion vignette, are an attempt to elicit views, beliefs and attitudes indirectly. Barriers to admissibility, including the social undesirability of certain views or attitudes, make this technique useful when researching taboo subjects. As suggested by Kitzinger and Powell (1995), we employed this method as a means of gaining access to the respondents’ ways of thinking about the topic at hand (Kitzinger and Powell 1995). The survey, including the vignette, was translated into isiXhosa, isiZulu, and Afrikaans<sup>2</sup>, and respondents could choose to answer the questions in any of these languages, or in English.

We focussed this study on beliefs about the sexuality of persons with *physical* disabilities for two reasons. Primarily, in the case of examining perceptions of the suitability

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<sup>2</sup> isiXhosa and isiZulu are two of South Africa’s eleven official languages. These Indigenous languages are spoken mostly by Black South Africans. isiXhosa is the home language of 22.7% of the population, and isiZulu, 16%, making these the two largest language groups in the country. Afrikaans is the home language of 13.5% of the population, making it the third largest language group in the country (Statistics South Africa 2012).

of people with physical disabilities as dating partners, we wanted to limit the number of factors which could influence respondents' responses. By focussing on physical disabilities, we sought to identify impairment-specific reactions, and reactions to difference. We thus isolated an example of disability which allowed people in the vignettes to be adult, able to communicate, and fully capable of consent. Secondly, it has been suggested that individuals with visible disabilities face more stigma and social limitations (Esmail et al. 2010).

In designing our study, we were also concerned about respondents answering qualitative questions in a socially desirable manner, which may be particularly pertinent in South Africa where there is an acute awareness of the country's exclusionary history, and ongoing inequality (Swartz 2007). Consequently, a largely online and anonymous survey using indirect measures seemed a suitable way to attempt to circumvent this form of social desirability in the present study, insofar as is possible.

### ***Participants and procedure***

The survey, administered through *Qualtrics*<sup>3</sup>, was advertised widely, including through a dedicated Facebook page, and two of South Africa's largest news sites, *The Sowetan and TimesLive*. We obtained permission from the institutional planning departments of two large urban universities – the University of Johannesburg in Gauteng and Stellenbosch University in the Western Cape – to advertise the survey. It was also administered by hand by trained data collectors in two peri-urban settlements in the Western Cape, Langa and Khayelitsha<sup>4</sup>. This was to avoid biasing the sample towards persons with access to computers. The pen-and-paper respondents were selected at convenience from busy areas in the data collectors' respective locations. All respondents had to be at least 18 years of age or older (due to the sexual nature of some of the content). Ethical approval for the study was granted by the University of East London and the University of Stellenbosch.

The sample consisted of 1,990 valid survey responses for the qualitative data. One hundred and twenty-five respondents who met the Washington Group criteria<sup>5</sup> for having a

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<sup>3</sup> *Qualtrics* is a survey-management platform.

<sup>4</sup> Langa and Khayelitsha are two large, peri-urban settlements on the outskirts of Cape Town in South Africa. Their inhabitants are largely Black African and Xhosa-speaking.

<sup>5</sup> The Washington Group Short Set of questions, which is being used in many contexts globally, was used to identify people with disabilities amongst the survey participants. These items measure disability in functional terms, and include questions regarding the respondent's abilities in terms of seeing, hearing, ambulating,

disability using standard cut-offs were excluded, so the remaining group were people without disability, according to the Washington Group criteria. Of the remaining 1,865 responses, 1,723 provided valid qualitative data (i.e., did not have missing or nonsensical responses, such as 'fggg'). The mean age of the remaining respondents was 26 years (SD = 9.15), and ranged from 18 years to 76 years. There were fewer men (43.3%) than women (57.7%). Racially, the sample consisted of 42.8% Black African, 42% White, 8.9% Coloured, and 4.5% Asian or Indian persons, as well as 1.7% who self-identified as 'other'. Of the participants, 51.2% held a school leaving certificate. In South Africa (total population estimated at 54,490,000), 67.5% of the population identify as Black and only 21.6% as White. In terms of education, according to the South African Census (StatsSA 2012), the percentage of people aged 20 or older with a school leaving certificate is 28.5%. Therefore, our sample had a higher number of White respondents and was better educated than the general population.

### ***Analysis***

As in the study of Kitzinger and Powell (1995), we treated the story completion vignette data as one would interview data. Respondents were able to give as long a response as they wished, the majority of responses ranging from 10-150 words. The responses were analysed using thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006). Responses written in isiXhosa and isiZulu were translated by professional translators, while those written in Afrikaans were coded by the first author, who is a speaker of the language. A random sample of the translations was then checked by an independent translator.

All transcripts were coded using Atlas.ti by the first author, as well as two research assistants on the project. In the first round of coding, we used Atlas.ti's open coding function, independently coding the same 100 responses. Following discussion, a code book was developed. The remaining responses were coded using this code book, although allowance was made for emerging codes. Coding was conducted until a point in analysis at which no new information was emerging (after 1000 responses). Having three researchers identify codes independently is a way of ensuring greater reliability within this sort of qualitative work (Saldana 2013).

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cognition, self-care, communication. Response options range from 1, 'No- no difficulty, to 2, 'Yes- some difficulty', to 3, 'Yes- a lot of difficulty', and, finally, to 4, 'Cannot do at all'.



The extracts were coded not only for semantic content, but also for dynamics within the responses (for instance, noting when respondents changed track half way through their response), and for the manner of responding (how they narrated the end of the story). In each case, the dynamic of responding was examined for what it revealed about the respondents' views concerning dating a person with physical disabilities, and this was coded (as suggested by Clarke, Braun, and Wooles 2015). The codes, and their associated extracts, were then examined by the first author and themes developed, which were then discussed as a team.

## **Results**

All the themes identified are listed in Table 1.

Insert table 1 about here

The responses may reflect respondents' assumptions regarding dating a person with physical disabilities, possibly in lieu of any personal experience of doing so. Thus, our results also illuminate a plethora of stereotypes and misconceptions which the respondents either held, or were aware of, in relation to romantic relations with people with physical disabilities, in spite of potentially never having dated a person with physical disabilities.

### ***Response dynamics***

*Inclusive attitudes.* We used a single theme to encapsulate positive views about dating people with physical disabilities. Responses coded here were those which conveyed positive attitudes towards dating people with physical disabilities, either because they limited reference to the disability status of the potential dating partner in the vignette, or because disability status was not seen as a barrier to dating. Example quotes include, '[the woman without disability] feels excited to go out with him, as with any other boy', and '[the person with physical disabilities] is a possible romantic companion, and if they've gotten on well so far, why not pursue the relationship to see if he might be a compatible partner'.

*Pity and condescension.* A large segment of responses implied or explicitly stated pity for, or condescension of, people without disability towards people with physical disabilities. Coded extracts conveyed an urge to protect the feelings of people with physical disabilities against

'inevitable' rejection, but, equally, gestured towards an unequal power dynamic which people without disability felt manifested between themselves and people with physical disabilities. For instance, some respondents indicated that the motivation for the person without disability's acquiescence to a date would be pity. One respondent wrote that, '[the person without disability] goes for one date out of sympathy for him but unfortunately does not return his calls afterwards'.

Manifestations of pity included using deception, with respondents stating, for instance, that, '[the person without disability] would probably not want to offend [the people with physical disabilities] and could say yes and go on the date. Alternately [the person without disability] may decline the invite and provide some excuse as to why'.

Another instance of condescension was in some respondents' indication that they were 'proud' of the courage of people with physical disabilities to try to date a person without disability, stating, for instance, that, '[the woman without disability] is deeply impressed by [the man with a physical disability's] confidence. Not only did he overcome the general fear of being rejected as a suitor, but he also overcame fears of being reduced to the stigma attached to disabilities'.

*Moralising.* Much of the data were prescriptive in tone (responses which contained the word 'should' or its variants, in relation to appropriate behaviour towards people with physical disabilities, were common). Exemplary responses include: 'the disability is not supposed to be a factor as [both] are human beings who could go out if they wish', and '[the people with physical disabilities'] disability should be secondary to his personality and character'. The general prescriptiveness of responses hints at a paternalistic sense of how to 'deal' with people with physical disabilities, pointing to some of the moralistic ways of thinking underlying people without disability's relationships with people with physical disabilities.

Emanating out of the dynamics above, most respondents without disability indicated that the nature of the relationship between the person without disability and the person with physical disabilities would depend entirely on the character of the person without disability, such as the need for magnanimity on the part of potential partners of people with physical disabilities, as seen in responses such as, '[the person without disability] was brought up in a decent home and did not judge someone on their outer looks'.

*Need to compensate for disability.* This theme highlighted a particularly interesting facet of the data: that people without disability believed people with physical disabilities should compensate, in some manner, for their disability. What is conveyed in these data is the idea that, for people with physical disabilities to ‘qualify’ as dateable, they need to exceed the expectations placed upon people without disability, by being exceptionally funny or charming, so as to ‘make up for’ what they ‘lack’ in physical desirability. This is exemplified in responses such as, ‘If the conversation and [the people with physical disabilities’] company were exceptional then [the person without disability] will certainly react positively and respond with the affirmative. If not, she can reserve her right to refuse [the people with physical disabilities’] invitation’.

### **Reactions**

*Disgust.* Some responses seemed to suggest powerful negative affect – such as recoiling, revulsion and fear. This included shock and offense that a ‘lower status’ romantic candidate would approach the character without disability. As one respondent wrote, ‘[the woman without disability] might say that she isn’t interested or feel offended that he could think that she would go on a date with [the person with physical disabilities]’. These codes were clustered into a distinct theme due to their negative valence, as evidenced by statements such as, ‘[the woman with disability] might respond with disgust due to his disability and tell John it’s her reason not to pursue anything with him’.

*Disability as an insurmountable obstacle.* This theme encompasses responses from two dominant sub-themes, namely ‘anxiety and complicated feelings’, and ‘stigma’. The sub-theme ‘anxiety and complicated feelings’ is evident in responses which conveyed discomfort (the word uncomfortable and its variants occurred frequently), as evidenced in responses such as ‘[the person without disability] might have a problem with John’s disability, perhaps the prospect of being intimate with [the person with physical disabilities] given his physical condition makes her feel uncomfortable. In this case, she may pretend not to like him although she does, because she is uncertain about the situation’.

Respondents conveyed a fear of being regarded as prejudiced, indicating that the sense of duty to be good to people with physical disabilities might also originate from a desire to do the right thing. For males, this took on a gendered tone, with comments such as, ‘He

should be a gentleman and say yes. He should take her out on another date if he doesn't feel uncomfortable with [the person with physical disabilities]. He should just say yes'.

The complicated feelings facet of this sub-theme refers to the fact that a number of the responses conveyed a somewhat mediated reaction on the part of respondents – that is, the response would change tack mid-way through, or would convey guilt about holding socially undesirable views, as exemplified in quotes such as, '[the person without disability] may not feel comfortable or have a certain view point where she sees no future with [the person with physical disabilities] because he has a disability...may be a pity date which will lead to more hurt'.

The sub-theme 'stigma' encapsulates one of the most prominent sentiments recurring throughout the data set. Stigma was coded as either being 'other' or 'self' – that is, the respondents either conveyed a fear of stigma by association whilst not explicitly stating their own views about people with physical disabilities, or expressed stigmatising and prejudicial views themselves.

In the first instance, exemplary responses include: '[the person without disability] will probably tell [the person with physical disabilities] that he is a nice person but he is not her type. This may be due to the fear of what the society might say about her', and '...depends on [if the person without disability is] prejudiced and the way handicapped are seen in his culture. He might accept or decline (sic)'.

In other cases, the respondents expressed these feelings as their own, noting their desire to conceal their romantic involvement with a person with physical disabilities: 'Unfortunately, when [the woman without disability's] friends see them together, she still feels ashamed'.

Finally, extracts included here framed the people with physical disabilities' impairment itself as too great an obstacle to allow for the possibility of romantic involvement. Amongst women, this often included a fear that the burden of caring for the person with physical disabilities would fall on them. As one respondent stated, 'It might depend on what type of disability John has. If he has a "time-consuming" disability, Jane must be very sure before agreeing to a date and sparking a real romantic interest'.

*Sex concerns and desexualisation.* Of special interest were those responses which conveyed respondents' sexual concerns about dating a person with physical disabilities, or desexualised

the people with physical disabilities in the vignette, writing, for instance, that, '[the person without disability] might have a problem with disability; perhaps the prospect of being intimate with [the person with physical disabilities] given his physical condition makes her feel uncomfortable'.

In contrast to women's concern with intimacy, broadly defined, the codes included in this theme from male respondents mainly constituted worries about physical limitations on sexual activity (narrowly-defined as heteronormative penetrative sex), with respondents stating, for instance, that, 'There might be a deal breaker in terms of disabilities, as in if she is paralysed from the waist down and does want someone sexually active then he wouldn't want to date her, but at the least they would be friends'. This not only reflects a focus on the mechanics of the sexual act, rather than intimacy more broadly, but also reinforces the observation of Esmail et al. (2010) and Tepper (2000) that restrictive understandings of what counts as sex contribute to disableism and perpetuate the myth of asexuality amongst people with physical disabilities.

*Ambivalence and uncertainty.* Related to, but distinct from, the 'anxiety and complicated feelings' sub-theme, 'ambivalence and uncertainty' encapsulates data which conveyed ambivalence and uncertainty about romantic contact with people with physical disabilities.

Respondents often showed ambivalence about dating people with physical disabilities, stating, for instance, that, '[the person without disability] is going to be nice to [the person with physical disabilities] because he cannot bring himself to "disappoint a disabled girl"; he might feel guilty for "leading this girl on and giving her ideas" while all he meant was being nice out of pity (sic)'. Despite the fact that this ambivalence could have a negative valence, it also sometimes signalled a hint of inclusivity. This can be seen in responses such as, '[the woman without disability] is really surprised and a little uneasy about how to respond, but since they had such a nice conversation and she doesn't want him to be upset, she agrees to go on a date with him'.

### ***Influential factors***

*Contact.* Respondents often motivated negative responding on the part of the character without disability by referring to the latter's lack of familiarity and past contact with people with physical disabilities. Statements such as, 'There might be some apprehension if [the

woman without disability] has never had a personal or intimate relationship with a person who has a disability', exemplify this. This lack of contact was framed as a barrier to romantic interactions with people with physical disabilities.

*Adjustments and accommodations.* Responses to the from female respondents evinced a strong longitudinal perspective on the scenario. Respondents pointed to concerns about the future burden of care in a relationship with a person with physical disabilities, making comments such as, '[the woman without disability] may not feel comfortable or have a certain view point where she [sees] no future with him because he has a disability'. Women also made more reference to adjustments which would need to be made over time in pursuit of a relationship with a person with physical disabilities, including 'googling [the man with a physical disability's] disability'.

*Curiosity/openness.* When respondents did show openness to the idea of dating a person with physical disabilities, their motivation was often curiosity. As one respondent wrote, '[the person without disability] smiles as she eyes [the person with physical disabilities'] prosthetic legs, "The more adventurous, the better"'.

The degree to which the curiosity displayed in many responses is not problematic is debatable – such sentiments might be seen to be fetishising/using people with physical disabilities as an opportunity for personal growth. However, they may reflect simple interest and openness, as suggested by such responses as, '[the woman without disability] accepts the invitation with an open mind'.

*Disability-dependent.* A prominent theme throughout the data set was the idea that the romantic suitability of people with physical disabilities depended on the nature of their disability. Respondents suggested that greater functional impairments would foreclose on the possibility of dating, whilst less severe impairments might be manageable, writing, for instance, that, 'If Jane is severely disabled (quadriplegic, for instance) she might require intense care, and John might not want to take the relationship further... With lesser amounts of disability, possibly lost a leg or a hand, the person will require less physical assistance after which John would be much more open to further the relationship (sic)'.

## Discussion

This discussion must be prefaced by an acknowledgement that vignettes are but one means of gaining some access to the ways of thinking about, perceptions and social constructions of the respondents concerning dating people with physical disabilities, and it is with this in mind that the following discussion is undertaken (Kitzinger and Powell 1995; Agunbiade and Ayotunde 2012). Further, as noted before, it must be borne in mind that our sample had more White respondents, fewer men, and respondents with a higher degree of education than the South African population at large. This limits the generalisability of our findings. Thus, what follows are our observations regarding attitudes of some South Africans towards dating people with physical disabilities.

We found that our sample of South Africans without disability's views about a dating scenario involving a person with a physical disability were dependent on the nature and severity of the disability, and characterised by pity for people with physical disabilities and fears about stigma and dependency. Notably, however, we also found evidence of inclusive attitudes, characterised by responses which did not focus on the disability status of the dating target, or expressed openness to dating a person with physical disabilities. It is important to note that answers characterised by ambivalence and uncertainty also convey potentially inclusive attitudes, indicating the potential for meaningful relating. Taken together, these facets of our data suggest that there are some positive attitudes towards dating people with physical disabilities in South Africa.

However, we also found that there is a perception amongst people without disability that lack of contact between people without disability and people with physical disabilities causes the former to feel anxious in the presence of the latter. Research on attitudes has consistently suggested that people without disability perceive there to be a hierarchy of disability acceptability, where severe and visible disabilities are ranked as less acceptable than less visible and less disabling conditions (Strohmer, Grand, and Purcell 1984; Olkin and Howson 1994). Based on our findings, it appears that this hierarchy holds for partnering with people with physical disabilities.

The motivations behind this hierarchy appear to be twofold: firstly, people without disability may fear the accommodations necessary to pursue a sexual relationship with a person whose physicality differs from their own. Secondly, this finding appears to support

what Davis (1995) calls the 'enforcement of normalcy', which is the tendency of people to exclude persons based on their deviations from their criteria for normalcy.

Social psychological research has for some time explored anxiety in interactions between non-stigmatised and stigmatised persons (Hebl, Tickle, and Heatherton 2000; Stephan and Stephan 2000; Hebl and Dovidio 2005). Writing from the psychoanalytic tradition, Watermeyer (2006) suggests that this nervousness is due to our imaginings about what it would be like to be stigmatised ourselves, and our fantasies about the life and internal world of the other.

Many of our findings mirror those of past studies. Pity played a large role in many respondents' narratives. Past work has suggested that people with disabilities encounter condescension and pity from people without disability (Crawford and Ostrove 2008). Our respondents without disability also expressed awkwardness about interactions between people without disability and people with physical disabilities, mirroring the findings of Marini (2012) and Marini et al. (2011).

We also found evidence that people without disability actively desexualise people with disabilities. 'Desexualisation is a process that separates sexuality from disabled bodies', writes Kim (sic) (2011, 483), 'making it irrelevant to and incompatible with them because [people without disability] are supposedly undesirable in society and because disability is believed to lead to sexual incapacity'. The findings of the present study provide tentative evidence that the myth of asexuality amongst people with physical disabilities (noted in the introduction) may be underlain not only by beliefs, but also by people without disability's active desexualisation of people with physical disabilities in interactions.

There was evidence of gender differences in responding to the dating scenario. For instance, moralising about the 'right' way to react to the scenario was framed by male respondents as a matter of 'being a gentleman', and men were more concerned with physical intimacy than were women. Women were more likely to refer to making adjustments over time to accommodate disability. However, gender did not emerge as a major axis down which the data were split. Future work in this area could potentially conduct a more purposeful gender analysis of attitudes towards dating people with physical disabilities. The present study seems to suggest that gender does not directly determine the valence of attitudes.

In the South African context, specifically, however, two of our findings have particular relevance. Firstly, our finding that more women than men feared the burden of care, which



could be placed upon them in a relationship with a person with physical disabilities, makes sense in context. Recent work in South Africa suggests that women bear the majority of the burden of hidden care work (Nnko et al. 2000; Steinberg et al. 2002; Akintola 2006). In higher-income contexts, professional or paraprofessional care workers may be available to assist people with physical disabilities with specific care needs. There is a dearth of such services in low- and middle-income settings. It stands to reason, then, that women without disability in such contexts might be more reticent to partner with a person whose care they feel they might become tasked with.

Secondly, it is relevant that we found evidence which suggests that some inclusive attitudes do exist. Even where persons without disability appeared to be ambivalent about the romantic suitability of people with physical disabilities, some expressed openness to exploring a romantic relationship with a person with physical disabilities. This is a notable finding in South Africa, where the numerous barriers faced by people with physical disabilities mean that evidence of positive attitudes towards them should be seized upon and explored. Indeed, the evidence of inclusive attitudes towards dating people with physical disabilities warrants further inquiry, given that so little is known about the antecedents of inclusive attitudes in this area.

## **Conclusion**

The findings presented in this paper have implications for future research and work in the field, which should – our data suggest – concern itself more with detailed exploration and analysis of the beliefs and attitudes of people without disability which underlie their willingness to date people with physical disabilities. The promotion of full inclusion, and the sexual rights, of people with disabilities is a central goal of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UN General Assembly 2007). Further inquiry and activism is urgently required if we are to begin to explore and explode some of the attitudes and beliefs which underlie negative attitudes found in the present work.

Some of the work which must be done may involve creating more opportunities for contact between people with physical disabilities and people without disability on an equal basis every day, in higher education institutions, places of employment, and public spaces. In South Africa, and in the Global South in general, there are many barriers to contact likely to foster and support relationships and intimacy (Goodley and Swartz 2016). But it is clear that

a much more complex politics of intimacy and desire is at stake here, not only contact. In the context of disability and sexuality, much remains to be done. However, the positive attitudes we did find in our sample suggest that fertile ground exists for this work to occur.

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**Table 1: Themes**

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|                            |                                       |
|----------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| <b>Response dynamics</b>   | Inclusive attitudes                   |
|                            | Pity and condescension                |
|                            | Moralising                            |
|                            | Need to overcompensate for disability |
| <b>Reactions</b>           |                                       |
|                            | Disgust                               |
|                            | Ambivalence and uncertainty           |
|                            | Disability an insurmountable obstacle |
|                            | Sex concerns and desexualisation      |
| <b>Influential factors</b> |                                       |
|                            | Disability-dependent                  |
|                            | Contact                               |
|                            | Adjustments and accommodations        |
|                            | Curiosity/openness                    |

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