

## **A Cultural Perspective: A Survey of U.S. and Egyptian Students Regarding Their Perceptions of People with Disabilities\***

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### **Abstract**

*This research used a modified version of the Disability Social Relations Generalized Disability (DSRGD) Scale to explore the commonalities and differences of perceptions about people with disabilities across cultural divides. The DSRGD scale measures the effect of the social context on perceptions towards people with disabilities. Approximately 200 U.S. college students and 200 Egyptian college students were surveyed about their perceptions of individuals with disabilities as friends, co-workers and spouses. They were also surveyed about their media use and perceptions of media bias toward disabilities. Results indicated that Egyptian respondents tended to be less positive about people with disabilities than U.S. respondents. Women were less comfortable with people with disabilities than men. Media use appeared to have little or no effect on perceptions of individuals with disabilities.*

**Key Words:** Disability, Culture, Perceptions, USA, Egypt.

### **Introduction**

In many instances, people with disabilities' rights have been overlooked; their voices have been neglected; they are viewed negatively; and their opportunities for survival have been threatened (Iwakuma & Nussbaum, 2000). Thus, this has negatively affected their chance to lead a better life and to participate in society. Negative perceptions (or stigmas) toward people with disabilities have always been a barrier to their integration in society and a key to their marginalization. Societies create the meaning of disability through language, media photography, art, and literature (Haller, 2000; Higgins, 1992). Media actively frames people with disabilities as "different" thus creating a stigma. This creates or changes the public image of people with disabilities and often affects their self image as well (Haller, 2000; Nelson, 1996).

Agenda setting research on the media has shown that the media tells its audience how and what to think about certain issues and groups (Haller, 2000). Despite advances precipitated by many equal rights movements, the portrayals of people with disabilities in the media have often remained stuck in a stereotypical Twentieth Century construct. The purpose of this study is to examine perceptions of individuals with disabilities in the United States and in Egypt, and then compare results to see if media plays a role in developing those perceptions.

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\* This study was conducted among the students of University of Louisiana at Lafayette, U.S.A. and The American University in Cairo, Egypt

## **Literature Review**

### **Disability in the United States**

Stereotypes are inherent to the human species. Regardless of an individual's background, one will invariably identify certain characteristics and assign a stereotypical label to logically file the individual in their mind. A tall person as a basketball player; a homeless person as lazy. Research has suggested that the stereotypical image often applied to persons with disabilities is negative and condescending. These beliefs about people with disabilities can create barriers which limit a person with disabilities' contributions and participation in society (Braithwaite & Harter, 2000; Herold, 2000; Thomson, 2000). Social stigmas limit the opportunities people with disabilities are offered and prohibit them from participating in society, both socially and professionally (Brodwin & Orange, 2002; Hergenrath & Rhodes, 2007). The criteria used to assign these stereotypes are culturally dependant and are developed over a life time.

There are many forces which add cultural layers to an individual. According to Sue, Arredondo and McDavis (1992) age; educational background; historical moments; geographic location; eras; ethnicity; language; healthcare practices/beliefs; and, religion/spirituality are some of the forces which contribute to one's cultural identity. TV (media) can, and often does, influence the cultural perception of individuals by their representation of people with disabilities. Titchkosky wrote:

The fundamental social character of representation lies in its ability to present a version of reality and not necessarily in its ability to "get it right." Representations have real consequences for real people, but these consequences go beyond the people being represented, since there are consequences for those who make these representations as well (2000, p. 198).

Depending on context, representations and stereotypes can eventually lead to the social construction of stigmatized people, a blemished, not quite human, person (Titchkosky, 2000).

The stigma of broken or blemished goods often affects people with disabilities relationships (e.g. friendship, romance and working). Nemeth (2000) wrote: ". . . there is still a part of me that buys into his assumption, kicking and screaming as my ego might be; this part of myself is trained to believe that as a blind woman I am lucky to find an able-bodied partner" (p. 37). Nemeth's description of a relationship between a person with a disability and an abled person highlighted the smugness frequently portrayed by the abled person and the unworthiness often experienced by people with disabilities. Society has conditioned people with disabilities to believe they are damaged goods and should be happy that any abled person is willing to be in a relationship with them.

Women with disabilities are confronted with additional discrimination, they are disadvantaged economically, socially and psychologically extensively more so than either men with disabilities or abled women (Westhaver, 2000). Differences between genders are evident from both the abled and disabled communities. In many cases people with disabilities believe they have to be particularly "good" relationship partners to make up for what they feel their partners are giving up by being in the relationship. Sometimes people with disabilities feel they must compensate for their relational limitations by being excessively giving (Nemeth, 2000). This can result in the denial or suppression of negative or unpleasant emotions, creating a sense that discontent and anger (Nemeth, 2000). If emotions are internalized it can create an unhealthy feeling of self loathing, resentment and/or depression. If on the other hand, anger and pain are expressed, a person with a disability could be judged as a bitter cripple who believes the world owes them. The fear of rejection can be paralyzing and emotionally damaging even limiting available assistance (Nemeth, 2000).

People with disabilities become a marked group resulting in the creation of an illogical paradigm. In one aspect, they are given a social identity as being citizens who have the same rights as others and should be integrated like able bodied individuals. This assimilation ignores the fact that they are different and does not allow them to be different. The integration into the general population reveals the inconsistency of the person with a disability as being seen but not socially acknowledged. Hiding the difference through legislation and rehabilitation programs renders persons with disabilities socially invisible (Dossa, 2006; Hergenrath & Rhodes, 2007).

### **Disability in Egypt and the Greater Middle East**

The condition of disability in the Middle East and particularly in Egypt has greatly improved over the past decades and continues to improve. Prior to the 1970s, people with disabilities in Egypt, and in the Arab world in general, were quite neglected and stigmatized by the community (Azar & Kurdahi Badr, 2009; Lababidi & El Arabi, 2002). Minimal or no services were provided to them or to their families, and if services were provided, they were mainly provided through a charity.

There were no educational or awareness programs provided to people concerning disabilities. Thus, disabled people were seen as “freaks of nature” and were totally excluded from the society. Families tended to hide their disabled children at home, because of fear that people might look down upon their siblings as well, which can jeopardize their chances of getting married (Khamis, 2007; Lababidi & El Arabi, 2002). Yet, this picture has begun to change gradually during the past 20 years; families and the community started to have new beliefs with regard to disabilities. New programs have developed, including "early detection, early intervention, normalization, training programs for parents and inclusion in Community-Based Rehabilitation (CBR)" (Lababidi & El Arabi, 2002).

In the 1960s, the first educational amenities for intellectually disabled children were established. Twenty years later, an increased focus and interest were stimulated by certain international events, such as the International Year of the Disabled, and the International Decade of Disabled Persons (UN 1981), spurring several new services, such as the establishment of associations by parents of disabled children and various CBR projects (Shukrallah, Mostafa & Magdi, 1997). This awareness helped provide activities and services to the disabled; engaging them in the public arena; raising awareness; voicing their concerns; lobbying; and advocating.

These international movements also encouraged the development of the first organization for disabled people in Lebanon in 1981. This has also spurred disabled people in other Arab countries to come together and form organizations that have concrete demands such as full representation, integration in society, and to be heard by the authorities and foreign organizations (Azar & Kurdahi Badr, 2009; Abu Habib, 1997). These programs have consequently had a positive impact; improving perceptions of and behavior towards disabled people. People with disabilities began to pursue prominent and proactive roles in society. However, some activists claim that these developmental programs have not yet met their potential in providing full rights, representation, independence, and they still lack the strong negotiation power and public co-operation and support (Azar & Kurdahi Badr, 2009; Abu Habib, 1997; Crabtree, 2007).

Despite all these efforts regarding disabilities in the Middle East and Egypt, there is a general atmosphere of negative perceptions and attitudes towards people with disabilities. There has always been this belief among the “able-bodied” people that people with disabilities are helpless, are in need of protection, and cannot lead an independent life (Abu Habib, 1997). Pity, condescension, embarrassment, or a mixture of the three, is the reaction most commonly encountered by men and women who have a disability, from abled people (Abu Habib, 1997). When a child with a disability is born, the mother is often blamed for the disability and for giving birth to a perceived nuisance and burden on the community. Development agencies, disabled groups, and funding agencies more often than not fail to consider the importance of the gender dimension of disability. (Abu Habib, 1997). In many cases it is rare for fathers of disabled children to be active in their care; it is the responsibility of the mother. Many times the fathers try to prove the “defective” gene came from the maternal share of the DNA (Azar & Kurdahi Badr, 2009; Abu Habib, 1997; Crabtree, 2007; McConkey, Truesdale-Kennedy, Chang, & Shukri, 2008). Yet, some scholars also argue that this is also the case in the West (Crabtree, 2007).

Women with disabilities are doubly marginalized by their societies and by organizations at the national and the international level. In the Middle East, disabled women are neither fully represented nor fully integrated in society, disability movements and women's movements. Middle Eastern women with disabilities are twice as likely; to divorce, separate, and be a victim of violence than abled women (Abu Habib, 1997). Women with disabilities are absent from the public arena; they are not active participants in the leadership of women's movements and they remain absent from the political life of their countries. Research has shown that women with disabilities have suffered because rehabilitation programs are tailored to suit the men with disabilities' desires and needs for recovering their masculinity and sexuality (Abu Habib, 1997). Evidence also reveals that women with disabilities usually enjoy fewer benefits from governmental and non-governmental institutions that are especially intended to address the needs of disabled people (Abu Habib, 1997).

Researchers claim that this double discrimination starts in the family. It begins during early childhood when families' allocation of resources to the persons with disabilities in the family is very much influenced by their perceptions of the life chances available. This, in turn, is influenced by the gender of the person with a disability. Thus, minimal resources are allocated to women with disabilities as compared to men; further endangering their life chances to live as normal citizens (Abu Habib, 1997; World Bank, 2005). For instance, in Lebanese households where more than one person is disabled, sons with disabilities are treated differently than daughters. In one case of siblings with disabilities, the parents bought a wheelchair for the son and neglected the daughter (Abu Habib, 1997). Sons with disabilities are encouraged to get an education, while daughters are kept at home (Nagata, 2003).

This is mainly because male children are perceived to have higher economic value, whether disabled or able-bodied. Males can bring income to the family, while females are only seen as potential mothers who are expected to support their husbands and are not expected to generate income independently (Abu Habib, 1997; World Bank, 2005). Thus, daughters with disabilities are regarded as a failure on several levels. While sons with disabilities can be endured, and often married, daughters with disabilities are merely a burden on the family resources.

Heba Hagrass, a woman with disabilities from Cairo, Egypt, better explains this notion about the social powers, relationships and marriage.

You have to realize that men and women are judged using completely different criteria. A man should be strong, able to earn money and provide for his family. Many disabled men, regardless of the type of their disability, can fit this description. A woman is judged according to a completely different scale. She need not to be clever...she should be beautiful and attractive, a good housekeeper able to comply with the demands of her husband, particularly physical ones. A disabled woman cannot be beautiful, not when judged according to our scale of beauty, in any case. And a disabled woman cannot certainly be sexually attractive! Is there anything left on the list of requirement after that? (Abu Habib, 1997)

Because of these beliefs surrounding marriage and sexuality, women with disabilities have less of a chance of getting married and leading a normal marital life as compared to their Western counterparts (Nagata, 2003). In Syria, only 20% of women with disabilities were literate, compared to 66% of the total female population and 40% for men with disabilities (who are literate). Moreover, only 12% of Bahraini women with disabilities were literate in comparison to 59% of the total population of Bahraini women. In the Middle East, the percentage of literate disabled women is far less than that of disabled men. Generally, women with disabilities have a low participation rate in the labor force (Nagata, 2003; World Bank, 2005). Yet, interestingly enough, the employment rate of disabled women and the kind of jobs they occupy depends primarily on the economic wellness of the country itself.

For instance, in Kuwait, an oil rich country, "the percentage of employed women with disabilities is 2% as compared to 10% for the total employed Kuwaiti women" (Nagata, 2003). Also, the majority of disabled women in these rich countries tend to be employed in professional fields, with a high percentage of them gaining good incomes and enjoying good social prestige. On the contrary, in poor countries like Egypt, Lebanon and Jordan, it is quite uncommon for educated and trained women with disabilities to find good jobs as their Gulf counterparts. In addition, some believe that it is more suitable and convenient for disabled women to learn and practice basic activities like cooking and sewing (Nagata, 2003).

Marriage of women with disabilities is quite challenging in the Middle East (Abu Habib, 1997; Nagata, 2003; World Bank, 2005). Arab disabled women are not allowed one of the basic human rights which is "the right to love." The community in general fails to recognize the sexuality of women with disabilities and discourages the expression of their sexuality. In Jordan, the total percentage of married women with disabilities was 16% as compared to 37% of disabled men in 1983 (Nagata, 2003).

### **Cultivation Theory**

Over 40 years ago, George Gerbner and his colleagues began researching a concept they were ultimately to dub "cultivation theory" while working on the "Cultural Indicators" project at the Annenberg School of Communication at the University of Pennsylvania. The theory essentially states that TV consumption leads to a shared societal perspective about the world. Through the consumption of media messages with a similar theme over a period of time, viewers "cultivate" beliefs about the real world that are based more on the messages in the media than the actual world around them. Media fills in gaps in our understanding of the world, particularly about issues and places that we do not have the ability or desire to experience directly (Gerbner, 1969; Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, & Signorielli, 1986).

Media messages reinforce society's presumed stereotypical images of people with disabilities. Media produce images and messages portraying either the "heroic supercrip" or bitter, angry people worthy only of pity and charity. People with disabilities are infrequently portrayed as whole and complex, living the same everyday lives as abled people (Kroll & Klein, 1992). Cultivation research does not speak to a direct and powerful effect of media messages, but rather a long term cumulative effect where media consumers cultivate a symbolic creation of reality that they then use to interpret everyday events (Gerbner, 1998).

The research approach to studying cultivation effects is a multi-step process that can lead to a comparison of media content with beliefs that people hold about the world. The first step in this approach is content analysis of media – looking for indicators that reflect a mediated spin on reality. It is important for the researchers to determine factual information about the state of the world so they can better determine whether the quantity of, or approach to, issues in the media is distorted from reality. The final step is cultural indicators analysis – surveying audiences about their beliefs of their world (Gerbner & Gross, 1976). While definitive causality cannot be determined by this approach, correlations can be drawn between distortions in the media's portrayals of the world and how accurate viewers are in their perception of reality (Haller, 2000; Higgins, 1992; Nelson, 1996).

The majority of cultivation research has focused on the perception of the prevalence of crime and social decay (e.g. Gross & Aday, 2003; Hetsroni & Tukachinsky, 2006). This has been dubbed the “mean world syndrome” and refers to the belief that heavy media use has resulted in people believing the world is more dangerous than it truly is. Cultivation theory may lend itself to the study of perceptions of people with disabilities, based on the continued consumption of media that presents stereotypical images of persons with disabilities.

### ***Hypotheses and Research Questions***

Prior research into attitudes about persons with disabilities as well as cultivation theory suggests the following hypotheses and research questions...

H<sub>1</sub>: Attitudes toward persons with disabilities will vary by social context.

H<sub>2</sub>: Women will have more positive attitudes toward people with disabilities than men.

H<sub>3</sub>: People with a friend or family member with a disability will have more positive attitudes toward people with disabilities than people without this experience.

RQ<sub>1</sub>: How will the attitudes about people with disabilities vary among Egyptian and American students that have a friend or family member with a disability?

RQ<sub>2</sub>: How does amount of TV exposure correlate with students' attitudes of people with disabilities?

RQ<sub>3</sub>: How does amount of internet use correlate with students' attitudes of people with disabilities?

RQ<sub>4</sub>: Which media will respondents in Egypt consider to be the most negatively biased in their portrayals of people with disabilities?

RQ<sub>5</sub>: Which media will respondents in the U.S. consider to be the most negatively biased in their portrayals of people with disabilities?

RQ<sub>6</sub>: Who will consider the media to be more negatively biased in their portrayals of people with disabilities, U.S. or Egyptian respondents?

### ***Method***

In the spring of 2009, over four hundred students at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette in the U.S. and at The American University in Cairo in Egypt volunteered to complete a survey about their attitudes toward persons with disabilities, media use, as well as provide basic demographic information. Students were participants in communication classes at both institutions and received extra credit for providing their anonymous responses. The questionnaire consisted of a modified measure of attitudes toward persons with disabilities; questions about average daily TV and internet use; perceptions of media portrayals of people with disabilities; experience with people with disabilities; and respondent age and gender.

Student attitudes about people with disabilities were measured using a modified version of the Disability Social Relations Generalized Disability (DSRGD) Scale (Hergenrather & Rhodes, 2007). The original DSRGD scale consists of 18 statements that assess respondents' attitudes toward people with disabilities in a dating relationship, marriage, and in the workplace. Subjects respond to the statements using a Likert-type scale ranging from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree”.

Due to concerns for the cultural sensitivity of the Egyptian students in the study, the first factor of the DSRGD was modified to address a friendship relationship rather than a dating relationship. (The researchers also believe that this tapped an important day-to-day relationship between persons with and without disabilities). This factor was modified by dropping the first statement, which suggested that a respondent would never go beyond a friendship with a person with disabilities (inferring the alternative being a dating relationship.) Two other statements were removed from the factor that referenced having a potential sexual relationship with this person. Further, the phrase “dating a person with a disability” was changed to “having a friendship with a person with a disability” in the remaining three statements. One additional alteration to the scale was made to the marriage factor. The statement in this factor referring to making love to one's spouse was removed for the same reason.

The resulting modified survey consisted of a 13-item measure that included three subscales: a 3-item friendship subscale, a 5-item marriage subscale, and a 5-item workplace subscale. The friendship subscale addressed the following issues about friendship with a people with disabilities: level of comfort in the friendship, worries about what others think, and embarrassment regarding helping one's friend in public. The marriage subscale considered attitudes regarding consideration of marriage, intent of marriage, partner dependence, partner's ability to earn income, and partner responsibility as a parent. The workplace subscale dealt with respondent attitudes about people with disabilities regarding co-worker relationships, requirement of accommodation assistance, consideration of words used during conversation, co-worker interaction, co-worker socialization, and ability to perform job duties.

Students were also asked to respond to several items that stated portrayals of persons with disabilities in the media are negatively biased. Individual statements were made about broadcast TV, cable TV, satellite TV, radio, movies, print journalism, and the internet. In each case subjects responded on a 5-point Likert-type measure ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree." Experience with people with disabilities was addressed with three questions that asked if the respondent him/herself was a person with disabilities; if the respondent knew someone with a disability; and if the respondent had a family member or close friend with a disability. Participants were also asked to estimate their average daily use of broadcast TV, cable TV, satellite TV, and the internet. They were also asked to report their age and gender.

## Results

### Descriptive Statistics

A total of 454 students responded to the survey, 210 from AUC and 244 from UL. Of the sample, 29.3% ( $N = 133$ ) were male and 70.7% ( $N = 321$ ) were female. One hundred fifty-three of the respondents from Egypt were female and 57 were male. The U.S. sample broke down similarly with 168 female and 76 male respondents. The average age of respondents was 20.8 years. The Egyptian portion of the sample had an average age of 19.8 and the American portion of the sample 21.7. The median age for both subsamples was 20 years old.

Of those surveyed, 2.2% ( $N = 10$ ) identified themselves as a person with a disability. Nearly half of the sample ( $N = 217$ , or 47.8%) said that they had a friend or family member with a disability. A majority of the sample ( $N = 367$ , or 80.8%) stated that they knew someone with a disability. Four respondents (1.9%) stated that they had a disability; 79 (37.6%) had a friend or family member with a disability; and 148 (70.5%) knew someone with a disability. Americans' exposure to or experience with people with disabilities was a bit higher. Six (2.5%) considered themselves a person with a disability; 56.6% ( $N = 138$ ) had a friend or family member with a disability. And nearly 90 percent ( $N = 219$ , or 89.8%) knew someone with a disability. Respondents spent an average of 4.40 hours on the internet daily. Average amount of TV viewed daily was determined by summing their reported daily viewing of broadcast, cable, and satellite TV. Respondents reported watching on average 4.71 hours of TV per day. The Egyptian students reported spending a bit more time than average per day on the internet ( $M = 4.86$  hours) and watching TV ( $M = 5.03$  hours). The U.S. respondents reported a slightly lower daily average use of the internet ( $M = 4.00$  hours) and TV ( $M = 4.45$  hours). The differences appear to be negligible. Cronbach's alpha was used to determine the reliability of the modified DSRGD scale and sub-scales. The total 13-item modified scale had an alpha of .75. The subscales of friendship (.53), marriage (.62), and workplace (.63) were lower. All results were lower than alpha readings found in the study that developed the original scale (Hergentrather & Rhodes, 2007), it is believed that the modified DSRGD will provide useful information in the current investigation.

**Hypothesis 1** – The first hypothesis looked at how attitudes toward persons with disabilities varied by social context, high scores represented more positive attitudes and low scores more negative attitudes. The highest subscale score, representing the most positive attitude, was in friendship with individuals with disabilities. Respondents averaged a 3.93 response to this subscale while averaging 3.69 on the work subscale and 3.24 on the marriage subscale. Mean scores varied among the U.S. and Egyptian respondents, with U.S. attitudes about people with disabilities being generally somewhat more positive. On the DSRGD scale as a whole, T-test analyses revealed that U.S. responses ( $M = 3.67$ ) were significantly more positive than Egyptian ( $M = 3.46$ )  $-t = -4.73$ ,  $df = 448$ ,  $p = 0.00$ ). No significant difference was found in the U.S. and Egyptian students' feelings about people with disabilities as friends. However U.S. students had more positive attitudes about people with disabilities as spouses (U.S.  $M = 3.42$ ; Egypt  $M = 3.04$ ;  $t = -6.63$ ,  $df = 451$ ,  $p = 0.00$ ). Similar results were found regarding people with disabilities as co-workers (U.S.  $M = 3.75$ , Egypt  $M = 3.62$ ,  $t = -2.59$ ,  $df = 451$ ,  $p = 0.01$ ).

**Hypothesis 2** – The second hypothesis looked at differences in how women perceived people with disabilities. Surprisingly, women tended to have the same or more negative responses to people with disabilities as did men, except in the case of friendship. T-test analysis revealed no significant gender difference in attitudes based on the total modified DSRGD scale. Nor were there significant differences on the subscale “marriage.” However there were significant negative differences when considering people with disabilities as potential co-workers (women  $M = 3.65$ , men  $M = 3.81$ ,  $t = 2.78$ ,  $df = 451$ ,  $p = 0.01$  two-tailed). There was a positive difference on concept friendship (women  $M = 3.98$ , men  $M = 3.83$ ,  $t = -1.86$ ,  $df = 450$ ,  $p = 0.03$  one-tailed).

For the Egyptian respondents, t-test revealed a significant difference between men and women’s attitudes about people with disabilities, but opposite than hypothesized. Overall, men ( $M = 3.58$ ) were more positive about people with disabilities than were women ( $M = 3.42$ ,  $t = 2.11$ ,  $df = 206$ ,  $p = 0.04$  two-tailed). Egyptian men generally reported more positively than did Egyptian women about people with disabilities as spouses (men  $M = 3.19$ , women  $M = 2.99$ ,  $t = 2.02$ ,  $df = 207$ ,  $p = 0.05$  two-tailed.) They were also more positive about them as co-workers than women were (men  $M = 3.78$ , women  $M = 3.56$ ,  $t = 2.51$ ,  $df = 208$ ,  $p = 0.01$  two-tailed.)

With the U.S. respondents, the only significant difference was found on the factor of friendship. Women ( $M = 4.05$ ) were found to have a more positive attitude about being friends with a people with disabilities than men ( $M = 3.80$ ,  $t = -2.24$ ,  $df = 241$ ,  $p = 0.01$  one-tailed). When looking only at female respondents, t-test analysis revealed a significant difference in the attitudes of U.S. and Egyptian women about people with disabilities for the total modified DSRGD scale as well as all of its subscales. U.S. women ( $M = 3.69$ ) scored significantly higher on the combined DSRGD Scale than Egyptian women ( $M = 3.42$ ) –  $t(316) = 5.30$ ,  $p = 0.00$ . They also scored significantly higher than the Egyptian women on all the individual subscales. Both groups of women were most likely to be willing to interact with disabled friends and least likely to marry a person with a disability. In all cases, the U.S. women had a more positive attitude about people with disabilities than did the Egyptian women. Most striking was the difference in attitudes about being married to a man with a disability. The difference was less with co-workers and even less when considering possible friends.

**Hypothesis 3** – The third hypothesis considered how a person’s experiences with people with disabilities might affect their attitude about people with disabilities. The vast majority stated that they knew someone with a disability (nearly 80%). However, about half of the sample reported having a friend or family member with a disability. Since the sample was fairly evenly divided on this third question, it was utilized to study hypothesis three.

As expected, t-test revealed that people who had a friend or family member with a disability ( $N = 214$ ,  $M = 3.64$ ) had a significantly more positive attitude about people with disabilities than people who did not. The most significant difference was regarding the issue of being married to a person with disabilities. Egyptian respondents, who had experience with the people with disabilities ( $M = 3.64$ ) scored significantly higher on the combined DSRGD Scale than people who had never interacted with people with disabilities ( $M = 3.52$ ) –  $t(448) = 2.54$ ,  $p = 0.01$ . They also scored significantly higher on all the individual subscales.

For the U.S. respondents, there was a significant difference found in all categories except having a people with disabilities as a co-worker. In all other cases people that had friends or family with disabilities had a more positive attitude about people with disabilities. For the U.S. respondents, people who had experience with people with disabilities ( $M = 3.73$ ) scored significantly higher on the combined DSRGD Scale than people who had never interacted with persons with disabilities ( $M = 3.60$ ) –  $t(240) = 2.07$ ,  $p = 0.02$ .

**Research Questions 1** – When looking only at respondents that had a friend or family member with a disability, t-test analysis revealed a significant difference in the attitudes of U.S. and Egyptian respondents about people with disabilities overall (U.S.  $M = 3.73$ , Egyptian  $M = 3.48$ ,  $t = -3.90$ ,  $df = 212$ ,  $p = 0.00$  two-tailed.) There was also a significant difference in the attitude toward having a people with disabilities as a spouse (U.S.  $M = 3.48$ , Egyptian  $M = 3.02$ ,  $t = -5.59$ ,  $df = 214$ ,  $p = 0.00$  two-tailed.) No difference was found regarding friendship or being a co-worker.

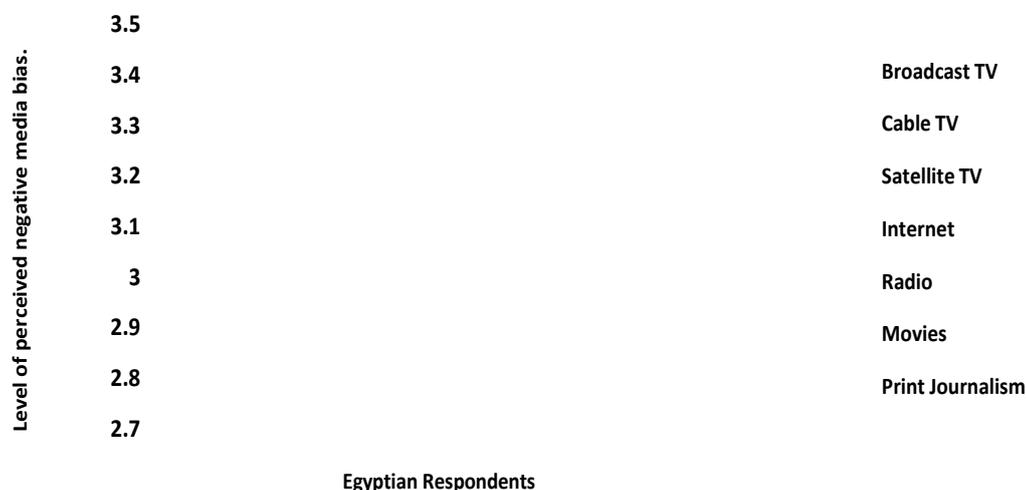
**Research Questions 2** – This question looked at the correlation between TV use and attitudes toward persons with disabilities. In two-tailed analyses, Pearson’s R revealed a very slight negative relationship between amount of TV viewed per day and overall attitude about people with disabilities ( $r = -.162$ ,  $p = 0.01$ ); friendship ( $r = -.110$ ,  $p = 0.05$ ); marriage ( $r = -.144$ ,  $p = 0.01$ ); and co-worker ( $r = -.117$ ,  $p = 0.05$ ). Although the relationship is very weak, it suggests that the more TV viewed the less positive one’s attitudes toward people with disabilities.

Similar results were found for both the Egyptian and U.S. subsamples, however there were some differences. For the Egyptian students, no significant relationship was found between TV viewing level and attitudes toward people with disabilities as co-workers. However there was a weak correlation for the modified total DSRGD scale ( $r = -.173, p = 0.05$ ), and the friendship ( $r = -.141, p = 0.05$ ) and marriage ( $r = -.148, p = 0.05$ ) subscales. For the American students, only the total modified DSRGD was significant ( $r = -.134, p = 0.05$ ), none of the subscales were.

**Research Question 3** – The relationship between internet use and attitudes toward people with disabilities was also studied. A two-tailed Pearson’s correlation analysis also showed a limited negative relationship between internet use and overall attitude about people with disabilities as measured by the modified DSRGD scale ( $r = -.172, p = 0.01$ ). A weak significant negative relationship was also found for the subscales of marriage ( $r = -.134, p = 0.01$ ) and co-worker ( $r = -.166, p = 0.01$ ). Again, this suggests that increased internet use may have a very mild negative effect on attitudes about people with disabilities. Once again, there were slight differences in the subsamples. For the Egyptian respondents there was a significant negative relationship between internet use and the overall modified DSRGD scale ( $r = -.186, p = 0.01$ ), friendship ( $r = -.172, p = 0.05$ ), and co-worker ( $r = -.148, p = 0.05$ ), but not marriage. For the U.S. respondents, the only significant relationship was a negative one between internet use and the subscale co-worker ( $r = -.159, p = 0.05$ ).

**Research Question 4** – This question considered which media the Egyptian respondents considered to be most biased toward people with disabilities. Subjects responded to the statement “I feel that \_\_\_ portrayals of people with disabilities are negatively biased” on a five point scale, ranging from strongly agree (5) to strongly disagree (1). The higher the average score on this scale, the more a respondent believed that that medium was generally negatively biased toward people with disabilities. They were asked the same question for all the following media: broadcast TV, cable TV, satellite TV, internet, radio, movies and print journalism (Figure 1).

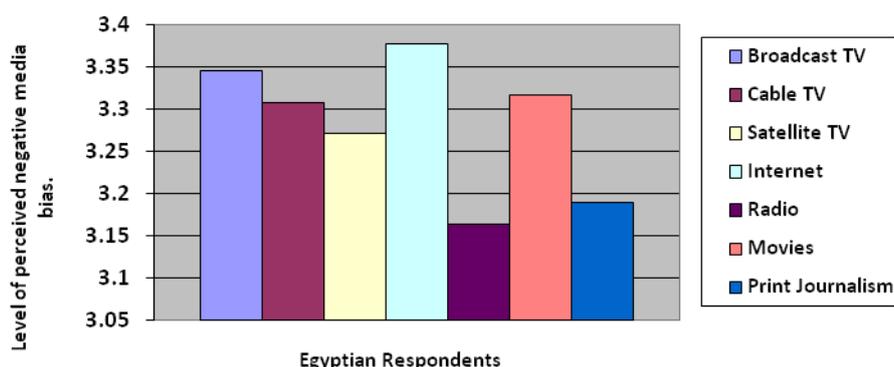
Figure 1: Perceived Negative Media Bias Toward people with disabilities – Egyptian Subsample.



Generally speaking, the Egyptian students reported that internet, radio, and print journalism were the least negatively biased in their presentations of persons with disabilities. Movies and TV were more negatively biased with broadcast TV being considered the most negative in its portrayals of people with disabilities.

**Research Question 5** – The U.S. subsample of students was also asked the same questions about their perception of portrayals of people with disabilities in various media. The American students also considered negative portrayals of people with disabilities to be relatively low in radio and print journalism. However they considered internet portrayals to be much more negative than did the Egyptian respondents. They considered movie portrayals of people with disabilities to be more negative as well. Responses about TV representations were similar to that of the Egyptian students (See Figure 2.)

Figure 2: Perceived Negative Media Bias Toward people with disabilities – U.S. Subsample.



**Research Question 6** – The final research question considered differences in the perceptions of negative bias toward people with disabilities. T-test analysis was performed comparing U.S. and Egyptian responses to the individual media bias statements along with each group’s overall average perception that the media were negatively biased toward people with disabilities. The latter figure was obtained by averaging subjects’ responses to the seven media bias statements.

T-test analysis revealed no significant difference in the overall perception that the media are negatively biased in their portrayals of people with disabilities. However, significant differences were found for internet, radio and print journalism. In all cases, the U.S. respondents reported that portrayals of people with disabilities in these media were more negatively biased. U.S respondents radio – U.S.  $M = 3.16$ ; Egyptian  $M = 2.98$ ;  $t(452) = 2.37$ ,  $p = 0.02$ . Print journalism was also considered more negative about persons with disabilities by the U.S. respondents ( $M = 3.19$ ) than by the Egyptian respondents ( $M = 2.95$ ) –  $t(452) = 3.03$ ,  $p = 0.01$ .

### Discussion

The negative perceptions of people with disabilities appear to be cross-cultural. Legislative solutions for tackling exclusion are necessary as they promise access to the public sites where abled counterparts conduct their everyday lives. However, these solutions have yet to fundamentally alter the cultural patterns of society (Harter, Scott, Novak, Leeman, & Morris, 2006). Although inroads have been made in the past few decades, negative stereotypes have been powerful barriers that forbid persons with disabilities to contribute and participate fully in their respective societies across the world. The results of this study indicate that despite some differences between perceptions among students in the U.S. and students in Egypt, there was a strong underlying similarity in their perceptions. This appears to be the case regardless of cultural context and differences between the two countries.

The U.S. attitudes towards people with disabilities were somewhat more positive than Egyptians. Stigma and discrimination against people with disabilities is traditionally inherent in the Egyptian culture, not only in the individuals with disabilities’ physical environment, but even in their own families (Abu Habib, 1997; Azar & Kurdahi Badr, 2009; Lababidi & El Arabi, 2002). Unlike in the U.S., where people with disabilities are better integrated in society and have a variety of rehabilitation services; allowing them to have better chances of pursuing “normal” lives; and in turn may result in a more favorable effect on attitudes towards people with disabilities in the U.S. than in Egypt.

Similarities appear in attitudes toward people with disabilities in both groups of respondents, both groups accept people with disabilities as friends, but show less acceptance to people with disabilities as co-workers and less still as spouses. However, Egyptian students are less positive about the acceptance of people with disabilities as co-workers or as spouses than their counterparts. This difference may be explained by the variance found in the legal environment between the two countries. Egypt does not have a law that encompasses the individual rights of people with disabilities in all aspects of their lives. Possibly for that reason, Egyptians are accustomed to people with disabilities in the workplace but do not necessarily think of people with disabilities rights outside of that framework (IDEAnet, 2003). Another similarity between both groups of respondents was in the generally more negative attitudes held toward people with disabilities by women – who were less inclined to be co-workers with people with disabilities or married to them than were men. This was a finding that was unexpected as based on the literature review; it was thought that women in both cultures would have more positive attitudes about people with disabilities.

Nearly half of the U.S. and Egyptian respondents had experiences and/or interacted with people with disabilities. For the U.S. respondents, this direct experience with people with disabilities correlated with a more positive attitude toward them. This was not the case in Egypt however. Clearly, the proper integration of people with disabilities in society – which is thought to help raise positive perceptions, understanding, and respect of their abilities – is not necessarily a translatable concept. This may be due to the fact that families in the Arab world tend to be ashamed of their disabled children because of the stigma attached to people with disabilities in this region.

The media and TV are pervasive, they often portray things that viewers do not have direct experience with, and consequently, could have a profound influence on the cultural perception of individuals. Media representations of people with disabilities could help audience members develop perceptions, and whether positive or negative, may become their reality. Moreover, these representations or stereotypes can become a social stigma and stigmas often carry an even more negative connotation, eventually leading to the social construction of stigmatized people (Titchkosky, 2000). Although TV is the most popular medium in the Arab region (and it is viewed as the powerful opinion maker) it has not proved to affect the perceptions of Egyptian students as would be expected. Yes, there is a slight influence but not significant enough. This is an interesting finding since media scholars have often linked formulation of perceptions and stereotypes to the cultivation theory of media. Here it would be more rational to make the assumption that cultural and traditional forces and attitudes toward people with disabilities have a more lasting influence on perceptions. However, it is noteworthy that Egyptians do find that TV and movies are most negatively biased in their portrayal of people with disabilities.

The internet also proved to have a mild effect on increasing negativity toward people with disabilities in both constituents, once again negating the idea that media use has a strong influence on attitudes toward individuals with disabilities. However, U.S. students did find the internet portrayals to be as negative as TV and movies. On the whole, with regard to perceptions of negative bias in media, there was no difference in the overall perception of both groups of students, although U.S. students saw more bias in internet, radio and print media content than Egyptians did. Once again this suggests that the idea of discrimination against people with disabilities is not of a major concern to Egyptians, in comparison to the U.S.; and that U.S. students attribute these negative perceptions to the media more than Egyptians do. This is because in Egypt, the culture is more of a source of these misperceptions.

### ***Limitations / Future Research***

Even with its limitations, we believe this research has provided a valuable first look at the cultural differences and similarities of the way that U.S. citizens and Egyptians perceive people with disabilities. University students are not an ideal group to evaluate the public perceptions about people with disabilities, but they are a collective that is accessible for initial attempts to understand the cultural differences in the U.S. and Egypt. This subject group limited our study because the students were not only from different countries but there was also probably a very different socioeconomic difference. The survey did not differentiate between which TV shows were watched, what internet sites were visited, limiting the assessment of media affect. Future studies should have more compatible subject groups, and identification of TV shows and internet sites would provide a more complete picture of perceptions and cultural differences/similarities.

### ***Conclusion***

As technology improves communication across the cultural barriers, the need to understand our neighbors grows. Studying cultural differences (both intra and inter) and bridging the abyss, to better understand the marginalized people in our own culture and our neighbors, will help to understand the standpoints created from the different cultures. By seeing the world through the eyes of others it will be easier to understand and accept our differences.

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