

BARRIERS AND ACCOMMODATIONS

Applying the Human Rights Model of Disability to HALS

BY MARCIA RIOUX, EZRA ZUBROW, ADELE FURRIE, WENDY MILLER AND MARY BUNCH

The research team for "The Geography of Literacy and Disability" has developed a new variable index that promises to provide a powerful tool for disability activists, policy-makers and advocates in Canada.

This index applies the human rights model of disability to the analysis of the 1991 Health and Activity Limitation Survey (HALS). Our team's Barriers and Accommodations Index places the locus of disablement on environments, systems of support and the exercise of rights, rather than on functional limitations of the individual. This is an important conceptual, methodological and analytical change.

For the past few decades, a human rights model of disability has been developing from within the disability communities of Great Britain, Canada and elsewhere. This model views disability as a form of social oppression. People are seen as having a disability by the barriers they experience to full access and participation in society, rather than by a physical, intellectual or other impairment. Disability issues are resolved, then, by providing accommodations, removing barriers and ensuring full participation in society.

The human rights model was developed in critical response to the medical and functional models of disability. The medical model interpreted disability as a medical problem or pathology to be fixed. The functional model saw disability as a person's limitations in activities in their daily lives at home, at work and in communities, resulting from the organization of physical or social environments leading to these limitations.

The 1991 HALS, based on a functional model of disability, began looking towards the future, a shift away from the traditional statistical analysis of disability as a medical condition. In response to the concerns of persons with disabilities, the community, advocates and policy makers, HALS collected information on the barriers experienced and the accommodations made. Such an approach provided useful information for analysis by policy makers and program developers because it allowed them to determine how many people with disabilities met their definition of disability and also the level of supports and services needed by those individuals.

Our research team used the HALS questions pertaining to barriers and accommodations to create the new index for our study of literacy and disability. This new index, the Barriers and Accommodations Index, measures the severity of barriers experienced and the degree of accommodations received - the experience of persons with disabilities in social environments, rather than qualities or limitations of the person.

Further, it provides an overall measure of peoples' experiences in terms of the accessibility of their environments. Rather than only looking at barriers and accommodations in one segment of an individual's life - within the home, at work, etc. - this index examines the impact across all activities. It demonstrates that environments accessible to all people, regardless of their diverse physical, intellectual or psychological qualities, are framed as a social responsibility, rather than as a "special interest" measure. The right to participate fully in one's society without experiencing

barriers is, after all, no more or less special from one person to the next, regardless of the qualities of that person.

To create the Barriers and Accommodations Index, our research team reviewed HALS, which was organized by major life activity, and selected those questions that identified barriers and accommodations. This exercise focused on the barriers portrayed through the survey. After identifying the pertinent questions, they were organized into natural categories, which are discussed below.

Barriers are grouped into six broad categories: 1) aids and personal services; 2) modifications to structures; 3) transportation; 4) employment; 5) financial; and 6) attitudinal. A barrier is identified when something, such as specialized equipment or training, is needed but not available - for example, not receiving adequate training or negative perceptions by the employer create barriers to employment. Lack of finances is a barrier to taking courses, travelling, participating in leisure activities or making modifications to homes. Attitudinal barriers are encountered in all aspects of life. This includes being labelled by others and having difficulties travelling because of unsupportive staff.

Accommodations are grouped into four broad categories: 1) aids and personal services; 2) modifications to structures; 3) transportation; and 4) employment. The financial and social categories are only included in the barriers section. The aids and personal services category looks at a series of questions relating to the current use of any aids, services, specialized equipment or devices, any physical or communication therapy received and any assistance received to perform daily activities. Any modifications to the home or work environment, as well as residing in housing designed for people with disabilities, are included as an accommodation. Transportation accommodations address the use of specialized or accessible buses.

The examples given in the above paragraphs are a portion of the types of information our research team used in constructing the Barriers and Accommodations Index. The categories were combined to achieve the overall index of barriers and accommodations presented in this article. Space limits a full explanation.

As shown in Figure 1, the Barriers and Accommodations Index includes four main categories characterizing the experience of barriers and accommodations for a person with disabilities, as follows:

- 1) barriers encountered, none removed;
- 2) barriers encountered, all removed;
- 3) no barriers encountered; and
- 4) barriers encountered, some removed.

Our research team's preliminary findings using this index suggest that at the Canada level, 13 per cent of adults with disabilities reported that they encountered no barriers in their daily activities. An additional 10 per cent stated that they experienced some barriers, but through accommodation - either personal or societal - all barriers had been removed. Forty-nine per cent of adults with disabilities reported that they experienced barriers and that some of those barriers had been removed. This means that 28 per cent of adults with disabilities reported that no accommodations had been made to the barriers they experience. The provinces all have a similar pattern of barriers and accommodations to that of Canada as a whole, as indicated by the pie charts in Figure 1.

As these early results demonstrate, the Barriers and Accommodations Index clearly allows for a different understanding of the experiences of persons with disabilities in Canadian society. It measures both the barriers encountered by persons with disabilities and the degree to which accommodations resolve these barriers. In effect, it measures how successful our society is at ensuring access and opportunity for citizens, including those who have a disability.

The data from the 2001 Participation and Activity Limitation Survey (PALS) is due to be released later this year. This survey includes questions that could be used to create a similar Barriers and Accommodations Index. This index will provide a way of measuring the change that has occurred in the past decade.

* * * * *

This article appeared in the Winter 2002 issue of ABILITIES, Canada's Lifestyle Magazine for People with Disabilities.

ABILITIES is published quarterly by the Canadian Abilities Foundation, a not-for-profit organization with a mission to provide information, inspiration and opportunity to people with disabilities, their friends and families, and professionals.

For more information or a sample copy, contact ABILITIES at 416-923-1885, e-mail able@abilities.ca, or visit www.abilities.ca.