

Using the IAT to investigate attitudes toward people with disabilities

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Psyc 554: Survey of Multivariate Statistics

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December 4, 2025

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Introduction

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), people with disabilities make up about 16% of the global population, or 1.3 billion people (2022), and nearly 30% of adults in the United States have some type of disability (National Center on Birth Defects and Developmental Disabilities, 2024), which is defined as impairment in major life areas due to health and contextual factors (WHO, 2022). In recent decades, there has been concerted effort to improve the quality of life for disabled persons (WHO, 2022). This is evidenced by the WHO's inclusion of disabled people in their Sustainable Development Goals and the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act and similar acts around the globe. Despite making up such a significant proportion of the population, and despite forward progress, disabled people continue to face discrimination, poor health outcomes, and even eugenics (Dolmage, 2017; WHO, 2022).

There are many factors influencing people's perspectives on disabled individuals, and many overlapping factors which directly influence the quality of life for people with disabilities. Two factors which greatly influence beliefs of disabled people are religiosity (or strength of one's religious beliefs; Schumm & Stoltzfus, 2016) and political ideology (i.e., liberal, conservative; Garneau & Schwadel, 2022). Often, both one's religion and one's political views are deeply linked with one another and work together to shape one's worldview.

The primary purpose of this research is to examine how religiosity and political ideology interact to shape beliefs of people with disabilities. To do this, the self-report measures of attitudes toward disabled and non-disabled people were used, alongside the results of the Implicit Associations Test (IAT). This allowed for comparison between self-reported attitudes and actual, implicit, attitudes. An added secondary analysis was done to evaluate whether disabled folks harbor more warmth toward other disabled people than do non-disabled people.

Literature Review

Religiosity

Of the factors which influence how people view individuals with disabilities, religion has a powerful influence (Baxter & Mahoney, 2023; Disabled World, 2025; MIND, n.d.), often shaping the better part of a person's worldview. For example, some religions view disability with a more charitable lens, viewing people with disabilities not as burdens, but as valued members of the community who must be taken care of (Baxter & Mahoney, 2023; Disabled World, 2025; MIND, n.d.). There has also been research that shows evidence of a positive correlation between prosocial behavior, altruism, empathy, and religiosity (Saroglou, Pichon, Trompette, Verschueren, & Dernelle, 2005), which suggests a stronger likelihood to care about and support people with disabilities.

Conversely, highly religious people tend to also be higher on Social Dominance Orientation (SDO), or the belief that certain groups are superior to others (Oxendine, 2018). This belief is negatively correlated with support for social programs, support for minority groups, and positively correlated with Belief in a Just World (BJW) (Pratto, Sidanius, Stallworth, & Malle, 1994). BJW is the belief that "people get what they deserve and deserve what they get," (Kaplan, 2012, p. 398). Since highly religious people are high on both BJW and SDO (Bègue, 2002; Kaplan, 2012; Oxendine, 2018), it can be assumed they would be less tolerant of disabled people.

Political Ideology

Another factor that shapes how people perceive others is political ideology (Garneau & Schwadel, 2022). Among individuals within the disability community, there is a general sentiment that politicians do not care about disabled people, regardless of political affiliation

(Cortland, 2023; Warren, 2024). While, in general, liberal individuals tend to be more tolerant of different groups (Garneau & Schwadel, 2022), both conservative and liberal voters believe that more needs to be done by politicians to assist people with disabilities (Cortland, 2023). In addition, disabled people themselves carry a diverse range of political beliefs, with about the same spread as non-disabled individuals (Igielnik, 2016).

Traditionally, the disability rights movement has been associated with liberalism and progressive politics, but disability is not perceived as a central concern to the left, with focus more on other forms of marginalization (Ne'eman, 2009). In addition, the left's support for issues such as assisted suicide and selective abortion have been perceived as support for eugenics by many disabled people, leading to a schism between the left and the disability rights movement (Ne'eman, 2009). On the other hand, conservative politics are often founded in SDO and BJW (Pratto, Sidanius, Stallworth, & Malle, 1994), and have often worked against social supports and social policies which would benefit disabled people (Ne'eman, 2009; Pratto, Sidanius, Stallworth, & Malle, 1994).

RQ1: How do self-reported and implicit views of disabled people vary across different levels of religiosity?

RQ2: How do self-reported and implicit views of disabled people vary across different political orientations?

RQ3: Do religiosity and political orientation interact to shape self-reported and implicit views of disabled people?

Methods

The data for this analysis was retrieved from the Open Science Framework website and can be viewed [here](#). The original dataset had a large sample ($N = 62,927$), and even after listwise

deletion of entries with incomplete data, the sample remained large ($N = 53,647$). For the purposes of this project, I extracted a pseudo-random sample of 500 participants. To make sure that the sample maintained its original structure, I randomly selected 400 participants who indicated they are not disabled, and 100 participants who indicated they are disabled. This was done to make sure the spread of disabled and non-disabled participants was representative of the overall population, yet large enough for analysis. Refer to Appendix A for a complete table of the demographics.

To test the research questions, a 2 x 3 MANOVA was conducted with political orientation and religiosity as the predictor variables, and self-reported warmth toward disabled people, self-reported warmth toward non-disabled people, and the overall IAT d-score as the outcome variables. Refer to Appendix B for a description of the scales. The MANOVA was followed up by univariate ANOVAs for each of the three outcome variables. Post-hoc Tukey tests followed to assess at which predictor levels there were significant differences in the outcome variables.

Additional Analysis

A paired t-test was conducted to determine whether there was a significant difference between self-report and implicit measures of bias. This was done by calculating the d-score of the self-report scales, such that negative scores indicate preference for disabled people, and positive scores indicate preference for abled people. That self-report d-score was then compared to the IAT D score through the t-test. An additional Welch's two sample t-test was conducted to assess whether the IAT scores were significantly different for disabled and non-disabled participants. These analyses were purely exploratory.

Results

Correlations among the study variables are presented in Table 3 (refer to Appendix C). The table shows that self-reported attitudes toward disabled and abled people were strongly correlated ($r = 0.74, p < .001$), which means that participants tended to report similar levels of warmth toward both abled and disabled people. Religiosity also had a small positive correlation with both warmth toward abled and warmth toward disabled people ($r = 0.21, r = 0.19$, respectively, $p < .001$), which means that individuals with stronger religious views tended to rate disabled and abled people more warmly than individuals with weaker religious views. However, the IAT d-score was not significantly correlated with either of the self-reported warmth variables, which means that individuals' own perceived warmth toward disabled and abled people is not accurate. Interestingly, religiosity was weakly correlated to the IAT d-score. Since higher, more positive, d-scores represent more warmth toward able-bodied individuals, this provides some evidence that more religious individuals are less accepting of disabled people than they believe. Finally, religiosity and political identity were negatively moderately correlated ($r = -0.41, p < .001$), which shows that more liberal individuals tended to be less religious than more conservative individuals.

Results of the MANOVA (refer to Appendix D) revealed a significant main effect of religiosity on implicit and self-reported perceptions of abled and disabled people. Using Pillai's Test, there was a significant multivariate effect of religiosity (*Pillai's Trace* = 0.053, $F(9, 1419) = 2.85, p = .003$, partial $\eta^2 = .018$), which answered the first research question. The main effect of political orientation was not significant (*Pillai's Trace* = 0.04, $F(18, 1419) = 1.15, p = .29$, partial $\eta^2 = .01$), nor was the interaction between religiosity and political orientation (*Pillai's Trace* = 0.09, $F(51, 1419) = 0.89, p = .70$, partial $\eta^2 = .03$), answering the second and third research

questions. Refer to Appendix E for the descriptive statistics for each dependent variable by religiosity and political orientation.

Univariate ANOVAs were conducted and indicated that religiosity significantly affected both the self-report measure of warmth toward abled people ($F(3, 473) = 6.75, p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .04$), and warmth toward disabled people ($F(3, 473) = 7.01, p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .04$). Religiosity did not significantly affect the IAT d-score results ($F(3, 473) = 0.74, p = .53$, partial $\eta^2 = .005$). Political orientation and the interaction term were not significant for any dependent variable. Refer to Appendix F for the complete ANOVA tables.

To explore the main effect of religiosity on self-report attitudes, post-hoc Tukey tests were conducted. For self-report attitudes toward abled people, participants who were moderately religious (M difference = 0.87, 95% CI [0.26, 1.47], $p = .001$) and strongly religious (M difference = 1.17, 95% CI [0.45, 1.90], $p < .001$) reported significantly higher scores than those who were not religious. For self-report attitudes toward disabled people, participants who were moderately religious (M difference = 0.76, 95% CI [0.16, 1.37], $p = .007$) and strongly religious (M difference = 1.10, 95% CI [0.37, 1.83], $p < .001$) scored significantly higher than those who were not religious. No other pairwise comparisons were significant among both self-report scores. Refer to Appendix G for the complete results.

A paired t-test was conducted between the d-score of the self-report scores and the IAT d-score. There was a significant difference between the two measures ($t(499) = 8.98, p < .001$, 95% CI [0.46, 0.72]). The mean difference was 0.59, indicating that the IAT d-scores ($M = 0.53, SD = 0.44$) were higher than the d-scores of the self-report scores ($M = -0.07, SD = 1.46$). Finally, a Welch's two sample t-test was conducted between the IAT d-scores of disabled participants and those of non-disabled participants. There was a significant difference between the two measures

($t(133.34) = 3.28, p = .001, 95\% \text{ CI } [0.07, 0.29]$). The mean difference was 0.18. Able-bodied participants ($M = 0.56, SD = 0.41$) had higher IAT d-scores than participants who were disabled ($M = 0.38, SD = 0.51$).

Discussion

The goal of this study was to explore how religiosity and political orientation influenced self-reported and implicit perceptions of people with disabilities. Results indicated an overall preference for able-bodied people over disabled people, as seen in the mean of the IAT d-scores. Additionally, the results indicated a disconnect between self-report and implicit bias, which begs the question of “why?”. There are several possible explanations for this discrepancy. First, people trying to make themselves look good or appeal to the potential moral leanings of the researchers is a common and well-studied phenomenon. It is possible that participants purposely inflated their ratings of warmth toward disabled people to conform with expected moral standards. Another possibility is that individuals are not aware of their bias against people with disabilities. I posit that it is a combination of both phenomena working together to create inflated self-report scores.

As for the research questions, religiosity had a significant association with self-reported measures of warmth, with higher religiosity associated with greater warmth toward both disabled and able-bodied people. However, due to the disconnect between self-report and implicit scores, religiosity had no significant influence on scores of implicit bias. We are left with the fact that individuals with stronger religious beliefs were more likely to inflate their ratings, whether on purpose or not. While the reasons above are likely responsible for this effect, there is merit in exploring why, specifically, religious individuals had such inflated scores. As discussed at the beginning of this paper, religions often paint disabled people as objects of pity and in need of

compassion. This is, potentially, an explanation for why religious people might have felt compelled to rate their warmth toward disabled people so highly. It is tricky to draw a conclusion, however, as highly religious people also rated abled people the highest.

For the second research question, there was no significant effect of political identity on implicit and self-report ratings. Regardless of political orientation, participants significantly preferred abled people over disabled people and inflated self-reported warmth toward disabled people. While potentially surprising at first, there is not much research on political identity and how people perceive those with disabilities, with disability occupying a marginalized place in the political science and politics (Evans & Reher, 2024; Friedman, 2018). The lack of consideration for people with disabilities, combined with the mixed perceptions that exist within the research that does exist, suggests that there is no clear stance on disabled people across political identities and parties.

Finally, my exploratory analysis revealed that, while disabled people are more warm than abled participants toward disabled people, they still prefer able-bodied people overall, as the IAT d-scores for abled and disabled participants were both positive. This phenomenon is due to a process called internalized ableism, wherein people with disabilities have internalized ableist stereotypes, values, and ideologies perpetuated by the dominant able-bodied culture (Perrin, et al., 2025). This has implications for how pervasive ableism is in society, with even disabled individuals holding ableist views.

Limitations and Future Research

This study is not without its limitations. First, the demographics of the sample were largely WEIRD (white, educated, industrialist, rich, and democratic) and female. It is possible that the results of this analysis are not generalizable to the global population. In the future, it

would be valuable to have a more representative sample of the population, and conduct cross-cultural research. Second, there is a potential for the results to be influenced by range restriction, as the analyses in this study excluded incomplete responses, and only consisted of a sample of the broader pool of data. Future research should utilize tools which can adequately assess large amounts of data at once and use a more nuanced approach to missingness. Future research should also examine how internalized ableism is formed and maintained within people with disabilities, as well as how internalized ableism impacts different facets of life such as self-esteem, affect, and social life. There is also untapped potential in exploring how internalized ableism manifests differently across different types of disability and different cultures.

Moving forward, it is important for social science researchers to develop meaningful ways to integrate disabled individuals into political research to deal with the underrepresentation discussed above. Research should focus on how political ideology shapes perceptions of people with disabilities, as well as what social factors enforce those perceptions. Building on existing theories of discrimination and group membership, such as aversive ableism (Friedman, 2018), SDO (Pratto, Sidanius, Stallworth, & Malle, 1994), affinity bias (Explore Psychology Staff, 2024; Pilat & Sekoul, n.d.), etc., is important to bolster our understanding of perceptions of disabled people and to continually validate popular theory.

Conclusion

Despite recent strides toward inclusion, attitudes toward people with disabilities remain generally negative, with people preferring able-bodied individuals, instead. This study adds to the literature by showcasing how implicit perceptions skew in favor of able-bodied people, regardless of political orientation or religiosity, with even disabled people holding a preferential view of able-bodied people. There is still much to be learned about bias and prejudice toward

disabled people, and this paper highlights the gaps that exist in political research. Hopefully, this can be used to inform policy and encourage people to evaluate how they interact with and think about people with disabilities going forward.

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Appendix A

Table 1
Sociodemographic characteristics

Characteristic	Disabled N = 100		Non-Disabled N = 400		Total N = 500	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Gender						
Female	69	69.00%	302	75.50%	371	74.20%
Male	22	22.00%	3	23.75%	117	23.40%
Non-Binary	9	9.00%	95	0.75%	12	2.40%
Age						
18-24	32	32.00%	118	29.50%	149	29.80%
25-34	33	33.00%	118	29.50%	151	30.20%
35-44	15	15.00%	67	16.75%	82	16.40%
45-54	15	15.00%	55	13.75%	70	14.00%
55-64	3	3.00%	34	8.50%	39	7.80%
65+	1	1.00%	8	2.00%	9	1.80%
Education Level						
High School or Less	17	17.00%	61	15.25%	78	15.60%
Some College	26	26.00%	69	17.25%	95	19.00%
Associate's Degree	13	13.00%	34	8.50%	47	9.40%
Bachelor's Degree	22	22.00%	103	25.75%	125	25.00%
Some Grad School	10	10.00%	40	10.00%	50	10.00%
Master's Degree	11	11.00%	77	19.25%	88	17.60%
Doctorate or Other Adv. Degree	1	1.00%	16	4.00%	17	3.40%
Race/Ethnicity						
Asian	1	1.00%	35	8.75%	36	7.20%
Black or African American	11	11.00%	53	13.25%	64	12.80%
Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander	0	0.00%	1	0.25%	1	0.20%
Hispanic or Latino	9	9.00%	38	9.50%	47	9.4%
Middle Eastern	2	2.00%	4	1.00%	6	1.20%
Native American	1	1.00%	3	0.75%	4	0.80%

White	60	60.00%	209	52.25%	269	53.80%
Mixed or Other	13	13.00%	49	12.25%	62	12.40%
Did Not Answer	3	3.00%	8	2.00%	11	2.20%

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Appendix B

Table 2

Description of variables used in MANOVA

Variable	Description	Scale
Tabled	How warm or cold do you feel towards physically abled people?	0 = very cold through 10 = very warm
Tdisabled	How warm or cold do you feel towards physically disabled people?	0 = very cold through 10 = very warm
Overall_D_score	Overall IAT D score	d-score, more positive means warmer toward abled people, more negative means warmer toward disabled people
religionid	Religiosity	1 = not at all religious, 2 = slightly religious, 3 = moderately religious, 4 = strongly religious
politicalid_7	Political identity	1 = strongly conservative, 2 = moderately conservative, 3 = slightly conservative, 4 = neutral, 5 = slightly liberal, 6 = moderately liberal, 7 = strongly liberal

Appendix C

Table 3*Correlations among study variables*

Variable	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5
1. Tabled	7.36	2.01	—				
2. Tdisabled	7.43	2.01	0.737**	—			
3. Overall_D_score	0.53	0.44	0.033	-0.044	—		
4. politicalid_7	4.45	1.63	-0.065	-0.026	-0.079	—	
5. religionid	2.20	1.05	0.207**	0.190**	0.091*	-0.407**	—

Note. * $p < .05$; ** $p < .001$.

Appendix D

Table 4

MANOVA for effect of religiosity and political orientation on perceptions of disabled and abled people

Effect	Pillai's Trace	<i>F</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>
Political Orientation	0.043	1.15	18, 1419	.293
Religiosity	0.053	2.85	9, 1419	.003
Political Orientation x Religiosity	0.093	0.89	51, 1419	.695

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Appendix E

Table 5A

Means and standard deviations for dependent variables by religiosity

Group	Tabled	Tdisabled	Overall_D_score
Not Religious	6.83 (1.98)	6.94 (2.03)	0.48 (0.43)
Slightly Religious	7.37 (1.96)	7.43 (1.93)	0.53 (0.46)
Moderately Religious	7.69 (1.93)	7.71 (1.91)	0.57 (0.43)
Strongly Religious	8.00 (2.06)	8.04 (2.08)	0.58 (0.40)

Note. M (SD)

Table 5B

Means and standard deviations for dependent variables by political orientation

Group	Tabled	Tdisabled	Overall_D_score
Strongly Conservative	7.56 (2.06)	7.67 (1.57)	0.66 (0.37)
Moderately Conservative	7.69 (1.93)	7.34 (2.27)	0.63 (0.41)
Slightly Conservative	7.51 (1.89)	7.30 (1.88)	0.46 (0.51)
Moderate	7.40 (2.10)	7.58 (2.05)	0.54 (0.46)
Slightly Liberal	6.96 (1.93)	7.38 (1.85)	0.42 (0.42)
Moderately Liberal	7.18 (1.98)	7.25 (2.06)	0.50 (0.39)
Strongly Liberal	7.38 (2.00)	7.40 (1.91)	0.52 (0.44)

Note. M (SD)

Appendix F

Table 6A

ANOVA for effect of religiosity and political orientation on self-reported warmth toward abled people

Effect	Sum Squares	Mean Square	<i>df</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>
Political Orientation	18.88	3.15	6	0.80	.570
Religiosity	79.59	26.53	3	6.75	<.001
Political Orientation x Religiosity	57.09	3.36	17	0.85	.630

Table 6B

ANOVA for effect of religiosity and political orientation on self-reported warmth toward disabled people

Effect	Sum Squares	Mean Square	<i>df</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>
Political Orientation	9.86	1.43	6	0.41	.069
Religiosity	83.43	27.81	3	7.01	<.001
Political Orientation x Religiosity	45.55	2.68	17	0.68	.828

Table 6C

ANOVA for effect of religiosity and political orientation on implicit bias score

Effect	Sum Squares	Mean Square	<i>df</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>
Political Orientation	1.75	0.39	6	~1.55	.160
Religiosity	0.42	0.14	3	0.74	.530
Political Orientation x Religiosity	4.567	0.27	17	1.44	.115

Appendix G

Table 7A

Tukey test for main effect of religiosity on self-reported warmth toward abled people

Comparison	Mean Diff.	Lower CI	Upper CI	<i>p</i>
Slightly Religious – Not Religious	0.54	-0.04	1.12	.078
Moderately Religious – Not Religious	0.87	0.26	1.47	.001
Strongly Religious – Not Religious	1.17	0.45	1.90	<.001
Moderately Religious – Slightly Religious	0.32	-0.30	0.95	.541
Strongly Religious – Slightly Religious	0.63	-0.11	1.37	.128
Strongly Religious – Moderately Religious	0.31	-0.45	1.07	.726

Table 7B

Tukey test for main effect of religiosity on self-reported warmth toward disabled people

Comparison	Mean Diff.	Lower CI	Upper CI	<i>p</i>
Slightly Religious – Not Religious	0.49	-0.10	1.07	.137
Moderately Religious – Not Religious	0.76	0.16	1.37	.006
Strongly Religious – Not Religious	1.10	0.37	1.83	<.001
Moderately Religious – Slightly Religious	0.28	-0.35	0.90	.666
Strongly Religious – Slightly Religious	0.61	-0.13	1.35	.151
Strongly Religious – Moderately Religious	0.33	-0.43	1.10	.673

Table 7C

Tukey test for main effect of religiosity on implicit bias score

Comparison	Mean Diff.	Lower CI	Upper CI	<i>p</i>
Slightly Religious – Not Religious	0.04	-0.09	0.17	.826
Moderately Religious – Not Religious	0.09	-0.04	0.23	.268
Strongly Religious – Not Religious	0.10	-0.06	0.26	.367
Moderately Religious – Slightly Religious	0.05	-0.09	0.19	.773
Strongly Religious – Slightly Religious	0.06	-0.11	0.22	.797
Strongly Religious – Moderately Religious	0.01	-0.16	0.18	1.000