Title: Understanding an Unknown Member of the Disability Community: The Sibling-In-Law

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Introduction: As two people marry, they naturally become part of each other’s families. When a spouse joins a disability family, factors regarding major life choices may become more complex as they now have a brother/sister-in-law with IDD. Currently, the role of a sibling-in-law (spouse of an adult sibling who has a brother or sister with a disability) is a neglected population in disability research (Vanhoutteghem et al., 2013 is a rare counter-example). We believe sibling-in-laws will provide important insight on how their lives have been impacted by marrying an adult sibling of an individual with IDD. In conducting this study, we endeavor to understand which aspects of the sibling-in-law’s life have been impacted after marrying into a disability family. In addition, we hope to gain insight into the sibling-in-law’s growth in overall acceptance and understanding of disabilities. This information could potentially highlight some areas of concern for sibling-in-laws, starting the conversation on how to provide resources and support to best serve this under-examined population.

Method: Through recruiting respondents from sibling and disability organizations, we are examining a large group of individuals who have “married into” disabilities, so-called “sibling-in-laws.” A web-based questionnaire was created for anonymous data collection. The questionnaire consists of five main sections. The first two ask participants to provide background information about themselves, their spouse, their in-laws, and the adult with disabilities (i.e., the brother or sister-in-law), as well as their initial thoughts about being a sibling-in-law. The third and fourth sections explore the experiences of being a sibling-in-law, involvement in disability advocacy, and the degree to which the participant and their spouse care for the brother/sister-in-law. Finally, section five includes open-ended questions about the individual’s overall perceptions about this relationship. Although data collection is ongoing, thus far participants average 35.3 years of age, with a range from 23 to 59 years.

Result: Preliminary findings revealed that sibling-in-laws felt their lives were changed in mostly positive ways, although different areas changed to different degrees, F (11, 198) = 8.84 p < .0001. Specifically, when recalling the time at which they were first told that their soon-to-be brother/sister-in-law had disabilities (rating factors on a 5-point likert scale), they felt their lives would be most changed in terms of relating to their spouse’s family (2.74) and to helping their spouse to care for their sibling-in-law (2.68); they felt that lesser changes would occur in terms of several work variables and in performing household tasks. Considering the current situation, respondents reported that they have increased in their knowledge of disabilities, disability services, and disability organizations, whereas fewer changes have occurred in relating to their own parents, their siblings, and having free time, F (11, 198) = 12.66, p < .0001. In further analyses, we will examine relations among these sibling-in-law perceptions to aspects of the respondent (e.g., gender, age, prior disability involvement), their brother/sister-in-law (e.g., type of disability; functional abilities); their spouse and spouse’s family (involvement in disability community; size of sibship); and in-laws (health, ability to care for offspring with disabilities).

Discussion: In disability research, sibling-in-laws have been almost entirely overlooked. In this study, we provide a first examination on this group, informing us about the supports needed to best reach this underserved population. Sibling-in-laws provide important insight on how their lives have been impacted by marrying an adult sibling of an individual with IDD. Understanding the people who marry into disabilities is vital for policymakers, especially if adult siblings (aka: their spouses) are going to be the main caretakers of individuals with disabilities in an aging American population.

References/Citations: