

ATTITUDES OF CHINESE SOCIETY TOWARDS PEOPLE WITH VISUAL IMPAIRMENT: AN EMPIRICAL STUDY

Yuexin Zhang (zhang.yuexin@bnu.edu.cn)

*Institute of Special Education, Faculty of Education, Beijing Normal University, Beijing,
P.R.China*

Yanhong Liu (bjyhl@bnu.edu.cn)

*Institute of Special Education, Faculty of Education, Beijing Normal University, Beijing,
P.R.China*

Abstract

Attitudes that society takes towards people with visual impairment are a key factor affecting the implementation of inclusive education and the realisation of social integration of this group. This study surveyed 1,446 teachers, parents and students of 27 regular primary and secondary schools in 9 provinces of eastern, central and western China. The results show that their attitudes towards people with visual impairment are relatively positive, but mostly out of sympathy; at the same time, they demonstrate cognitive prejudice towards the abilities of people with visual impairment. This article further analyzes the potential effects that such attitudes have on the implementation of inclusive education.

Keywords: People with visual impairment, attitude, inclusive education

Introduction and problem statement

Over the past decades, the question "What is an attitude" has been a popular subject of research and discussion in multiple disciplines such as sociology, psychology and pedagogy, and the "attitude" theory and definition vary widely among disciplines and among scholars. So far there is no generally accepted definition that could be adopted extensively in empirical research (Böttger, Gipser and Laga 1995, 11). Nevertheless, most "attitude theory" scholars view "attitude" as describable by a structure (Cloerkes 1997, 76), which is composed of a particular stimulus (e.g. an encounter with a particular person, a circumstance, or a particular group of people) and resultant behavior (Ellinger 2006, 150). Specifically, such an attitude structure has three components, i.e. the affective component, the cognitive component, and the cognitive component. The affective evaluation of an attitude object is at the core of the three-component structure of an attitude (Fengler and Jansen 1987, 263; Bierbrauer 1996, 115; Ellinger and Koch 2006, 225).

The International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health (2001) suggests adjusting environmental and social conditions as appropriate to adapt individuals' needs and reduce barriers so that people with disabilities can better get involved in social life. Extensive studies have demonstrated that social attitudes are an important part of the social environment and the main factor that affects the social inclusion of people with disabilities. Living conditions of people with visual impairment are to a greater degree related to discriminatory behavior of others and discriminatory environments in society; negative attitudes towards people with disabilities, such as fear, dislike and mockery, hinder the social participation of them and separate them from common social life (Seifert and Stangl 1981, 9-10; Tröster 1990, 56). "Overcoming negative attitudes presents an enormous challenge, but it is the key to providing inclusive education" (Save the Children 2002, 27).

Among the substantial studies at home and abroad about social attitudes towards people with disabilities, most of them focus on such types of disability as mental retardation and physical disabilities, with only a few studies targeted at attitudes towards people with visual impairment (Zhang 2014, 84). Existing studies have found

that blind people are often seen as "lonely" ones (Thimm 1971, 106) and blindness or visual impairment itself is also often considered the worst disability (Bracken 1976, 289-295). In ancient China, physical defects were often seen as sources of some special power (Chen and Pan 2012; Jiang and Li 2004); people were especially superstitious about special powers of the blind, such as fortune telling (Chen & Pan 2012, 55). Even today, some ancient beliefs are still influential. Also, some comparative studies on various types of disability have found that social attitudes towards people with visual impairment are fairly negative. For example, by surveying 665 rehabilitation workers from different cultural backgrounds such as China, Italy, Germany and Greece about their attitudes towards 20 types of disability, a study found that the degree of social acceptance of people with blindness and visual impairment was behind that of people with 10 other types of disability including hearing impairment and physical disability (Westbrook et al. 1993, 620).

The provision of inclusive education is inseparable from teachers, student parents and fellow students, who play an important role in spreading ideas about and implementing measures for inclusive education (see, e.g. Palmer et al. 2001; Bailey, Montagano and Cramer 2011; Chung 2000 on this important subject). Most of the domestic studies conclude that inclusive education gets a low degree of social acceptance (Chen 2005; Chen et al. 2006; Deng 2004; Liu and Niu, 2005). Basic social understanding and attitudes towards people with visual impairment are a direct reflection of social acceptance of inclusive education, but related studies lack an in-depth and comprehensive discussion in this regard. This study focuses on how teachers, parents and fellow students - who are closely connected with inclusive education for children with visual impairment - think of people with visual impairment, and on this basis, discusses the potential influences of attitudes on inclusive education.

Questionnaire design

The main part of the questionnaire used for this study was designed based on the bipolar semantic differential scale that Thimm (1971, 88-89) adopted in his classic experiment on social attitudes towards people with visual impairment. The scale includes 25 pairs of opposite adjectives that describe personality traits of people, such as "strong-weak",

“passive-active”, “serious-careless”, with each pair divided into 6 levels, presented in a “3-2-1-1-2-3” form, but coded from 1 to 6 correspondingly for the analysis purpose. Besides the bipolar semantic differential scale, the questionnaire also includes such questions as about “typical and possible jobs for people with visual impairment”, and “special abilities of blind/ visually impaired people”.

Sample analysis

According to levels of economic development, China may be roughly divided into the east, central and west parts (National Bureau of Statistics 2011). Accordingly 9 cities (Figure 1) were chosen for the study, and three schools at municipal, county and rural levels were chosen from each city.

As stated above, a knowledge of attitudes that teachers, parents and fellow students have towards people with visual impairment is of great importance for understanding barriers to inclusive education and as well as ways of removing those barriers. For this reason, this study surveyed regular school teachers, parents and students (aged 14 and above) in these 9 cities in 2012 and 1,446 effective questionnaires altogether were collected, in which females (n=846) are much more than males (n=564). Parents of students of regular schools, who are in all trades and professions of society, may be seen as representatives of various groups of people in society.

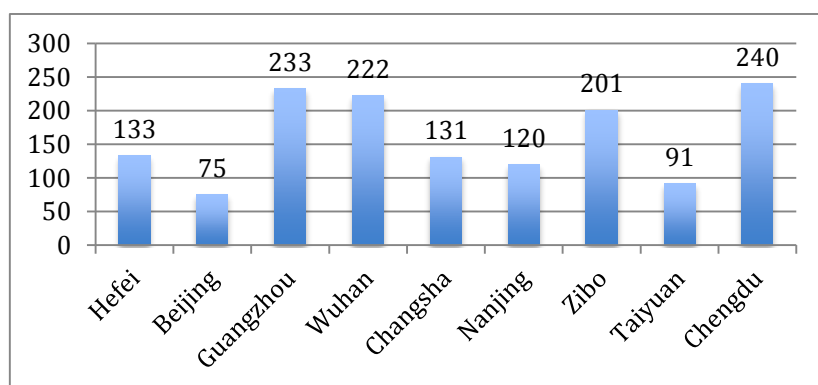


Figure 1 - Sample Resource

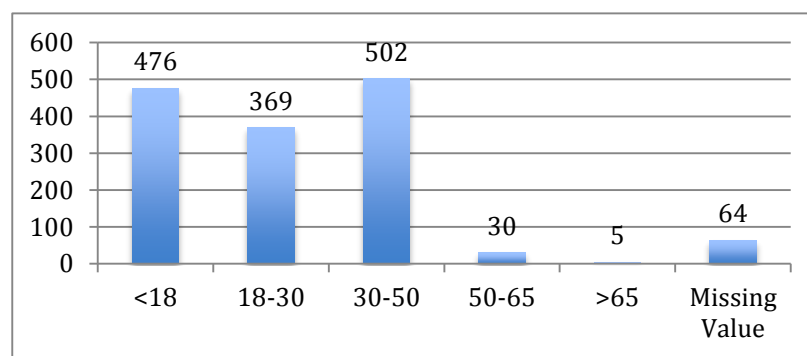


Figure 2 - Age

Questionnaire results

Results of bipolar semantic differential scale

The results of bipolar semantic differential scale (Figure 3) show the respondents' understanding of personality traits of people with visual impairment. It is obvious that some individual adjectives have peak values, which means that the respondents attribute personality traits the adjectives describe to people with visual impairment. A factor analysis of the peak values chosen according to their peak value and the correlation between the adjectives helps interpret the factors. This study considers as peak values the items with a mean smaller than 2.7 and greater than 4.3, finding that people with visual impairment feature the following personality traits: Helpful, friendly, sober, low-pitched, submissive, sensible, thrifty, serious, emotionally rich, and orderly.

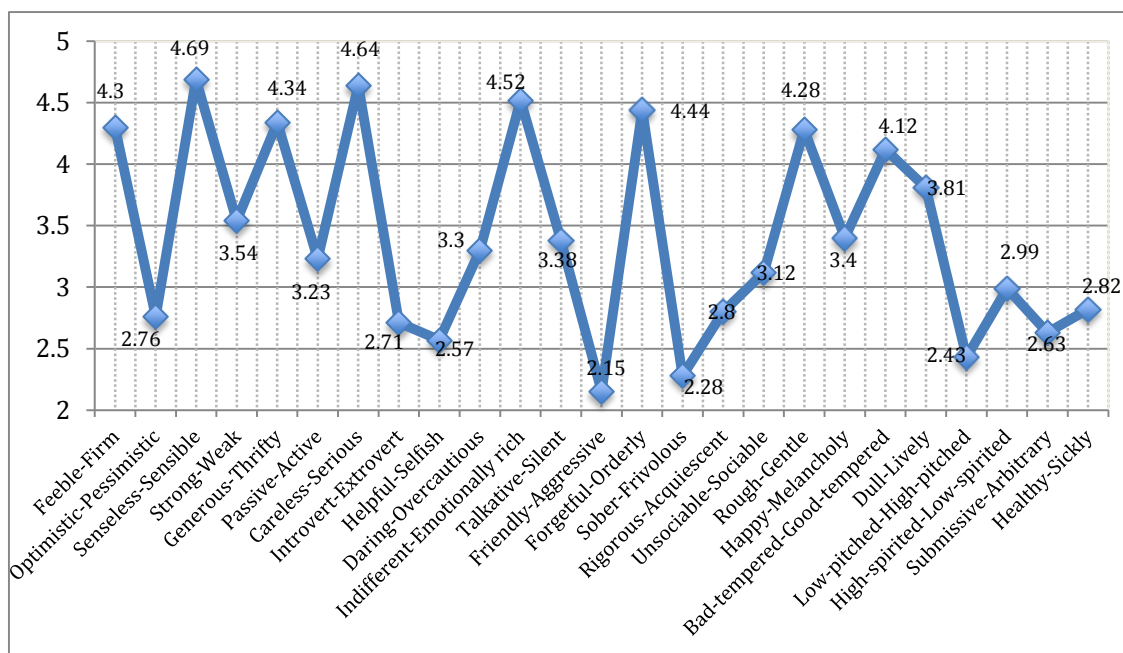


Figure 3 - Means

Note: The adjectives were translated from Chinese questionnaire

The KMO (Kaiser-Mayer-Olkin) value is 0.831, and Bartlett's test reveals significant difference ($p=0.000^{***}$); three factors taken for factor analysis explain 57.616% of the total variance explained. The Rotated Component Matrix reveal three factors and items they contain, as shown below:

Factor 1 (F1): Sensible, orderly, serious, emotionally rich;

Factor2 (F2): Submissive, low-pitched, friendly, sober, helpful; and

Factor 3 (F3): Thrifty.

F1 may be named "factor of self-management ability". Because each item in this factor is on the right side of the scale, the higher point it obtains, the higher the tendency towards that personality trait.

F2 mainly covers features of social interaction and is hence named "factor of social interaction ability". Because each item in this factor is on the left side of the scale, the lower point it obtains, the higher the tendency towards that personality trait.

F3 contains only the item "thrifty" and is named "factor of consumption concept".

Factor analysis results suggest that the respondents generally think people with visual impairment have strong capabilities for self-management and social interaction and are largely thrifty.

Typical and possible jobs for people with visual impairment

The respondents think that the top three jobs for people with visual impairment are "massagist" (n=799), "jobs in music" (n=149) and "fortune-telling" (n=89). Some academic occupations, such as traditional Chinese physician, teacher and IT engineer, are mentioned by only a small number of respondents and are not typical jobs in the eyes of most respondents.

Most respondents believe that if people with visual impairment received corresponding education and training they would have access to an obviously broader scope of jobs, but by comparison, "massagist" (n=271) and "jobs in music" (n=270) are still seen as jobs that people with visual impairment are mostly likely to take. In addition, "teacher" (n=104) is seen as a major job that people with visual impairment could take after receiving related education and training, but mentioned among typical jobs by only 30 respondents. At the same time, 83 respondents think that people with visual impairment could take "many or all jobs" after receiving related education and training while only 6 respondents feel that they could not take any of the listed jobs, an increase of 79 respondents and a decrease of 32 ones respectively (Figure 4).

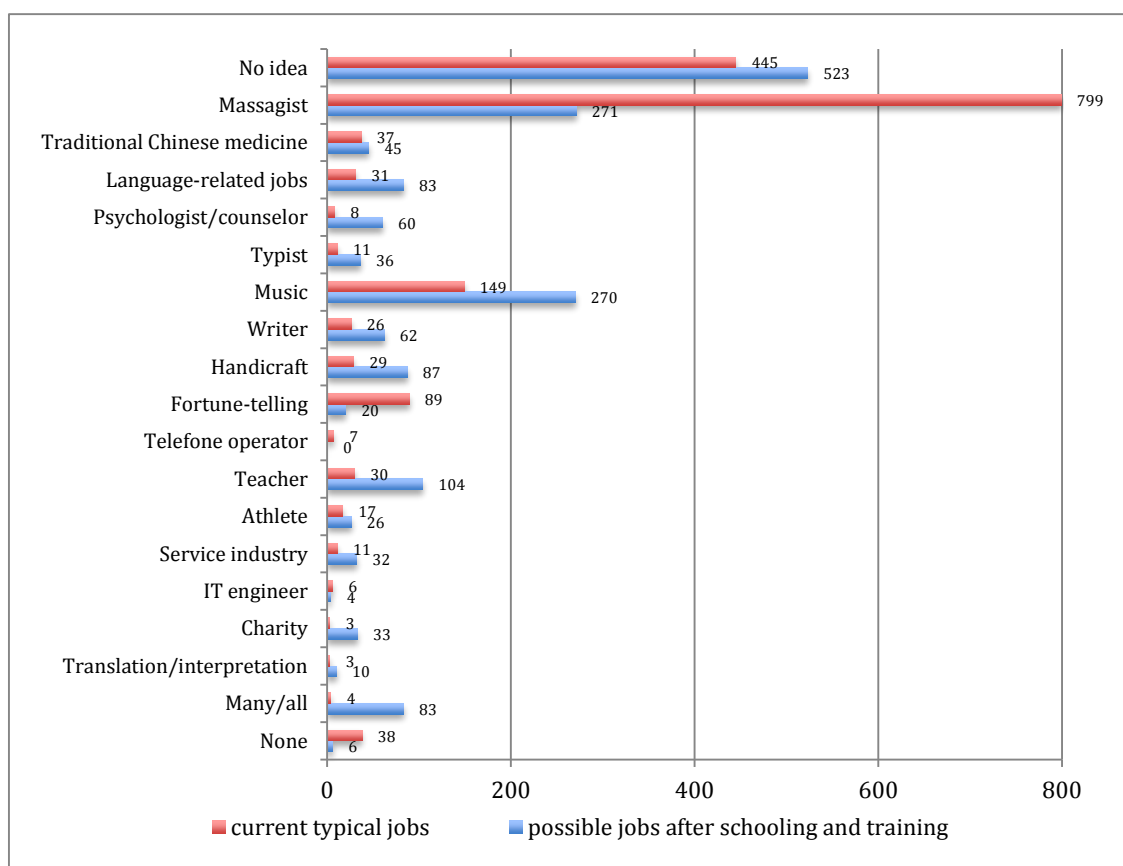


Figure 4 - Jobs for people with visual impairment: current typical and possible Jobs

How many people with visual impairment could support themselves with their jobs?

Survey results about "People with visual impairment support themselves with their own jobs" are consistent with those about "Typical jobs for people with visual impairment". 59.1% of the respondents (n=854) think only a very small number of people with visual impairment could support themselves, but also 504 respondents have the opposite opinion. And 1.5% of them (n=22) even believe that none of people with visual impairment could support themselves at all.

Special personality abilities of people with visual impairment

Study results show that, as a compensation for their "miserable fate" of visual impairment, people with visual impairment are believed to have some special abilities (n=1267), which is similar to results of other related studies (e.g. Thimm 1971; Neubert and Cloerkes 1987; Chen and Pan 2012; Jiang and Li 2004). The respondents at large tend to make very positive remarks on special personality traits and abilities of people

with visual impairment, who are supposedly endowed with various special abilities such as "keen sense of touch" (n=997), "good hearing" (n=987), "good memory" (n=745), and "special music talent" (n=553) (Figure 5).

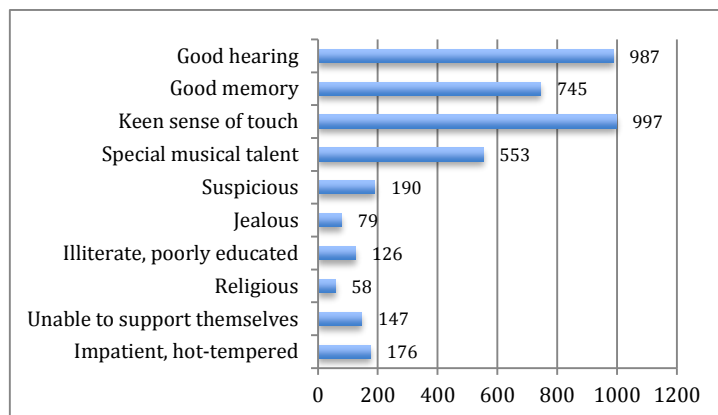


Figure 5 - If yes, what are they?

Results analysis and discussion

More than half the respondents (n=747) have an experience of interaction with people with visual impairment, but only about 8% (n=119) of them have close personal or business contact, showing that common people get to know the visually impaired largely from such sources as literature, media and films - whose value orientation, contents and forms of presentation are therefore particularly important as the main sources of information on people with visual impairment. Currently, domestic reports on people with visual impairment have "created" three images of them: First, the successful, inspiring image despite disability; second, the image of an binary opposition as an individual broken in body but firm in spirit; third, the ignored and forgotten miserable image (Li 2014, 77-80). Though successful in sparking public resonance and broader attention from society, such reports, which put focus on individual cases who are successful or in a desperate plight, show to the public not the actual living conditions of most people with visual impairment, but generate a stereotype of people with visual impairment, and this is probably a reason why respondents in this study have generally "positive" affective attitudes towards this group of people.

In China, massage by blind people is a historically long tradition, and such stereotypes about blind people in ancient times as music and fortune-telling still play a

considerable part today. It is evident that there are considerable limitations on how people with visual impairment participate in society and what social roles they play, and in essential terms, they are marginalized and excluded from real social interaction and everyday life. Except for traditional jobs, limitations on public understanding of possible jobs for people with visual impairment are also noticeable. A large proportion of the respondents feel that even if people with visual impairment received appropriate education and training, they still could engage in only a few jobs, suggesting inherent social prejudice towards abilities of this group. Such prejudice indicate that people are suspicious of the possibility of inclusive education for children with visual impairment, believing that it is not realistic for them to study in regular schools and that they can hardly make progress in school as the other children do.

Social prejudices towards people with visual impairment are also reflected in "special abilities of people with visual impairment" such as keen hearing and sense of touch. Though the assertion about the special abilities of people due to visual disability has not yet been scientifically verified, this subjective public perception about "special abilities" inevitably has important effects on their education and social interaction. Especially when a visually impaired child in school fails to demonstrate any special abilities as teachers expect of them, which would instead exacerbate the teacher's discrimination against and rejection of the student.

This study's bipolar semantic differential scale and questions about jobs and special abilities mainly reflect the "affective component" of the three-component structure of attitudes. The study shows that the respondents' affective attitudes towards people with visual impairment are relatively positive, thinking that they are thrifty and have fairly high levels of self-management and social skills; such positive affective attitudes, however, are at odds with that actual situation that people with visual impairment face in getting involved in society and receiving education. Based on consistency theories regarding the three-component attitude structure, the question is: Why do positive affective attitudes fail to bring about positive behaviors? Or, in the case of China's education for visually impaired children, why, though teachers, parents and fellow students show positive affective attitudes about visually impaired children, is the current

situation of inclusive education still not much promising? Survey results on the several questions in the questionnaire about jobs for people with visual impairment show that most respondents have a negative attitude towards work abilities/skills of people with visual impairment, which is probably one of the fundamental reasons for the obstruction of inclusive education for visually impaired children. Such deep-rooted concepts in traditional education in China as "academic achievement foremost", as well as negative public remarks about work abilities/skills of people with visual impairment, lead to the general assumption that people with visual impairment can hardly be successful in the regular education system, and become an excuse that many common schools use for denying visually impaired children. At the same time, seemingly positive remarks about special abilities of people with visual impairment actually also reflect lack of understanding of this group of people, as well as prejudice towards them - de facto discrimination against them.

In addition, such "positive emotions" may grow out of public "sympathy" for people with visual impairment. As shown in study results, "sympathy", a seemingly positive affective component, has not led to positive behaviors. Though sympathy tends to be seen as a positive attitude towards people with visual impairment, in fact it may produce some negative effects such as overprotection and underestimate. Sympathy for students with visual impairment comes from underestimate of their ability to study or work. Educators and parents often assume that poor school performance is something expected of visually impaired students, attributing it to the difficulty of schoolwork itself or to visual impairment, and may show astonishment or disbelief at their good performance. This seemingly positive sympathy is somewhat a label tagged on students with visual impairment, who may thus become over-reliant and have a sense of frustration; the consequent mental and emotional problems should not be neglected (Thiele 2003, 37). In addition, such sympathy will have persistent negative effects on attitudes that teachers and fellow students have towards students with visual impairment, seeing them as different from other students and in need of "constant protection", which will in turn put pressure on teachers, parents and fellow students to varying degrees.

In conclusion, the study finds a contradiction between emotion and behavior in terms of public attitudes towards people with visual impairment. That in fact reveals the real attitudes of society towards people with visual impairment, or the real plight confronting them - widespread sympathy of society and de facto inequality. Such contradictory attitudes and de facto inequality pose potential barriers to visually impaired children's access to inclusive education.

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