Loughborough University

Exploring the need for qualitative research in the investigation of attitudes towards relationships with people with learning disabilities

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ABSTRACT

Psychological research in to attitudes towards disability has mainly been conducted using quantitative methods. By reducing attitudes to single scores, these studies overlook the complexity of beliefs about disability and the ways in which people present them. The current study takes a qualitative approach to the investigation of attitudes towards relationships with persons with learning disabilities. Focus groups elicited rich responses in a more naturalistic environment, allowing for in-depth analysis by two methods. Grounded theory highlighted three themes of what constitutes these attitudes: disability is seen as a burden on relationships, participants perceive disparity in emotional complexity, and the productivity requirements of the context predict the nature of attitudes. Conversation analysis, on the other hand, depicted that evaluations are worked up for interactional purposes due to processes of alignment – thus questioning the traditional assumption that performed attitudes reflect an underlying, cognitive state. The findings of the two analytic methods, alongside those of existing research, are discussed in relation to their contribution to our holistic understanding of attitudes towards disability.

KEY WORDS:	DISABILITY	QUALITATIVE	ATTITUDES	GROUNDED THEORY	CONVERSATION ANALYSIS

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INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, research exploring attitudes to disability has developed alongside increasing disability awareness and acknowledgement of the prominent divide between the disabled and non-disabled populations. There is evidence to suggest that people with disabilities are more likely to be met by exclusionary attitudes that ascribe them a lower social status than members of the non-handicapped population, causing barriers to participation in ‘normal’ everyday life (Grewal *et al,* 2002). This can be seen across various aspects of life: within employment less than half of all disabled people are economically active (Shaw, 2004), whilst in the sporting arena the Paralympics receives significantly less media coverage than the Olympics (Hall & Minnes, 1999). Goffman (1963) refers to disability as a social category, involving a ‘stigma’ that devalues the individual through defining them as different from other humans. This can create discomfort for both parties and cause avoidance of ‘mixed contacts’: those between the stigmatised and non-stigmatised (Newman, 2008).

Existing literature has therefore focused on attitudes towards maintaining relationships with persons with disability (Gordon *et al,* 2004; Hergenrather & Rhodes, 2007; Ouellette-Kuntz *et al*, 2010), since this is fundamental to their inclusion within society. Such work has predominantly used quantitative measures to infer the internal cognitions of populations on a large scale. This situates explanations for exclusion at the level of individuals’ attitudes. However, it is argued in this study that the production of single attitude scores by quantitative methods masks the true complexities of the socially situated nature of beliefs about disability. This report will seek to show, through the development of various stages of qualitative analysis, the affordances of different levels of explanation. The discussion that follows begins by considering the contributions of existing literature, before acknowledging different psychological approaches to attitude theory, and finally addressing the need for a more rigorous qualitative approach to disability attitude research.

Attitudes towards relationships with disabled people vary according to the type of disability the person has. A number of studies have investigated the variation in attitudes over a cross-section of impairments. For example, Gordon, Minnes and Holden (1990) asked participants to fill in their questionnaire four times, once for each of the following disabilities: Cerebral Palsy, Epilepsy, Amputee and Blindness. They reported generally high acceptance of disability, with Epilepsy being the most socially accepted and Cerebral Palsy the least. This is unsurprising seeing as Cerebral Palsy can also be associated with mental impairments, which are reported to correspond with less social acceptance (Robinson, Martin & Thompson, 2007; Gordon *et al,* 2004). One explanation for this is that people feel greater discomfort in being around someone who acts ‘differently’ or unpredictably

(Grewal *et al*, 2002). Quantitative findings such as these are useful in highlighting the range of physical and mental impairments that are referred to by the term ‘disability’. There is therefore a need to focus on specific impairments in data collection because one respondent’s interpretation of ‘disability’ may be very different from another’s. This could reduce the validity of findings if they are referring to divergent objects of thought. This study focuses on mental disabilities - specifically ‘learning disabilities’ - because to date they have received less scholarly attention, despite being reported the least socially accepted. Learning disabilities affect approximately 2 per cent of the UK population (Emerson & Hatton, 2008) and involve significant impairments of intellectual, social and adaptive abilities (British Psychological Society, 2000). Since these aspects are likely to directly influence attitudes towards social interactions, learning disabilities provide an appropriate focus for developing a qualitative approach to disability attitudes.

A further finding offered within the literature is that contexts requiring a lower level of intimacy correspond to more positive attitudes (Hergenrather & Rhodes, 2007; Gordon *et al*, 1990). Multi-dimensional scales that ask for participant responses in relation to varying situations have been fundamental in reaching these conclusions. The Disability Social Relationships (DSR) scale (Grand, Bernier & Strohmer, 1982) is one example, exploring the contexts of dating, marriage and work. Attitudes towards relationships with persons with disability were most positive within the working environment, and least positive in the context of marriage. Despite this useful contribution, the scale is restricted to three social situations: for example it excludes the key relationship of friendship. In addition, developing methodological sophistication through the incorporation of different contexts still fails to account for variation in attitudes within each relationship area. To illustrate, one item on the DSR scale states ‘In the workplace, I would not expect a co-worker with a disability to require extra help and attention that would disrupt normal activities’ (Grand *et al*, 1982). Respondents may expect disabled people to be able to manage certain work situations independently, but need additional support in others – yet the closed response format of the questionnaire requires them to make a choice in one direction. Although the 4-point Likert scale allows expression of varying degrees of agreement, two respondents with the same view may answer quite differently because they are forced to make this choice. This highlights the need for a qualitative approach, whereby participant responses are not restricted by the imposed categories of the researcher (Hartley & Muhit, 2003) and data analysis can account for variations.

A final contribution of existing studies is made through the acknowledgement of social desirability as a confounder of participant responses (Ouellette-Kuntz *et al*, 2010; Gilmore, Campbell & Cuskelly, 2003), whereby behaviours that are deemed socially desirable are over reported and those believed to be less desirable are under reported (De Vaus, 2002). This is a particular issue within disability research due to ideas of political correctness that perhaps increase the pressure for participants to respond favourably. Some studies have included social desirability scales within their methodology, in an attempt to account for its effect on attitude (Hall & Minnes, 1999). However, merely reporting the issue as a confounder does not increase the validity of results. The choice of method for data collection can, on the other hand, impact upon the tendency for socially desirable responding. For example, questionnaires administered over the telephone are reported to associate with high levels of socially desirable responding due to reduced participant anonymity (Ouellette-Kuntz *et al*, 2010). This could be somewhat overcome through the administering of questionnaires in paper format because anonymity would increase so that participants are less accountable for their responses. Nonetheless, they would continue to be aware that their attitudes were being measured and may try to anticipate the researcher's expected responses.

One possible way to decrease social desirability is to collect data in a more naturalistic setting, where the researcher's role is less invasive (Potter, 2002). Potter and Hepburn (2005) highlight the difficulty in avoiding imposed researcher categories within psychological studies, where participants are aware of being observed. In focus groups, however, the role of the researcher as moderator is less invasive and restrictive than in either interviews or quantitative methods. Although responses are still worked up for the purpose of the study, the more natural environment allows participants to present their attitudes through social interaction, as they would in everyday life (Puchta & Potter, 2004). Wilkinson (2004) argues that group solidarity in this interactive environment facilitates disclosure in discussions of sensitive topics, such as disability. In addition, "less inhibited members of the group break the ice for shyer participants" and mutual support can be offered in raising issues that may be viewed as deviant from cultural or researcher expectations (Kitzinger, 1995, p300). The combination of these factors, alongside participants' freedom to develop discussions in their own way (Mack *et al,* 2005), detracts from social desirability and can elicit more elaborate responses. For these reasons, focus groups may be appropriate for gaining a richer perspective on attitudes towards disability.

Whilst exploring beliefs about disability, it is important to acknowledge current debates about what constitutes an attitude. Traditional theory defines attitude as a person's thoughts, feelings and behaviours that develop through experience and result in positive or negative views of the attitude object (Horne, 1985). It is considered an enduring mental state, stable across time and contexts (Eagly & Chaiken, 1993). Studies that quantify attitudes through measurement scales maintain this approach, assuming that responses on questionnaire items reflect participants' individual mental state. An alternative approach, however, lies within discursive psychology and has developed through the acknowledgement of weaknesses in traditional attitude research.

One major criticism is that attitudes are inconsistent across contexts (Potter and Wetherell, 1987); “the same individual can be found offering different evaluations on different occasions, or even during different parts of a single conversation” (Potter, 1998, p244). This contradicts the notion that responses display underlying and enduring attitudes. Instead, it argues that expressing an attitude is first and foremost a social act, and so attitudes are socially constructed for interactional purposes. This entails a different focus on their organisation within talk, rather than their stable existence inside someone’s head. Therefore it supports the need for a qualitative approach to attitude research through analysis of extended talk, as opposed to quantifying attitudes as stable and enduring traits.

The analysis of attitudes within this interactive context also allows for the consideration of social influences that may affect how participants present them. Turner (1987) describes that being part of a group can cause depersonalisation: a person changes their self-categorisation and aligns to the group identity rather than their unique personal attributes. This has been displayed across varied contexts, typically through quantitative measures that test participant views before and after exposure to group consensus. For example, results from pre and post-test questionnaires in Wyer’s (2010) recent study found participants’ political attitudes to align more closely to those of their political party after exposure to information from this in-group. However, such a finding relies upon quantified participant reports of attitudes, which could be confounded by their reactivity to researcher objectives. The focus group data of this study may therefore develop Turner’s theory by offering more naturalistic examples of self-categorisation processes within interactions, whilst contributing to an understanding of the social influences that affect the presentation of attitudes in everyday life.

Despite being scarce within the literature, there have been some attempts at the qualitative investigation of disability attitudes. However, these centre on the perspective of those with a disability. For example, an interview study by Troiano (2003) found, through grounded theory analysis, that stigmatisation causes persons with learning disabilities to feel hopeless and lowers their self confidence if they feel singled out as different. Some qualitative studies have interviewed disabled people specifically about their attitudes towards relationships, consistently reporting these individuals to favour companionship over deeper, emotional interactions (Turnbull, Blue-Banning & Pereira, 2000; Matheson, Olsen and Weisner, 2007). Rather, the focus of disabled participants is on doing things together and having fun. These findings from the perspective of those experiencing disability may act as a useful comparison in the analysis of non-disabled attitudes towards relationships, which are the focus for this study.

To summarise, existing research has contributed to the field by highlighting that disability attitudes vary according to type of disability, context and social desirability. Despite the usefulness of these quantitative methods in highlighting findings across large populations, they mask the true complexity of disability attitudes by asking for closed-format responses (Mack *et al,* 2005), which are far from representing the presentation of attitudes in everyday life. In addition, quantitative scales assume the traditional approach of attitudes as stable, consistent and individual to the presenter. This view fails to consider the discursive viewpoint of attitudes as formulated for interactional purposes. This study addresses such limitations by taking a qualitative approach, where participants are able to develop discussions according to their personal desires or beliefs. The following research questions will provide a focus for investigation:

1) How can a qualitative approach develop our understanding of the *types of attitudes* held towards relationships with people with learning disabilities?

2) How does this qualitative approach contribute to our understanding of the *social presentation* of such attitudes?

It is the aim of this study to address these research questions and develop the field by providing a richer perspective on the nature of disability attitudes and the social processes that surround how people present them.

METHOD

Design

Focus groups were conducted, allowing participants to discuss their views in an interactive way (Krueger and Casey, 2009). The topic of disability could ignite controversial issues that respondents feel more comfortable discussing in a group situation that offers a degree of anonymity, as opposed to one-on-one (Puchta & Potter, 2004). In addition, one participant's views may provoke reactions in other group members, creating discussions that more closely replicate those of everyday life (Wilkinson, 2004). This also gives less reliance on the moderator to initiate topics; rather, their role is to facilitate discussion amongst group members.

A focus group schedule[1] was designed, including three areas for discussion: friendship, work relationships and romantic relationships. Each area included a question and a scenario for the moderator to give, alongside fact sheets and videos to prompt discussions. A pilot study was conducted to test the appropriateness of the schedule and equipment. Results highlighted a need for changes in the romantic relationships section, where ambiguous wording of the scenario caused overlap between points raised after this prompt and those discussed in the following question. The scenario was therefore

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[1] See appendix 3.

reworded to be suitably different from the subsequent question and give participants a clearer focus of what they were to discuss.

Participants

An opportunity sample of 15 undergraduate students from Loughborough University participated in the study: six males and nine females, average age 20 years. Participants were divided in to five groups of three, each including a combination of males and females. Four groups were comprised of one male and two females, one group included 2 males and one female.

Ethical Considerations

Preceding any recruitment or data collection, ethical approval was obtained from both the Department of Social Sciences and the Ethical Advisory Committee at Loughborough University, in accordance with the British Psychological Society (2009) guidelines. Prior to the focus groups, participants were asked to read the Participant Information Sheet[2] detailing the study's purpose and sign the informed consent form[3] if they decided to take part. All recruited participants were happy to proceed.

Procedure

The focus groups were conducted and video recorded in a Social Psychology observation room at Loughborough University. Each group was allocated an hour, which none exceeded. The moderator followed the interview schedule; beginning with asking participants to read the fact sheet entitled 'What is a learning disability?'[4]. Participants were then asked whether they were happy with the definition of the term 'learning disability'; 14 replied that they were, and one participant requested clarification from the moderator.

Participants were shown two videos[5]. The first was shown at the beginning of the friendship discussion and portrayed two friends with learning disabilities playing darts. The second was shown at the beginning of discussions about working relationships with people with learning disabilities and showed a woman working on a reception. Within the romantic relationships section, participants were given a second fact sheet, entitled 'Why are personal relationships important?'[6], which provided information about intimate

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[2] See appendix 1.
[3] See appendix 2.
[4] See appendix 4.
[5] See appendix 5.
[6] See appendix 6.

relationships for people with learning disabilities. All materials were taken from MENCAP, a leading UK charity for people with learning disabilities and their families or carers (Mencap, 2010).

Analytic Method

The data was analysed using Glaser & Strauss' (1967) grounded theory method; a systematic, yet flexible approach that centres on constant comparison and analysis to construct theories grounded in the data themselves (Charmaz, 2006). It therefore compliments the use of focus groups in ensuring participant views are at the centre of the process, as opposed to researcher objectives. Transcribed data was coded systematically. The initial stage involves "in vivo" or open coding, which uses the participants' own terms, perceptions or concepts to summarise the data. This process is done line-by-line to ensure all of the data is accounted for. The most frequent and significant initial codes are then selected to reduce and represent large amounts of data, through focused coding. Selective coding then groups these codes to form more abstract and conceptual ideas. This process provided three analytic categories for students' attitudes towards having different social relationships with persons with learning disabilities.

Throughout the coding process, salient interactional elements of talk were recognised within the data but were not represented by the grounded theory analysis. For this reason, a second analytic section uses conversation analysis to study the organisation of social interaction in talk (Sacks, 1992). Extracts were re-transcribed using the Jefferson (2004) method, in order to include important details of not simply what participants say, but how they say it (Wilkinson & Kitzinger, 2008). Conversation analysis is typically used to analyse more naturalistic data than that generated from focus groups. However, it is relevant to this study because it treats *what* people say and *how* they say it as inseparable (Wilkinson & Kitzinger, 2008) and also sees utterances as related. It is therefore useful in developing the grounded theory analysis that only reported *what* people say, out of the context of their surrounding talk.

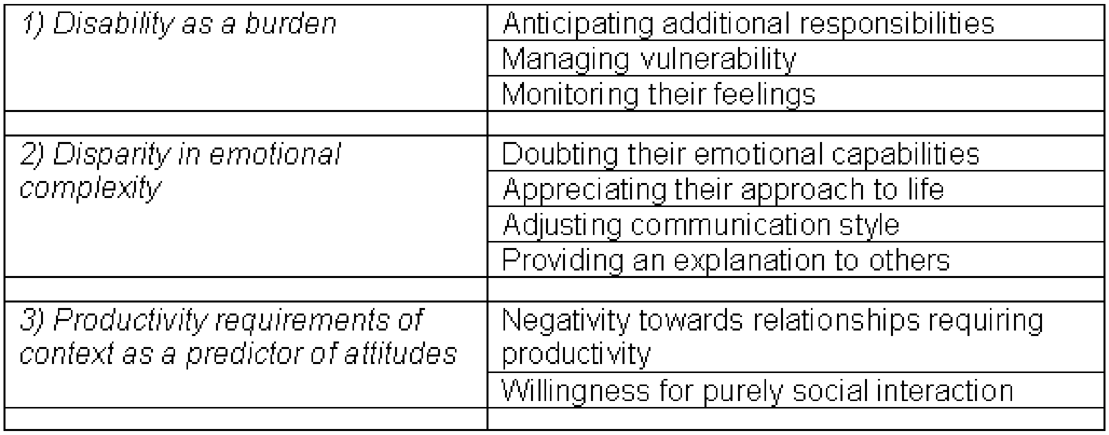
Findings of the two approaches, alongside those of existing quantitative research, will be discussed in relation to their contribution to our understanding of attitudes towards persons with learning disabilities.

ANALYSIS

Grounded Theory

The extensive grounded theory analysis revealed three selective codes, as summarised in image 1. These will be discussed in turn and supported by direct quotations from the data sources.

Image 1 – Overview Table of the Grounded Theory Findings



1) Disability as a burden	Anticipating additional responsibilities
	Managing vulnerability
	Monitoring their feelings
2) Disparity in emotional complexity	Doubting their emotional capabilities
	Appreciating their approach to life
	Adjusting communication style
	Providing an explanation to others
3) Productivity requirements of context as a predictor of attitudes	Negativity towards relationships requiring productivity
	Willingness for purely social interaction

Disability as a burden

Throughout the data, participants described the pressures that they perceive learning disabilities to put on relationships. The burden was described in three categories: anticipating additional responsibilities, managing vulnerability and monitoring their feelings.

Anticipating Additional Responsibilities

Expectations of increased responsibilities from having a relationship with someone with learning disabilities were prominent across the social situations. In extract 1, Kaitlin discusses the impact that working alongside someone with learning disabilities might have on her own workload:

Extract 1 – FG2: 273-277[7]

Kai: Yeah, I feel like it would be my responsibility to, umm, sort, you know, sort out any mess or any situations that are caused or just to help out, but obviously if you're in a very busy job role or, you know, say you've got clients that aren't happy with the standard or whatever and it's letting the reputation of the company slip or something.

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[7] The labeling of extracts can be explained as follows: "FG2" refers to focus group number 2 and "273-277" refers to the line numbers of the extract on the original transcript, (see appendix 7). "Kai" is an abbreviation of the pseudonym used for the speaker (as noted in appendix 8).
All extracts will be labeled in this way and all transcripts are included in the appendices.

Kaitlin foresees having to manage situations that have gone wrong, suggesting an expectation that a colleague with learning disabilities would experience difficulties in a working environment. This negativity contradicts reported positivity towards the work context within existing literature: Hergenrather and Rhodes (2007, p72) state “The mean score for Work was the highest, suggesting that undergraduates have positive attitudes toward persons with disabilities in the workplace”. However, the mean score for the work context was only marginally greater than the mean scores for other contexts – yet the authors concluded that this represented positivity. This inaccuracy highlights the usefulness of a qualitative approach, allowing for the full complexities of attitudes to be explored, rather than reducing them to single scores in order to report them as *either* positive *or* negative.

Responsibilities were also discussed in the context of sexual relationships:

Extract 2 – FG1: 524-527

01 Ber: Cos they might not have the access to like sexual umm
02 education that we have like at school or something li- I don’t
03 know, they might, they might be excluded from that and then
04 it would be sort of your responsibility to then explain it to
05 them before anything happens or.

Bernie perceives responsibility for ensuring the partner with learning disabilities has a suitable level of knowledge and understanding to consent to sexual acts. This perception seems justified in the light of current law[8], whereby misinterpretation of a disabled partner’s understanding of a sexual relationship can reap serious repercussions for the non-disabled partner.

Managing Vulnerability

Managing vulnerability relates to ideas of being cautious in interactions. Existing literature has discussed that uncertainty over how to act can cause non-stigmatized individuals to avoid ‘mixed contacts’ with the stigmatized (Goffman, 1963; Newman, 2008). Participants in this study did not go so far as to reject contact with persons with learning disabilities, but did report ‘holding back’ as a means of managing their vulnerability through avoiding upset:

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[8] Persons are assumed to have the capacity to consent to sexual relationships (through understanding the act and its consequences) unless proved otherwise (Mental Capacity Act, 2005).

However, sexual relationships are considered sexual offences if a partner with a mental disorder is believed to lack understanding of the acts they are engaging in (Sexual Offences Act, 2003).

Extract 3 – FG3: 115-120

Kay: Yeah, you wouldn’t want to patronise them or offend them in any way, so I’d always be kind of
Chr: Worried.
Kay: Yeah holding back.

Although people may ‘hold back’ with the intention of protecting the individual, Troiano (2003) highlights that being treated differently causes lower self confidence in people with learning disabilities. This, in turn, may amplify their exclusion.

Monitoring Their Feelings

Participants discussed needing to monitor the feelings of a person with learning disabilities throughout interactions and understand their desires:

Extract 4 – FG5: 35-41

Jad: I think you’d, like, constantly, not always think oh they’ve got a disability but you’d constantly, like, be aware, make sure it’s kind of clear what you say and
Sco: Yeah.
Jad: Always trying to make sure that they comfortable with the situation, so that they don’t, kind of, feel that they’re different or anything

Similarly, when discussing whether to approach a colleague with learning disabilities in the lunch hour participants agreed that they would, “unless they’re the kind of person who would want to sit on their own and you’d just need to leave them to it” (*Focus group 4, lines 242-243).*

Feeling the need to monitor feelings was, again, particularly prominent when discussing sexual relationships.

Extract 5 – FG1: 494-508

Ber: I think they need t- they need to understand like the sexual, like, not c- not rules but d’you know wh- like they need to understand how- how serious it might get if say if you’re going to have a sexual relationship with them. I mean I- I, as long as they understood th- they’re just like anybody else really it’s jus- it’s just that they don’t learn as fast so as long as they did understand that then I don’t think it should be a problem. But I wouldn’t want them to feel, like maybe, umm as if, if the person without the learning disability was sort of more powerful then they’d have a power, sort of, struggle.
Jon: Mmm

Ber: Just cos if they didn’t necessarily like understand but they went ahead with it, they might think that they were trying to, like.
Mel: Being forced in to something they didn’t want to do.

It may be that *any* person in *any* relationship is responsible for ensuring awareness of their partner’s feelings before engaging in sexual acts. However, due to the vulnerability perceived in people with learning disabilities, participants noted a particular need to ensure a partner both desires engagement in sexual acts, and is able to make an informed decision – linking again to the laws previously discussed.

This section shows the various components that participants imagine would be a burden on a relationship with someone who has learning disabilities. Issues of additional responsibilities, managing their vulnerability and monitoring their feelings all culminate in the perception of additional effort being required in relationships of this kind. The burden was particularly heightened in the context of sexual relationships, where ideas of vulnerability and disparity in understanding are prominent. This concept is a focus for the following section.

Disparity in Emotional Complexity

Participants displayed perceptions of disparity in emotional complexity between the disabled and the non-disabled within four areas: doubting their emotional capabilities, appreciating their approach to life, adjusting communication style and providing an explanation to others.

Doubting Their Emotional Capabilities

Participants were largely negative about discussing emotionally heavy topics with a person with learning disabilities, assuming them to have less capability to comprehend the issue and offer the desired support.

Extract 6 – FG4: 38-54

Mat: I wouldn’t know if, like, cos if they were- I wouldn’t know if they would understand like the, how you would, err, like, if they’d empathise with the way you were feeling. Er- if- if- it depends on like what sort of problem it was.
Kev: Yeah.
Kel: Yeah maybe they wouldn’t react in the way that you’d hope them to
Kev: Or they might not like yeah

Kel: Like you- I don’t think you could count on them to give, give them your sympathy.
Kev: They might not understand fully, like, your problem and then if it was like a personal problem they might not understand that and they might tell people and, I don’t know. I think it’s harder to trust, maybe, cos you don’t know how they are gonna understand it that much.

Within the wider literature on relationships, trust and empathy are highlighted as key components to friendship (Felmlee & Muraco, 2009; Güroğlu *et al*, 2008). In extract 6, participants question the ability of a person with learning disabilities to adhere to these friendship norms and reciprocate the emotional input of a non-disabled partner. This provides an interesting comparison with research from the perspective of those with disabilities, who assign greater importance on doing things together in friendship than to giving or receiving emotional support (Turnbull *et al*, 2000). Matheson *et al* (2007) found that 16-17 year olds with developmental disabilities seldom mentioned loyalty and trust as components of friendship, despite these qualities being prominent in normative descriptions of adolescent friendships. People without disabilities may therefore feel that their emotional input is not reciprocated – as discussed in this extract – and this perhaps strengthens the divide between the disabled and non-disabled.

Appreciating Their Approach to Life

Disparities in emotional complexity were not necessarily interpreted negatively, however. Participants repeatedly showed appreciation of the outlook on life that they perceive a person with learning disabilities to hold.

Extract 7 – FG1: 274-292

Mel: I think they’d bring fun to the work place as well, you know how we were saying about, like, they’d be fun to have them as a friend, I think it would be quite fun to have them
Ber: In the work place.
Mel: Have them as well like, lighten up the, th- the atmosphere.
Jon: Mmm
Ber: Yeah cos some people take it too seriously don’t they and then.
Mel: Yeah
Ber: I guess they just yeah make it a happier place and
Mel: Yeah
Ber: I don’t know, a nice place.

Such positive perceptions of people with disabilities have seldom been reported by the single attitude scores of existing quantitative literature. The emotional simplicity of a person with learning disabilities that was expressed negatively in extract 6 is shown to be positive in the context of extract 7: participants talk of this laid-back outlook helping them to gain a more positive perspective.

Adjusting Communication Style

Alongside perceptions of disparity in emotional complexity, participants discussed expectations of needing to adjust their communication in interactions:

Extract 8 – FG3: 554-573

Kay: But you c- you have to talk, you'll have to kind of talk to them in a way that they'll respond to.
Bob: Well that's the thing cos
Kay: Cos if you just shout, well not shout but, like, they w- they won't take it, they might take it the wrong way or it might not help the situation
Bob: Yeah.
Kay: So you'd have to find a way to motivate them that will help them
Chr: Yeah.
Kay: In their specifi-
Bob: Yeah.
Kay: Cos you've got to talk- I'd imagine you've got to talk to them all differently, they all respond to different ways.

Shouting is discussed as inappropriate, reflecting perceptions of disabled people being unable to handle extreme emotion such as anger. It may be that matching communication style to the recipient is a normal part of interaction, regardless of who the recipient is. However, the needs of a person with learning disabilities are considered more sensitive because they are perceived to be different from those of a non-disabled person, who presents the norms. Participants consistently used the non-disabled population as a means of comparison; for example, referring to a 'lower mental age' in people with learning disabilities.

Extract 9 – FG3: 81-97

Chr: Cos sometimes it can be hard in terms of like, obviously sometimes, like someone with learning disabilities can have like a mental age that is younger than what you are.
Bob: Yeah.

Chr: And sometimes like, it’s hard, like, you don’t want to patronise them, you want to be on their level.
Bob: No exactly, yeah.
Chr: But equally you want to talk appropriately, and
Bob: Yeah.
Chr: Like that would be hard for me but it wouldn’t put me off of being friends with someone.

Participants feel the need to communicate on a lower level, yet avoid being patronising. Managing communication could therefore add to the burden described in the first analysis section.

Providing an Explanation to Others

Perceived disparity was further exaggerated by participants’ desire to provide explanation of the disability when introducing a person with learning disabilities to other friends.

Extract 10 – FG4: 83-91

Kev: I don’t think any of my other friends would
Mat: Yeah.
Kev: Mind too much, but no- I’d tell them, like, that obviously I’m bringing someone else and tell them that they’ve got learning disabilities so that they don’t, I don’t know, just so that they expect I’m bringing someone, another friend along, and to expect to have to maybe explain things more than once and stuff like that. I don’t think it would be too much of a problem.

Kevin’s explanation suggests that people with learning disabilities are considered to be different and that accountability for abnormal behaviour is essential to maintaining smooth interactions. Nonetheless, attitudes towards the inclusion of people with learning disabilities within this environment were positive on the condition that this prior warning was given.

This second section describes the disparity that participants perceive between their own emotional abilities and those of people with learning disabilities. This was interpreted negatively when discussing the ability of a person with learning disabilities to reciprocate a friendship, yet positivity was expressed with regards to learning from their more relaxed approach to life. Participants reported needing to manage this disparity in interactions, reinforcing the perception of additional effort requirements in relationships of this kind that was evident in the previous (*disability as a burden*) section.

Productivity Requirements of Context as a Predictor of Attitudes

The final emergent theme involves two components: negativity towards relationships requiring productivity, in comparison to displays of willingness for purely social interaction.

Negativity towards Relationships Requiring Productivity

Within the working environment – where productivity and tangible outcomes are vital - participants expressed greater belief in the capabilities of non-disabled people, showing expectations for a person with learning disabilities to be a liability.

Extract 11 – FG2: 232-247

Kai: Yeah. Or don't have the capacity to take i- the work any further or higher level or, or deal like, she was on reception desk. If she had to deal with a rude customer or a complicated situation, then I think I.
Ste: It would be hard not to interrupt, like, if you think that, I don't know, you might feel like you can help better, but, you should leave them to it I guess.
Kai: Yeah.
Fio: I think I'd probably try as much as possible to let them do jobs, and then if they didn't do it to like the standard that was expected then jus- without even sometimes without telling them, just like finish it off, or
Kai: Mmm.
Fio: Clean it up a little bit better or whatever.

Some positivity was expressed towards the completion of simple tasks by a person with learning disabilities, with particular reference to the video material that portrayed a woman successfully working in a reception. However, participants doubted such a person's ability to cope with complicated or unexpected situations. Many expected higher efficiency if they did the job themselves and displayed a preference for this:

Extract 12 – FG4: 175-180

Kev: Well I've said, like, sometimes I've said that before, like, I go and do things myself and, like, get other people to help me rather than the person who's disa- got the disabilities and umm, I have told the manager at some point that I- I need some more help like and it kind of has to be worked around so that when stuff needs to be done, it's me and someone else, not- not discriminating against him but cos it's easier, it's just easier, a lot easier.

The negativity expressed towards working relationships contradicts findings within existing literature that report this low-intimacy context to correspond to more positive attitudes (Hergenrather & Rhodes, 2007; Gordon *et* al, 1990; Grand *et al*, 1982). The present study also highlights variability in attitudes within the context of work, which fails to be represented in the existing quantitative literature. Extract 13 describes such variation, according to the type of job being discussed:

Extract 13 – FG5: 212-219

Sco: I think, yeah, that’s quite limited, cos obviously there’s, if you’re a crane driver or something there’s fac- safety factors and things in there and they might be I don’t know, I don’t know much about learning disability but they might be a bit slow to react or they might not under- like be a- they might be unaware of the people around them, whereas something like receptionist, like you said, is quite good cos it’s like, like warming and it’s quite repet- repetitive isn’t it so once they’ve understand it- understood it, they can use that again and again and again.

More positive attitudes were expressed towards people with learning disabilities carrying out simple tasks, in comparison to their participation in more complex or skilled roles.

Negativity was also expressed through doubts over whether a person with learning disabilities could provide for a partner in a long-term romantic relationship. Jon’s response (extract 14) followed the moderator’s question of whether they would ask a friend with learning disabilities out on a date, after growing very close to them.

Extract 14 – FG1: 399-406

Jon: It’s, ah- it’s just similar, like if, if y- you’ve grown close, you know wha- what’s to stop you, I mean, yeah wha- what’s to stop you you going out on a date I d- you know. I suppose i- it’s a very, it’s a difficult situation. If you’re being, you know if you’re the kind of person who is looking quite materialistically like, errm, you know, she’s going to be able to provide me with great looking kids and she’s got can have a great career ahead of her so we can support each other. Then, if you’re looking from that per- perspective then m- maybe you’d be less enthusiastic, I guess.

Jon initially discussed the date situation and displayed positivity. However, he soon jumped to discussing the long-term future of the relationship in terms of having children and upholding a job. Discussion of these aspects, which require greater productivity, elicited more negative attitudes.

Willingness for Purely Social Interactions

In contrast to relationships requiring productivity, attitudes towards purely social relationships were largely positive.

Extract 15 – FG1: 56-64

Jon: Cos yeah I think, with something like that, it does it just does take more effort, but I think can be e- just as rewarding a- as a friendship with anybody else.
Mel: Yeah I was gonna say that.
Ber: Yeah, it could be even more rewarding.
Jon: And yeah probably more fun because I think they're gonna have a different perspective on life.

The participants in extract 15 discuss that a relationship with someone with learning disabilities requires more effort, but can also be more rewarding than a relationship with a non-disabled person. Perhaps less effort is anticipated in purely social contexts and therefore the rewards are perceived to be greater. Further positivity was expressed towards interactions in the work lunch hour:

Extract 16 – FG3: 770-772

Bob: Yeah like I said it would just be like having a normal friend, I suppose, especially on lunch hour because you're not really at work or anything like at that kind of time.

Extract 17 – FG4: 213-218

Kev: That's a bit different, I think, cos it's not, like, in your work environment. It's not like anything has to be done or anything complicated then it's not wasting time so yeah I think I would just go and have dinner wi- like have my lunch with him, like, you can still have a normal conversation. Umm, that's more as friends though, like, if you're friends it's different to being in the work, I think, work colleagues are different to friends.

Kevin displays willingness towards interactions at this time because it does not require tangible outcomes, unlike the rest of the working day. There is also suggestion that the relationship during the lunch hour becomes contextualised as a friendship rather than work colleagues, again showing greater positivity for purely social interactions.

In this final section, the analysis of extended talk argues that the *productivity requirements* of the context influence the type of attitudes held towards relationships with persons with learning disabilities; rather than *intimacy* of context, which has been the focus of existing quantitative research (Hergenrather & Rhodes, 2007; Gordon *et al*, 1990). It appears that the additional effort participants reported in the previous two sections (*disability* *as a burden* and *disparity in emotional complexity*) is manageable in purely social contexts but perceived more negatively when the productive demands of the situation are higher.

Findings of the grounded theory analysis have successfully addressed the first research question. Using extended talk – rather than imposed researcher categories – this qualitative approach has extended beyond single-score measures that label attitudes as *either* positive *or* negative. Rather, it presents both positivity *and* negativity, within the categories of *disability as a burden*, *disparity in emotional complexity*, and *productivity requirements as a predictor of attitude.* The perception of higher effort requirements in relationships of this kind was prominent, and elicited greater negativity in contexts requiring productivity than in purely social contexts.

The grounded theory analysis fails, however, in addressing the second research question: how does this qualitative approach contribute to our understanding of the *social presentation* of such attitudes? Despite analysing responses that were generated within the *social* context of a focus group, it maintains an *individualistic* approach that focuses on *what* people say and assumes this to reflect their internal mental state. Potter and Hepburn (2005) criticise such failure of analytic methods to consider the data collection procedure as a social interaction. To address this issue, the next section will take a discursive approach in considering the social dimension of attitudes, using conversation analysis (Sacks, 1992) to look at *how* people present their attitudes through talk.

Developments with Conversation Analysis and Discursive Psychology

Discursive psychology argues that people do not act as isolated individuals, holding fixed attitudes that can be reproduced at any time. Rather, responses are worked up for interactional purposes, in light of the situational context (Potter, 1998; Potter & Wetherell, 1987). Conversation analysis in this section highlights three features of talk, all of which display alignment: collaborative responses, attitude reformulation and disclaimers.

Collaborative Responses

Throughout the focus groups, participants displayed group solidarity by developing ideas collectively and using their own turns in talk to elaborate on the contributions of other members.

Extract 18 – FG4: 36-44[9]

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[9] See appendix 9 for transcription conventions.

01 M: Would you feel comfortable, like, telling them your
02 problems?
02 Mat: I wouldn’t know (0.6) if (0.2) like (2.0) cos if they we- I
03 wouldn’t (0.2) know if they would understand (0.2) like the
04 (0.3) how you would (2.0) err (0.2) like (0.1) if they’d
05 empathise with the >way you were feeling< =er- if- if- it
06 depends on like what >sort of problem< it was.
07 (0.2)
08 Kev: [Yeah]
09 Kel: [Yeah] maybe they wouldn’t react in the way that you’d (0.2)
10 hope them to

Matt shows hesitation through numerous pauses, as well as stuttering on line 05. He makes repeated displays of uncertainty with “I wouldn’t know” (lines 02-03). Following Matt’s turn, Kevin and Kelly both present agreement with “Yeah”. Kelly then strengthens her alignment to Matt’s response by giving a similar evaluative expression (lines 09-10). The speakers align their expressions with those of other group members, following Sacks’ (1987) principle of preference for agreement.

Alternative examples within the data present alignment by collaborative completion (Lerner, 2004). In these instances, the second speaker does not wait for the first speaker to finish their turn; rather, they pre-empt the completion of that turn as a method of responding. This shows alignment with the statement of the original speaker. The example in extract 19 is taken from a discussion of maintaining a friendship with someone who has learning disabilities:

Extract 19 – FG3: 115-120

01 Kay: Yeah (0.1) you wouldn’t want to patronise or >offend them in
02 any way< so I’d always be kind of
03 Chr: Worried
04 Kay: Yea:h holding back

Christina’s collaborative sequence-initiating utterance (line 03) comes within Kayleigh’s turn space in order to pre-empt the completion of her turn (lines 01-02). Kayleigh stops talking when Christina interjects, before ratifying that this completion accurately represents what she was about to say with “Yea:h” (line 04). She then expands on Kayleigh’s completion with “holding back” (line 04), regaining speakership of her original turn and reformulating to complete the turn constructional unit herself (Lerner, 2004).

Extract 20, a second example of collaborative completion, is part of a discussion about physical relationships, which highlights the role of mutual support in eliciting elaborate responses.

Extract 20 – FG1: 505-510
01 Ber: Just cos if they didn’t necessarily like understand (0.6) but
02 they went ahead with it (0.3) they might think that they were
03 trying to (0.8)
04 like
05 (0.2)
06 Mel: Being forced in to something they didn’t [want] to do
07 Ber: [yeah]
08 Ber: Yeah

In her initial turn, Bernie hesitates and appears to have difficulty making her statement (shown with the pauses on lines 01-05). Mel initiates a collaborative turn sequence on line 06, offering an affiliating utterance that pre-empts the completion, which Bernie is seemingly unable to give. Bernie then ratifies that this completion is appropriate on line 07. This confirmation is exaggerated in two ways: by her interjection before the end of Mel’s collaborative completion (shown by the overlap on line 07) and her repetition of “Yeah” on line 08. The mutual support perhaps generated a more elaborate response than Bernie could have produced in isolation, presenting a benefit of group discussions over individual interviews.

This section displays how participants work together to formulate responses. It reinforces the usefulness of focus groups, whereby mutual support (Kitzinger, 1995) and group solidarity (Wilkinson, 2004) elicits responses that might otherwise be left unsaid because they are considered deviant from cultural expectations. Evidence of collaborative responding therefore sustains the notion that attitudes are not an individual phenomenon. This is further supported by evidence of attitude reformulation.

Attitude Reformulation

Conflicting responses were rare across the data and when they did occur, participants reformulated their answers to maintain solidarity. Extracts 21 and 22 illustrate this whilst participants are discussing their feelings about having physical relationships with a partner with learning disabilities.

Extract 21 – FG3: 989-994
01 Bob: Umm, but like it- I don’t know it’s (0.2) almost like (1.0) the
02 learning disability thing isn’t quite (0.5) as important when
03 you think about (0.6) °sex°=
04 Chr: =You see I think it’s [rea::]lly important
05 Bob: [yeah]
06 Bob: Yeah I don’t know

Christina immediately latches on to Bob's initial turn with a discrepant response (line 04). She uses an extreme case formulation (Pomerantz, 1986), "rea::]lly", which is emphasised by elongation and constructs her statement as believable in order to legitimise claims. Before Christina has finished her turn, Bob quickly discards his original statement with an interjection of "yeah" (line 05), and repeats this on line 06. He has therefore reformulated his evaluation to show conformity with Christina – again highlighting a preference for agreement in talk (Sacks, 1987). At this point, however, Bob displays uncertainty in his altered evaluation with the words "I don't know" (line 06). After further discussion[10], he reformulates his response to present a view that aligns to Christina's:

Extract 22 – FG3: 1038-1040
01 Bob: Yeah (0.3) I think it would b- I think you would have to be like
02 (0.3) know them (0.1) and maybe go out with them for a lot
03 longer (0.3) maybe than: (0.2) just so you can build up- like
04 trust and everything

Bob now presents the view that learning disability needs management and therefore *is* an issue within the context of sexual relationships, contradicting his previous statement. He compromises his own evaluative expression in order to preserve group solidarity.

This supports Turner's (1987) self categorisation theory, since Bob has moved away from his personal attributes and is instead taking on the group identity that has been presented by the majority; aligning his own performance with those of other group members[11]. This variability in attitudes (Potter, 1998; Potter & Wetherell, 1987) reinforces that people do not act in isolation when presenting their attitudes; rather they formulate their expressions as a means of managing their identity, perhaps regardless of internal cognitions.

Disclaimers

Further evidence of talk being constructed for interactional purposes – and specifically to align to social expectations – can be seen through the use of disclaimers. This verbal tool permits the speaker to make a statement that would otherwise threaten their identity through negative retypification, without it doing so (Overstreet & Yule, 2001; Potter & Wetherell, 1987). Extract 23 provides an example, whereby the participant is discussing their personal experience of working alongside someone with learning disabilities:

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[10] See appendix 10.

[11] It is worth noting that the focus groups in this study included only three participants – perhaps the processes of social categorisation and alignment would be more defined in larger groups where the majority view is likely to involve more people.

Extract 23 – FG4: 175-180

01 Kev: I go and do things (1.0) myself (0.6) and like (0.3) get other
02 people to help me rather than (1.0) the person who's disa-
03 got the disabilities and umm (0.4) I have told the manager at
04 some point that I- I need some more help like (0.2) a:nd (1.5)
05 it kind of has to be worked around so that (0.3) when stuff
06 needs to be done it's me and someone else not (0.6) not-
07 >discriminating< against him but (0.2) cos it's easier- it's just
08 easier =a lot easier

Taking Hewitt and Stokes' (1975) early terminology, Kevin uses an *identity* claim (disclaiming that he is discriminating, lines 06-07) to ensure acceptance of a *substantive* claim (that it is easier to ask non-disabled people if a job needs doing, line 07). He says the word "discriminating" (line 07) very quickly; indicating awareness of it being a dispreferred response that risks violating social rules (Overstreet & Yule, 2001). Kevin's denial of being discriminating disassociates him from the potentially problematic statement he makes in order to avoid negative retypification (Overstreet & Yule, 2001); thus preserving his moral identity and maintaining his alignment with other group members.

Disclaimers are also used as a form of 'hedging', whereby participants preface a statement with words that limit their commitment to it (Hewitt and Stokes, 1975). The participant in extract 24 is discussing their feelings about sharing their problems with someone with learning disabilities:

Extract 24 – FG5: 91-94

01 Sco: As long as you had the trust there (0.4) but (0.1) I don't know
02 much about learning disability (1.5) like I don't know if they'd
03 (0.6) they'd TALK to random people or, I don't know. So:
04 (1.0) if you (0.4) would they be able to (0.3) keep- the words
05 to themselves if you know what I mean

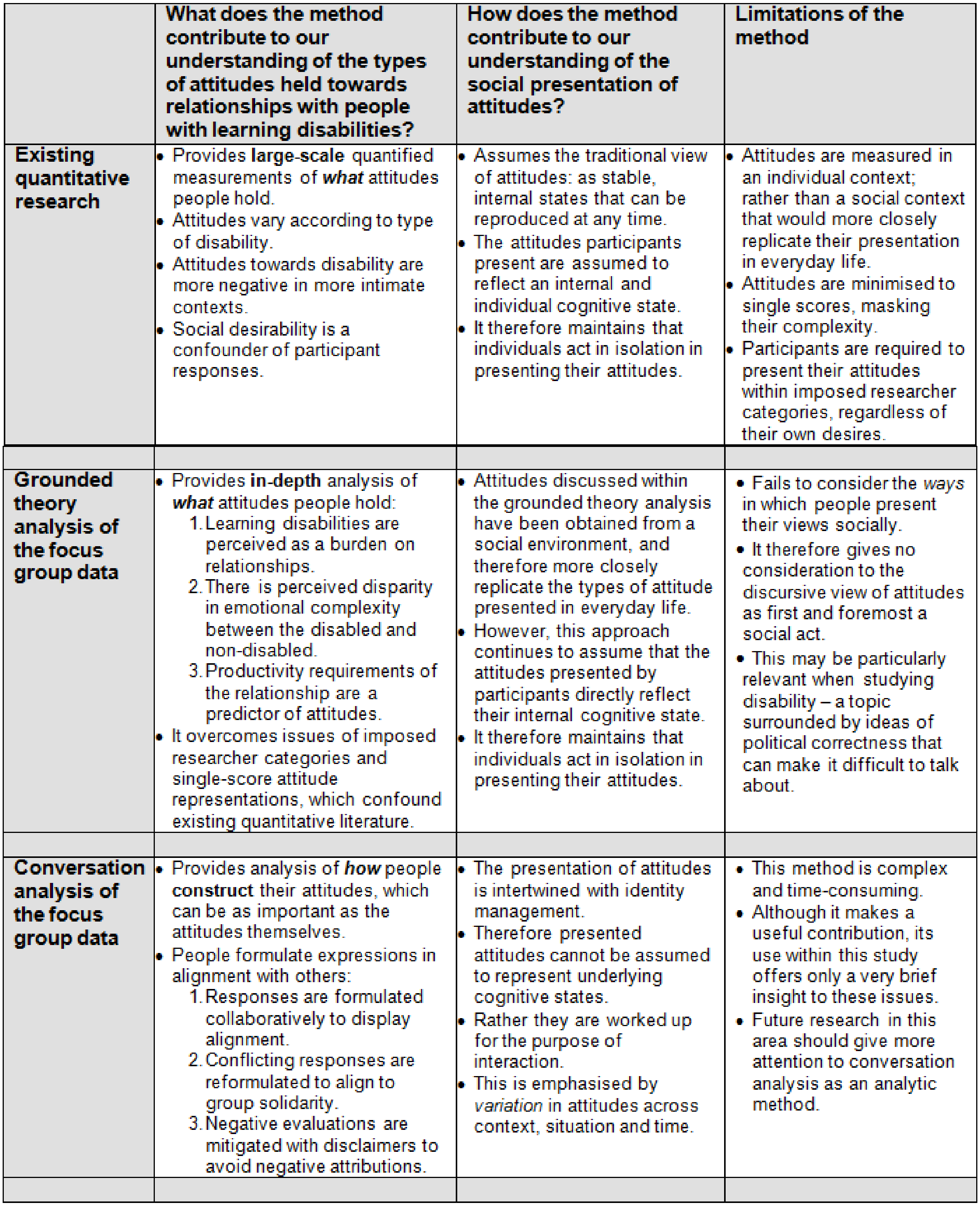
Scott uses the disclaimer of lacking a suitable level of knowledge (lines 01-02) to preface his suggestion that people with learning disabilities have inferior capabilities – perhaps due to uncertainty of how his claim will be received by others. Emphasis is placed on the word "don't" (line 01), which strengthens the disclaimer. Use of this tool allows Scott to express his ideas without committing to his statement being accurate; he is willing to be better informed by others. Any rejection of these substantive claims will be attributed to Scott's lack of knowledge, as opposed to impacting negatively on his identity.

Evidence of alignment, specifically through the use of collaborative responses, attitude reformulation and disclaimers, suggests that participants construct their responses for interactional purposes, as a means of 'doing talk' and managing identity. This discursive approach does not discount that participants *may* be revealing their true evaluations, but it does not *assume* this (Potter & Wetherell, 1987); unlike the grounded theory approach.

Discussion section begins on the next page …

DISCUSSION

Image 2 – A table highlighting the contribution of different methods within the field of disability attitude research.



	What does the method contribute to our understanding of the types of attitudes held towards relationships with people with learning disabilities?	How does the method contribute to our understanding of the social presentation of attitudes?	Limitations of the method
Existing quantitative research	• Provides **large-scale** quantified measurements of ***what*** attitudes people hold. • Attitudes vary according to type of disability. • Attitudes towards disability are more negative in more intimate contexts. • Social desirability is a confounder of participant responses.	• Assumes the traditional view of attitudes: as stable, internal states that can be reproduced at any time. • The attitudes participants present are assumed to reflect an internal and individual cognitive state. • It therefore maintains that individuals act in isolation in presenting their attitudes.	• Attitudes are measured in an individual context; rather than a social context that would more closely replicate their presentation in everyday life. • Attitudes are minimised to single scores, masking their complexity. • Participants are required to present their attitudes within imposed researcher categories, regardless of their own desires.
Grounded theory analysis of the focus group data	• Provides **in-depth** analysis of ***what*** attitudes people hold: 1. Learning disabilities are perceived as a burden on relationships. 2. There is perceived disparity in emotional complexity between the disabled and non-disabled. 3. Productivity requirements of the relationship are a predictor of attitudes. • It overcomes issues of imposed researcher categories and single-score attitude representations, which confound existing quantitative literature.	• Attitudes discussed within the grounded theory analysis have been obtained from a social environment, and therefore more closely replicate the types of attitude presented in everyday life. • However, this approach continues to assume that the attitudes presented by participants directly reflect their internal cognitive state. • It therefore maintains that individuals act in isolation in presenting their attitudes.	• Fails to consider the *ways* in which people present their views socially. • It therefore gives no consideration to the discursive view of attitudes as first and foremost a social act. • This may be particularly relevant when studying disability – a topic surrounded by ideas of political correctness that can make it difficult to talk about.
Conversation analysis of the focus group data	• Provides analysis of ***how*** people **construct** their attitudes, which can be as important as the attitudes themselves. • People formulate expressions in alignment with others: 1. Responses are formulated collaboratively to display alignment. 2. Conflicting responses are reformulated to align to group solidarity. 3. Negative evaluations are mitigated with disclaimers to avoid negative attributions.	• The presentation of attitudes is intertwined with identity management. • Therefore presented attitudes cannot be assumed to represent underlying cognitive states. • Rather they are worked up for the purpose of interaction. • This is emphasised by *variation* in attitudes across context, situation and time.	• This method is complex and time-consuming. • Although it makes a useful contribution, its use within this study offers only a very brief insight to these issues. • Future research in this area should give more attention to conversation analysis as an analytic method.

This study has considered a qualitative approach to the investigation of attitudes towards interacting with people with learning disabilities. Image 2 summarises the contributions of the various approaches to the field of research. It highlights a progression from quantitative research to the grounded theory method, which overcomes the methodological limitations of existing quantitative methods. The grounded theory analysis of extended talk elicited elaborate participant responses that have developed an understanding of the complexity of disability attitudes; therefore building upon results of the existing quantitative literature that fails to represent such detail through single measures. The following discussion begins by addressing the contribution of the grounded theory findings to answering the first research question: how can a qualitative approach develop our understanding of the *types of attitudes* held towards relationships with people with learning disabilities?

The concept of disability as a burden describes that the perceived additional effort and management needed to maintain a relationship with someone with learning disabilities can create resistance to interactions. Perhaps, therefore, it is not so much *discomfort* that causes avoidance of mixed contacts (Goffman, 1963; Newman, 2008), but a lack of enthusiasm due to high input requirements of the relationship. The finding of perceived disparity in emotional complexity highlighted doubts over the ability of a person with learning disabilities to reciprocate these inputs, particularly on an emotional level. This perception seems justified, given that studies have found people with disabilities to place little importance on emotional relationship qualities; instead valuing companionship and ‘doing things together’ (Matheson *et al*, 2007; Turnbull *et al*, 2000). Negativity therefore stemmed from expectations of investing more than what would be gained from a relationship with someone with learning disabilities. Such reasoning for negativity fails to be reported by the single-measure results of existing quantitative literature. Future disability attitude research should therefore follow a more rigorous qualitative approach, since an enriched understanding of the nature of these attitudes is essential in order to minimise inequalities between the disabled and non-disabled.

The finding that productivity requirements of the context predict willingness to uphold a relationship differs from existing quantitative research that has instead focused on the ‘level of intimacy’ of the context as a predictor of attitudes (Hergenrather & Rhodes, 2007; Gordon *et al*, 1990; Grand *et al*, 1982). Such studies have reported positive attitudes towards working relationships because the context requires low intimacy. To contrast, this study reports negativity towards working relationships due to perceptions of lower productive capabilities in people with learning disabilities. Both this study and the existing literature report negativity towards long-term relationships. Again, existing studies assume this is due to a higher level of intimacy in such contexts. In-depth analysis of talk in this study, on the other hand, reveals that this negativity results from doubts over the productive capabilities of a person with learning disabilities. The issue of intimacy did not feature within the talk, suggesting it has been imposed by the researchers of existing studies in their attempts to infer attitudes from quantitative measures. This reinforces the need for a qualitative approach to disability attitude research.

Despite the usefulness of grounded theory in eliciting these findings, the method focuses on *what* people say, with little consideration of *how* they say it. Its contribution to the second research question – how does this qualitative approach contribute to our understanding of the *social presentation* of such attitudes? – is therefore minimal. Conversation analysis – an analytic method that is currently absent in existing literature on disability attitudes – was included in this study to address the second research question. Its findings highlight some interesting features of talk that provide evidence of the presentation of attitudes being first and foremost a social act. This will be the focus of the following discussion.

Participants formulate their responses collectively, aligning to one another and performing collaborative completion (Lerner, 2004). This highlights the value of using focus groups for disability attitude research: the mutual support (Kitzinger, 1995) displayed through group solidarity (Wilkinson, 2004) allows them to talk more freely about this sensitive topic, which sequentially contributes to an enriched understanding of the types of attitudes people hold. However, evidence of collaborative responding contradicts the traditional assumption that attitudes reflect an internal mental state (Horne, 1985; Eagly & Chaiken, 1993). Instead, they are worked up for the purpose of interaction. This is particularly evident in attitude reformulation, where the preference for agreement (Sacks, 1987) is strong enough for participants to change their expressions in order to align to other group members. This provides evidence for Turner’s (1987) theory of altered self-categorisation in groups, within a more naturalistic environment than the quantitative context in which it has traditionally been measured. As a result of such variability in attitudes (Potter, 1998; Potter & Wetherell, 1987), participants’ internal cognitions cannot be inferred from their evaluative expressions.

This conclusion has implications for the findings of the grounded theory method used in this study, which follows the traditional approach of attitudes as reflections of the speaker’s internal cognitions. The grounded theory findings are not rendered meaningless; rather, they should be interpreted as the participants’ *chosen presentations* of attitude as opposed to inferring their *actual* internal state. Thus, the discursive view of attitudes as a social, rather than individual, phenomenon is reinforced.

Participants’ use of disclaimers (Overstreet & Yule, 2001; Hewitt & Stokes, 1975) further emphasises that attitudes are worked up for interactional purposes; the prefacing of socially deviant or uncertain evaluations manages the speaker's identity by mitigating expressions that might otherwise allocate them negative attributions. Evidence of disclaimers indicates a benefit of analysing extended talk, since it accesses the expression of evaluations that lie beyond the speaker's alignment to social desirability. In comparison, the limited response format of questionnaires restricts participants to one answer, such that socially desirable responding has the potential to confound results. This is consistently reported in existing quantitative literature (Ouellette-Kuntz *et* al, 2010; Gilmore *et al*, 2003). It should be noted, however, that the grounded theory method gives no attention to social desirability, since it focuses only on *what* participants say and not *how* they say it. Tools such as disclaimers, which merely preface a statement, are therefore surpassed by the main theme of talk in grounded theory analysis. Potter and Hepburn (2005) iterate that an understanding of what is going on interactionally is essential to making appropriate inferences from the data. In this study, conversation analysis contributes to such an understanding by considering both *how* participants manage their identity through talk, and *what* views they are choosing to present; therefore acknowledging the full complexities of attitudes.

Both analytic methods of this study promote a pervasive need for a qualitative approach to attitude research, since single measures (for example those obtained by the Disability Social Relationships Scale – Grand *et al,* 1982) fail to represent the complexity of participant responses. Grounded theory analysis successfully addressed the first research question, developing a more elaborate overview of disability attitudes than that which is currently portrayed by quantitative literature. However, conversation analysis provides strong evidence that these attitudes are formulated for interactional purposes, arguing against the inference of internal mental states from participant expressions. Future research should give greater consideration to the discursive view of attitudes; a focus on their use within social interaction is more applicable to their existence in everyday life contexts, rather than the study of attitudes as an individual phenomenon.

Perhaps future research in to disability attitudes, or in fact attitude research of any topic area, would benefit from a multi-dimensional approach. Studies should begin with qualitative data collection so that key issues are generated in a bottom-up manner, avoiding imposed researcher categories. Methods of analysis such as grounded theory can be useful in identifying key themes expressed by participants, although these expressions should be interpreted as *presentations* of attitudes rather than reflections of internal cognitive states. Conversation analysis can contribute by assessing *how* these attitudes are presented and used in interaction. At this stage, quantitative methods can provide a useful contribution by building upon ideas generated from the participants themselves (Mack *et al,* 2005).

There are some limitations to the present study. The first lies within the data collection method: although focus groups moved towards a more naturalistic environment than that of quantitative questionnaire measures, they are still based on *reports* of attitudes rather than people *doing* them. An ideal data set would be naturalistic observations of people *doing* disability talk, where the researcher's role is virtually non-existent (Potter, 2002). However, obtaining data whereby speakers address the desired topic area without prompts is unrealistic. Future studies could also take a qualitative approach to the investigation of attitudes towards *other* impairments, since this study focused solely on learning disabilities. Although the findings may be applicable to other disabilities, this cannot be assumed. It is also worth noting that this study gave little more than an insight in to conversation analysis. As reported in Image 2, it is a complex method that can – and perhaps should – have an entire body of future research dedicated to it.

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