

Self-Concept and Participation of People with Various Disabilities from Different Cultures in Israel

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Background: Physical, social, and environmental barriers, as in the case of people with disabilities, may negatively affect health, welfare and self-perception. **Purpose:** To give voice to adults with disabilities from different cultural groups, and to learn from their experiences as to which factors serve as enablers and/or barriers to their participation in life activities. **Method:** A qualitative phenomenological study of 41 adults (ages 25-65) with diverse disabilities from three cultural backgrounds (15 Jews, 13 Arabs, 13 new immigrants from the Former Soviet Union). Consenting participants engaged in semi-structured interviews conducted in their native languages. Audio recordings of the interviews were transcribed, and analyzed by researchers to identify content categories and identify major themes. Participants' anonymity was maintained through encryption of all identifying data. **Results:** The two major themes that emerged related to participants' self-perception as persons with a disability, and their perception of the environment that enables or impedes their participation in activities. **Discussion and Conclusions:** The tension between internal self-definitions and external social messages was experienced along a continuum by all interviewees. Some distinguishing variations were found between the three groups that represent the uniqueness of each of their cultures. These variations ranged from denial of their disability to accepting them and responding through developing an assertive self-perception. Although physical barriers challenged participants in their daily environments, they perceived social attitudes as the most significant barrier to participation. In addition to the many commonalities between participants in the three groups, each cultural group discussed distinctive experiences and concerns that emerged from their specific social and political context within
