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## Social Representations of Disability in University Students

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### Abstract

*Training on disability in the university context allows understanding the historical, cultural and personal position of this situation, placing the subject as a dynamic actor. The objective of this study was to determine the social representations on disability in university students of physical education. A multi-methodological approach was used, supported by a quantitative descriptive and qualitative case study. The information was collected through surveys and the mixed technique of natural semantic networks. The results reveal that disability for university students encompasses components related to limitation (100%), inclusion (66.78%), diversity (54.20%), impairment (22.95%), capacity (19.47%), difference (11.90%), difficulty (11.17%), adaptation (8.65%) and condition (5.12%). The conclusions contribute to the reflections on disability in university training processes, in which health, participation, educational inclusion and physical activity and sport are positioned as issues to be taken into account in academic and research issues with this population.*

**Keywords:** Social Representations, Training, University Students, Disability, Diversity.

### Introduction

The object of study is oriented towards the social representations on disability in university students of a Faculty of physical education, recreation and sports in Medellín, Colombia.

This inclination arises from the understanding that the place that one inhabits in the world and that makes it possible to be the center of daily experiences is constructed through the words that enunciate it, which in a certain way symbolizes knowledge, beliefs, perceptions and other components of that world, which from the perspective of Saussure (1945) is known as “language as a social fact, in the life of individuals and societies there is no factor as important as language” (pp. 34 - 35). Pinker (2007) states that it is a semantic issue, since “it is about the relationship of words with thought, the relationship of words with other human aspects, which permeate the way in which we make a representation of reality in our head” (p.17).

For this work, the training of physical educators is assumed from the permanent changes and dynamics of the society for which they are trained, which has led to the diversification of their functions and the expansion of their responsibilities. Perhaps for this reason, a fundamental purpose of teacher training in Physical Education is to make them understand the role that corresponds to them as actors of change, which implies that in teacher training, pedagogy acquires a transcendental role (Martínez, 2003).

The university student is conceived as the person who is part of the teacher training processes in a School of Physical Education. The field is understood from the disciplinary and specific

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components of physical education, as active and organized spaces in which the existence of structures, norms and hierarchies constitute the behavior of the subjects (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1996).

Taking into account the relevance that this study gives to the word of the other, in empirical terms, it is important and necessary to embrace the theory of social representations, which according to Moscovici (1961) are "almost tangible entities. They circulate, cross and crystallize in our daily universe through a word, a gesture, an encounter, they constitute a symbolic substance that at the same time permeates the practices, mythical or scientific" (p.27).

From an institutional point of view, the Ministry of National Education (2013) regarding the subjects in training, gives importance to their voices and perceptions, in the sense that "the processes that are developed during training have profound repercussions on the representations of the profession, on the function and identity of the teaching role and on the professional development of the educator" (p.72). Thus, the physical education teacher can be perceived as a subject of change in the contexts in which he/she has the possibility of acting, being fundamental that they are aware of their function and professional performance, according to the demands required by the individual and the group they are focused on, and taking into account their social responsibility. Therefore, this research points to a conception of the teacher from subjectivity, from the experience of the subject and the relationships generated with others in different contexts.

The above points out and benefits a relationship of categories that it is necessary to face, it is about the social representation on disability, since being trained as a teacher does not necessarily incorporate the reflective position and relative to this process, but it also includes a representation of what it means to be a teacher and the characteristics and functions performed in society. With this, it is intended that social representations on disability contribute to the process of teacher training in education, and provide theoretical, practical and methodological elements for further studies.

By the way, Abric (2001) mentions that social representations allow the understanding of everyday relationships and clarify the categories of social practices, in the sense that discourses, representations and practices are mutually constructed. Therefore, the studies of social representations on teacher training in education constitute a space of debate for the search and consolidation of their identity in the field of educational knowledge.

Regarding the referential framework that supports this research, it is necessary to say that in the search for studies that link social representations with teacher training, common elements are found, such as didactics (Isaacs and Chiguay, 2014; Velásquez and Córdova, 2018); the relevance of the context in which the training takes place (Calvo, 2013). Specifically, studies that address teacher training in disability from social representations is a little studied issue, since these studies are mainly focused on educational inclusion (Garnique, 2012; Bornand and Chiguay, 2016; Gutiérrez and Martínez, 2020). According to these works, it stands out that considering the teacher as a main axis is fundamental to improve educational processes.

The theoretical categories that support this research are oriented towards social representations and the contribution to teacher training from social representations. Social representations refer to the social, to the binding relationship between individual and collective aspects. According to Moscovici (1961) they are a particular form of knowledge, whose intention is the construction of

behaviors and forms of communication between subjects. From this perspective, social representations are a set of knowledge and mental activities with which subjects evidence personal and social reality.

One of the contributions of the theory of social representations to the teacher training process is to influence the dynamics and quality processes of higher education, considering a broad notion of curriculum, understanding it as the set of elements that contribute to and improve the educational act. In this way, the social representations of teachers in training, exposes the way in which the University permeates its discourse, but at the same time, recognizes other ways of elaborating the curriculum, linked to the way in which the subjects conceive their training and their professional function.

In this regard, Biggs (2005) proposes that quality in the university environment is linked to the scenario of change, generosity and understanding, acceptance and respect for diversity, which linked to the theory of social representations, alludes to the ways in which subjects represent their reality from their singularities and considerations. This leads to conceive the quality of education from the understanding and acceptance of the other, since diversity among students is increasing.

### **Methodology**

Social representations are not pigeonholed in a specific methodological development; this depends on the theoretical orientation that supports the study. In this case, it is based on the structural approach and empirical considerations (Abric, 2001), focusing its interest in recognizing the content and structure of social representations from the central core. To this end, it focuses on achieving the following three considerations, or at least the first two, with different procedures and techniques:

1. Identify the content of the representation.
2. Study the relationship, organization and hierarchy between elements (central core).
3. Determine and verify the central core.

The triple objective implies a “multi-methodological approach” Abric (2001, p. 54), which makes possible a safe approach to the reality of the individual or group being investigated.

### **Type of Study**

Given the intentions of the study, a multi-methodological design (Polit and Hungler, 2005) including quantitative and qualitative methods is employed. The descriptive design (quantitative) supports the case analysis (qualitative). In this way, we seek to understand the reality (university context) on disability training of future teachers in education. This work is situated in the interpretative approach (Bolívar, 2004) from the pretension of understanding social, educational and personal practices in a specific historical context, i.e., it has a practical approach, and at the same time positivist by having a technical purpose.

### **Population and Sample**

The sample for data collection and subsequent descriptive and natural semantic network analysis is based on stratified probability sampling (Grisales, 2001), following the criteria of reliability (95%), error (5%), probability of occurrence (P: 50%), probability of non-occurrence (Q: 50%), population (N: 825) and final sample (n: 219).

## **Techniques and Instruments**

For the collection of information, tools were used in accordance with the considerations of the study, namely: first, a questionnaire (Briones, 1996) on the academic and social profile, attitudes and testimonies on disability; second, the technique of Natural Semantic Networks: stimulus word guide (Figueroa, 1976), which are networks of meanings of the conceptions that people make of an object in its context.

The most relevant values of the natural semantic networks according to Valdez (1998) are:

**J-Value:** expresses the semantic richness determined by the number of words about a social object.

**M Value:** indicates the semantic weight and is obtained by multiplying the frequency with the hierarchy of each of the words originated by the participants.

**SAM Set:** It constitutes the central core of the semantic network and therefore the central axis of the SR.

**FMG Value:** shows in percentages the semantic distance between the concepts of the SAM set, starting from the main defining word with the most important M value, which is equivalent to 100%.

To determine the break point (PQ) of the SAM set and, therefore, the hegemonic representation, the words that reached a semantic distance equal to or greater than 5% in relation to the primary defining word were chosen. The data analysis was performed in the Excel spreadsheet program.

## **Information Analysis**

The analysis of information is based on a triangulation exercise following Rodriguez (2005), which refers to the “plurality of research approaches and instruments” (p.2). Thus, the following types of triangulation are used:

- **Of data:** it is developed from a group analysis of the data on social representations on the students' disability training.
- **Of methods:** quantitative and qualitative methods are embraced for the analysis of the information of the techniques used to establish the social representations and their organization.
- **Instruments:** Two different techniques are used

## **Results**

The results on social representations are presented from the structural approach, accounting for the content and organization of the analyzed objects. The findings of the semantic networks in the quantitative constituent are shown with the various semantic values revealed in numerical data.

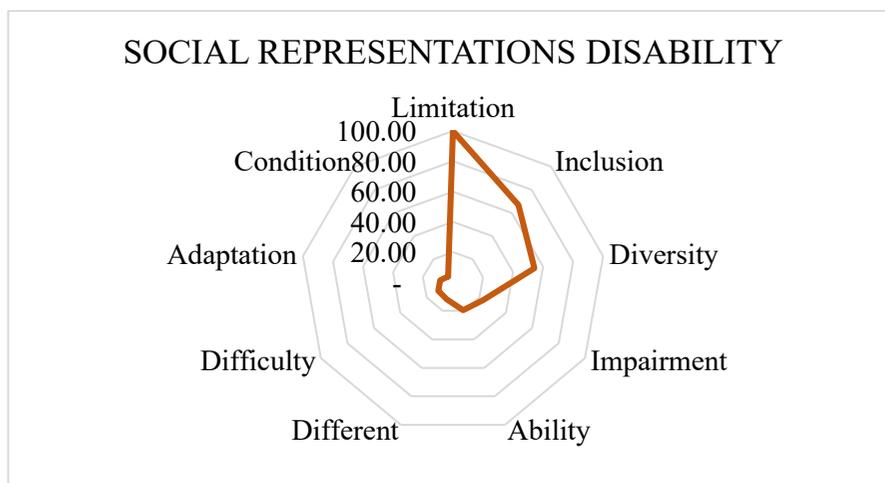
The overall semantic network on disability was determined with a total of 270 concepts (J-value) making up the total set, which declares a wide semantic richness. The predominant representation, i.e., the most relevant words that specify the object studied, was constituted by 9 defining terms (see Table 1) selected on the basis of the break point, i.e., words with a percentage equal to or greater than 5%. The main concept was limitation (100%), followed by inclusion

(66.78%), diversity (54.20%), impairment (22.95%), ability (19.47%), different (11.90%), difficulty (11.17%), adaptation (8.65%) and condition (5.12%). These categories determine the SAM set, that is, the central core of what disability is for the students.

Adjusted Disability Word	Order	Frecuency	M	FMG
Limitation	289	79	22831	100,00
Inclusion	242	63	15246	66,78
Diversity	225	55	12375	54,20
Impairment	131	40	5240	22,95
Ability	114	39	4446	19,47
Different	97	28	2716	11,90
Difficulty	85	30	2550	11,17
Adaptation	79	25	1975	8,65
Condition	65	18	1170	5,12

**Table 1 Social representations on disability**  
Source: own elaboration

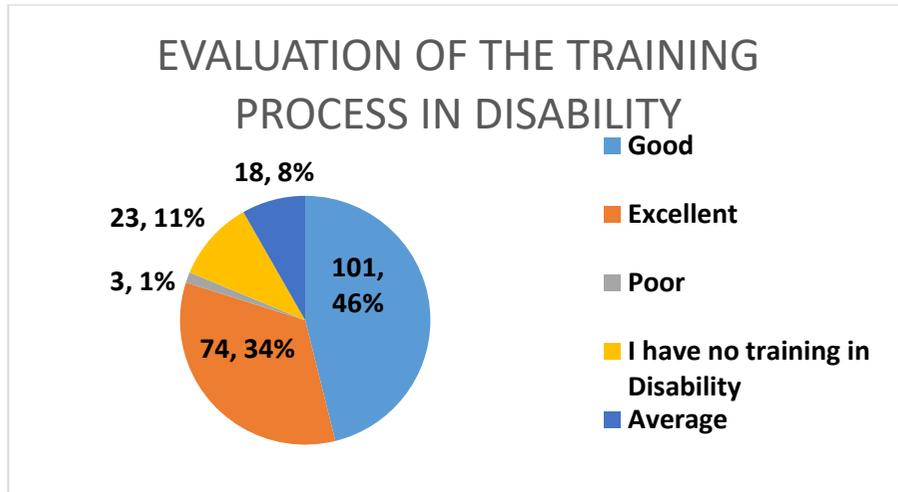
Regarding the semantic distance of the defining terms of the SAM set (see Figure 1) the word that defines disability with the highest percentage for students is limitation, a concept that can be understood in a negative way, of course, of the nine words that make up the central core, six of them encompass positive representations about disability, since inclusion, diversity, capacity, difference, adaptation and condition are issues that denote the multiplicity and possibility of people with disabilities and of the professionals who work with this population.



**Figure 1 SAM disability set**  
Source: own elaboration

The above results show two substantial dimensions for studies on social representations, which are information and the field of representation, the first related to knowledge about disability and

the second, referring to the organization of information, which allows determining that limitation, inclusion and diversity are significant aspects at the time of mentioning disability. Now, a third dimension in the social representations corresponds to the attitude, which expresses the general position of the subjects and their connection with the represented object, which in the case of this research had a predominantly good (46%) and excellent (34%) consideration (See Figure 2).



## Discussion and Conclusions

One of the relevant contributions of this study is that it allowed the identification of the voices of the participating students, their position on disability and the structure of their representation, issues that have practical effects and are of great importance for curricular designs and professional training programs that consider the students' demands. In this regard, Vásquez et al. (2025) mention that it is necessary to adjust the curriculum of physical education degrees, so that they relate to the demands of the contemporary educational environment.

Regarding the training process on disability in professionals in the field of physical education, Paz et al. (2023) conducted a content analysis of the curricular designs of professional training programs in Peru, finding three fundamental factors to promote inclusive educational processes, namely, flexibility in the curricula, school management and information and research on the characteristics of students with special educational needs, for which it is necessary to identify the barriers that may be present in academic spaces.

The results denote, at the same time, a relationship with the professional training process in which the subjects investigated are immersed, since their object of study focuses on pedagogical, didactic and disciplinary components, in which the body, movement, body expression, health and practice are relevant issues (Marín & Muñoz, 2023). In this way, disability can be conceived from the possibility, since issues such as capacity, adaptation and condition invite to understand that people with disabilities have in themselves potentialities and aptitudes that, if well oriented, can achieve adequate and adjusted objectives in different scenarios.

Continuing with the methodological type from the structural approach of social representations, it can be postulated that disability is associated fundamentally with limitation (100%) and inclusion (66.78%), components directly linked to the object of study, likewise, words such as

diversity (54.20%), impairment (22.95%), capacity (19.47%) and difference (11.90%) emerge. In correspondence with these results, Alulima et al. (2022) in a quantitative descriptive study surveyed 180 Ecuadorian teachers and academic authorities, finding that the perception of disability is directly linked to the relationship of these actors in the educational context, therefore, learning about this category is connected to the experience and inclusive processes in which they have participated.

One of the relevant findings is that the social representations on disability in the university context come especially according to the same students surveyed, from professors and fellow students, internal and external academic conventions to the university institution, technological and computer media, academic texts and databases, which reveals a considerable plurality in the way students obtain their knowledge, which will be socialized with other people.

Finally, it is expected that as subsequent lines and works of research in which the methodological design and the structural approach of social representations are used, projects will be generated in fields of knowledge in which disability is linked to health, participation, educational inclusion, caregivers of people with disabilities and adapted sport, strengthening the studies on this construct and promoting the methodological approach applied in this study.

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