Medical Xpress

# Taking sightlessness for a spin can harm people's attitudes toward blindness

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Using simulation to walk in the shoes of a person who is blind—such as wearing a blindfold while performing everyday tasks—has negative effects on people's perceptions of the visually impaired, according to a University of Colorado Boulder study.

"When people think about what it would be like to be blind, they take from their own brief and relatively superficial experience and imagine it would be really, really terrible and that they wouldn't be able to function well," said Arielle Silverman, who is lead author of the paper and blind. She conducted the research as part of her doctoral dissertation in CU-Boulder's Department of Psychology and Neuroscience and now is a postdoctoral researcher at the University of Washington in Seattle.

In one part of the study, after simulating blindness by having their eyes covered, participants believed people who are blind are less capable of work and independent living than did participants who simulated other impairments like amputation, or had no impairment.

In another part of the study, participants who were blindfolded said they would be less capable if they personally became blind and slower to adjust to their new world compared with study participants who weren't blindfolded.

The findings, published online in *Social Psychological and Personality Science*, demonstrate the self-centered nature with which people reflect on other's difficulties.

The findings also show that blindness simulations—typically meant to be bridge-builders resulting in compassion and understanding—can sometimes harm rather than help attitudes.

Silverman became interested in studying the effects of blindness simulations in part because of her own interactions with strangers enthusiastically wanting to help her navigate her way across a street, for example.

"I noticed and wondered why people who've never met a blind person before seem to intuitively have good attitudes toward blind people and people who tell me they have interacted with a blind person before tend to seem more condescending," she said.

Blindness simulations are often used to train teachers and professionals in other fields who are preparing to work with people with visual impairments.

There also are variations on blindness simulations—activities that are implemented with good intentions but that can exploit blindness, said Silverman. These include trust walks—typically used as a group bonding exercise—and blind cafes, where diners are blindfolded and dine in the dark.

More than 100 undergraduate CU-Boulder students participated in the study, some of whom were blindfolded and performed tasks like walking across a room or down a hallway; figuring out that a water pitcher they were given had a closed spout, opening it and then filling a glass as full as possible without overflowing; and sorting coins into groups of common denominations.

Afterward, all of the participants, some of whom were not blindfolded or had different impairments, completed questionnaires asking about

their competency perceptions of blind people as well as themselves if they were to become blind.

Jason Gwinn, also a CU-Boulder doctoral student in psychology at the time of the study, and Leaf Van Boven, professor of psychology at CU-Boulder, co-authored the paper.

A blindness simulation that might improve people's attitudes would go further than the typical activity and teach people good strategies for adapting to blindness, said Silverman. Developing friendships with people with disabilities and in other underrepresented groups, perhaps through team-building exercises, also is a good strategy, she said.

Another important consideration when it comes to evaluating the effectiveness of simulations is the fact that the built world and social environments are not designed for people with disabilities.

"A lot of the disability that I experience has nothing to do with not being able to see," said Silverman. "Instead, it's because I can't access something like a poorly designed website, for example.

"So if there's a way for simulations to capture how much difficulty is caused by the social environment and the built world, this could improve attitudes and help people understand that those with disabilities are just as competent as they are."

Provided by University of Colorado at Boulder