

Introduction

- Misconceptions associated with learning differences can create unique barriers to success for students in higher education. [3]
- Students with L/AD graduate at lower rates when compared to students without L/AD. [1]
- Factors that contribute to challenges include stigma, low self-esteem, and lack of knowledge among teachers, family, and peers. [2]
- Without adequate support and sufficient understanding of L/AD challenges, students with L/AD can struggle emotionally, academically, and socially. [3]
- Purpose: Obtain an in-depth understanding of stigmatizing experiences from the perspective of postsecondary students with L/AD.**

Methods

- Data were from a larger prospective cohort study that analyzed the role of mentorship for undergraduate students (CS³LD Project).
- Participants were 52 undergraduate students with L/AD in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math) majors.
- Secondary analysis of 30 transcripts from student focused group discussions and responses to focused questions was conducted.
- Conceptual thematic analysis was used whereby data were analyzed, coded, conceptualized, and organized into categorical and thematic findings to enhance understanding.
- Thematic classification was used to label and reframe the phenomena related to stigma. [6]

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Results

| Misunderstanding | Definition | Impact |
|--|---|--|
| L/AD "Can be Stopped" (Extent of L/AD) | Others' beliefs that L/AD can be controlled or cured. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Misunderstanding involuntary behavior can make students feel guilty and frustrated. Feeling misunderstood can lead to issues with discipline in the classroom and negative feelings about self. |
| L/AD "Reflects Intelligence" (Impact of L/AD) | Misunderstanding that L/AD affects a person's intelligence: making them less intelligent than those without LD. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Undermining the student results in feelings of inferiority and self-doubt. Students may question their intelligence or seek to prove themselves to others. |
| L/AD is "Not Real" (Existence of L/AD) | Misconception that LD is not real because it is not physically manifested. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Societal ignorance can make students feel rejected and may cause them to harbor negative feelings that they need to cope with internally. |

"It would be nice if people would understand not only is it something that I can't control but it is something that is frustrating for me as well."
- U24

"People...assume that because I am slow, I am stupid or incompetent, but I understand things really well when given enough time."
- U7

"People sometimes said that LD doesn't exist. Because you cannot like physically see anything."
- U45

"I still struggle having an LD, I feel as if people think I use my LD as a crutch or an excuse when realistically it's something I struggle with daily."
- U3

Discussion

- Misconceptions fell within three primary classifications, those that were related to the extent of L/AD, the impact of L/AD, and the existence of L/AD.
- Stigmatization became internalized as self-doubt, resentment, and negative self-perception, which had to be overcome by the student in order to remain successful in college.
- While misconceptions challenged personal identity, stigma also provided an opportunity for participants to articulate a definition for themselves that centered on positive aspects of having L/AD.
- Participants were able to exhibit self-reflection and self-advocacy in response to stigma as a way to come to terms with their diagnostically-related challenges and gain a better understanding of their diagnosis.
- Findings from this study capture positive interpersonal coping strategies as a result of stigma such as self-advocacy, self-reflection, and self-acceptance.

Clinical Implications

- Students with L/AD experience a broad range of stigmatizing misconceptions about their L/AD which can negatively impact self-esteem and decrease disclosure of diagnosis.
- Without adequate support to manage stigma, negative perceptions and lower expectations of students with LD can create barriers to achievement in school and in society.
- In order to create individualized strategies and interventions to assist the student to cope with their diagnosis in-depth, further understanding of the lived experience of students with LD is required.

References

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