

External Perspectives on Intellectually Inter-Abled Romantic Relationships

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By

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Abstract

This study qualitatively explored participant's thoughts, opinions, and attitudes regarding intellectually inter-abled romantic relationships. An intellectually inter-abled romantic relationship is a romantic relationship where one partner has an intellectual disability, and the other partner does not. Eleven participants individually participated in one in-person interview with a median length of 37 minutes. These interviews consisted of open-ended questions based on an interview guide created by the researcher which sought out the participant's thoughts, opinions, and attitudes regarding intellectually inter-abled relationships. This guide can be found in Appendix A. This data was analyzed using grounded theory analysis, which is an inductive approach with a goal of categorizing the data into themes and creating a substantive theory based on the data set. The themes that emerged were societal judgment, taking advantage, amplified struggles and solutions, put like and like together, and who am I to judge; love is love. The substantive theory that arose from the data is as follows: Generation Z college students are generally accepting of intellectually inter-abled romantic relationships as long as the person with the intellectual disability can undoubtedly give true informed consent and is not being taken advantage of.

External Perspectives on Intellectually Inter-abled Romantic Relationships

Study Rationale

In our progressive society, we have fought to become more and more accepting of all different types of relationships (non-heterosexual, interracial, etc.) and more accepting of intellectual disabilities. However, we have yet to see, research, or even consider the possibility of intellectually inter-abled relationships. The goal of this study is to explore people's thoughts, opinions, and attitudes on intellectually inter-abled romantic relationships, and explore why we don't see or talk about these types of relationships. As with much qualitative research, the goal of this study is begin the conversation surrounding intellectually inter-abled relationships in an attempt to answer these questions.

Definition of Intellectual Disability

'Intellectual disability is characterized by significant limitations both in intellectual functioning and adaptive behavior as expressed in conceptual, social, and practical adaptive skills. This disability originates during the developmental period, which is defined operationally as before the individual attains age 22. There are five assumptions that are essential to the application of the definition, 1. Limitations in present functioning must be considered within the context of community environments typical of the individual's age peers and culture, 2. Valid Assessment considers cultural and linguistic diversity as well as sensory, motor, and behavioral factors, 3. Within an individual, limitations often coexist with strengths, 4. An important purpose of describing limitations is to develop a profile of needed supports, 5. With appropriate personalized supports over a sustained period, the life functioning of a person with ID

[intellectual disability] generally will improve' (Schalock et al., 2021). Intellectual disability can be a result of several different factors, such as a chromosomal abnormality, neonatal complications, malnutrition, use of alcohol/drugs during pregnancy, infections shortly after birth, and lead poisoning to name a few (Shree & Shulka, 2016). A few examples of disorders that often, but not always, result in intellectual disability are Down Syndrome, Autism Spectrum Disorder, and Fetal Alcohol Syndrome (Anjum et al., 2023).

Stigmatization and Discrimination of the Intellectually Disabled

People with intellectual disability are often stigmatized and fall victim to discrimination. This stigmatization stems from the principle that people generally do not want to associate with other people that are different from them. These so called 'differences' are often based on harmful stereotypes and prejudices. In the case of intellectual disability, one of the most common stereotypes that fuels discrimination is that people with intellectual disability are childlike. This 'us versus them' mentality is often the underlying cause of bullying, teasing, and exclusion of people with intellectual disabilities (Hoetz, 2021). This stigma and exclusion of people with intellectual disability, especially when it is based on the stereotype that people with intellectual disability are childlike, is especially evident when it comes to romantic and sexual relationships.

Societal Perception on Romance and Sexuality in People with Intellectual Disabilities

Desire and expression of sexuality and romance is generally agreed to be a natural and normal human right for adults. However, for adults with intellectual disabilities, expression of romance and sexuality is often not allowed and is highly taboo. Intellectually disabled adults historically have been labeled as asexual and assumed to not have interest in sexual relationships

(Correa et. at 2021). In one study, about half of participants thought that people with intellectual disability did not have the right to a sexual relationship (Mcconkey & Leavy, 2013). This ideology that intellectually disabled people should not have sex is called sexual ableism (Bahner, 2023). Despite sexual ableism, ‘individuals with ID [intellectual disability] desire and value romantic relationships and perceive these as fulfilling needs identified by classic theories of romantic love as key, such as companionship, love, support, passion, sexual intimacy, communication and commitment’ (Charitou et al., 2023). One study reported that 82.4% of adults with intellectual disability have had at least one sexual relationship in their lifetime (Gillario et al., 2017) and another study reported that 35% of people with intellectual disability were currently in a romantic relationship, and 85% of people with intellectual disability desired a romantic relationship (Heifetz et al., 2019).

Romance and Sexuality Being ‘Impractical’ for People with Intellectual Disabilities

If people with intellectual disabilities report desiring and engaging in romantic and sexual relationships, why is it exactly that non-disabled people view people with intellectual disabilities as asexual and believe they should not engage in these types of relationships? One reason is the belief that sexual pleasure is not a ‘practical’ intervention for a person with a disability. It is a common belief that everything a person with an intellectual disability should do should have a practical outcome. For example, taking a shower has the practical outcome of being clean, and getting on a public bus has the practical outcome of being able to go to the store. However, to many people, the outcome of sex being pleasure is not considered a practical one, and therefore it is believed that intellectually disabled people should not engage in sex (Alexander & Gomez, 2017). There are also concerns regarding potential unplanned pregnancies, sexual abuse, and

sexually transmitted infections that could arise from sexual contact. It also has been reported that families and support workers for people with intellectual disabilities are simply uncomfortable with this population having sex, and therefore they do not want to discuss safe sex options with them. Instead, they choose to not discuss sex with their intellectually disabled family members and supportees any further than telling simply abstain. There is also the concern that people with intellectual disabilities can't make informed decisions regarding their sexual and romantic lives. While it is true that more severe cases of intellectual disability can result in the individual not being able to make informed decisions about their sexual and romantic lives, many people on the milder end (which is roughly 90% of people with intellectual disability) are completely capable of making these types of decisions (Bahner et al. 2023).

Intellectually Inter-Abled Romantic Relationship Gap

While there has been some research regarding the sexual and romantic desires and relationships in people with intellectual disabilities and outside perspectives of it, there is a gap in the research when it comes to people with an intellectual disability being in a romantic relationship with someone without an intellectual disability. The goal of this research study is to fill this gap and gather information about people's thoughts, opinions, and attitudes regarding intellectually inter-abled relationships. The goal is to simply get people thinking about this topic and start the conversation surrounding it.

Method

Participants

This study consisted of eleven participants. The participation requirements were kept minimal; participants had to be at least 18 years old and be fluent in English. Participants' ages ranged from 19-23 years old, and they were all students enrolled in SUNY Brockport. Nine were undergraduate students and two were graduate students. Six participants self-identified as men, five as women, and two as non-binary. Six participants identified their sexual orientation as straight, two gay/lesbian, one demisexual and one as pansexual. Ten participants self-identified as white and two of them specified they were Hispanic, and one identified as black. Five participants never worked with people with intellectual disabilities, five with children with intellectual disabilities, and two with adults and children with intellectual disabilities.

Participant Recruitment

Full approval from the SUNY Brockport International Review Board was received before recruitment and data collection began. Prior to data collection, participants were recruited through convenience sampling. Convenience sampling simply means recruiting participants who are easily available to the researcher (Etikan et al., 2015). The researcher used a verbal script to ask people they knew if they may be interested in participating. The script included basic information about the study, including that it was about perceptions of relationships, but no mention of intellectual disabilities to keep the study single-blind. The script also included the commitment to the study, including an approximate one-hour long, in-person, fully confidential interview. Once data collection and analysis began, the researcher began to recruit more participants using gradual theoretical sampling. Gradual theoretical sampling occurs once data collection and analysis has begun and involves actively recruiting participants based on the emerging codes and themes. Specifically, recruiting participants who share the same particular characteristic or experience as the participant(s) who contributed to the emerging theme(s) that the researcher believes is responsible for that participant's contribution. It is done to increase rigor by exploring representativeness an emerging theme(s) to see if it truly exists or not (Coyne, 1997). For example, in this study, halfway through the study the researcher began to recruit participants who had experience working with adults with intellectual disabilities. This was done because one participant had this experience, and they gave unique insight that the other participants who did not have this experience did not. Gradual theoretical sampling allowed for the emerging themes to strengthen and increased representation and rigor overall within the study.

Data Collection

Before data collection, participants had to read and sign an electronic consent form. With participant consent, the interviews were audio recorded using the researcher's password protected iPhone. Participants were informed that they could skip any question or end the interview at any time if they wanted to, and that they would not be asked why or pressured to continue. The researcher served as the interviewer for every participant. Participants were asked a series of standard demographic questions, and then asked questions from/based on the interview guide, then asked a few more demographic questions about if they had worked with individuals with intellectual disabilities before, and if they had any family or friends with an intellectual disability. These demographic questions were asked at the end to prevent priming before the interview. The interview guide, named The Questionnaire on Perceptions of Hypothetical Inter-Intellectually Abled Romantic Relationships, was created by the researcher and consisted of 13 questions related to the participants' thoughts, opinions, and attitudes on intellectually inter-abled romantic relationships. Alongside the 13 questions, the interviewer asked questions that they came up with in the moment based on the participant's previous answers. This was done to gather as much accurate data as possible, ensure the interviewer fully understood the participant's answers, give the participant a chance to elaborate on their answer (if they so chose), and create a more conversational style interview. The interviews lasted between 22 minutes and 1 hour and 7 minutes, with a median interview time of 37 minutes. Every interview concluded with the option for the participant to contribute anything else they wanted to add and to ask the interviewer any questions they may have.

Coding

After the completion of each interview, the audio recordings were transcribed using Microsoft Word, and the interviewer read through each transcription and corrected any errors

from the transcript. Participants' names were removed and replaced with their respective participant numbers to maintain confidentiality. Once the interviews were transcribed and all errors were corrected, they were analyzed using coding. The first five interviews were coded using line-by-line in vivo coding, meaning that the researcher read each line of conversation and wrote down the most important key words from each line. Once the researcher felt confident in their coding abilities, they switched to simply highlighting the most important key words from each line of conversation to increase efficiency. This was done for the last six interviews and did not include the demographic questions, unless the answers from the demographic questions included something potentially important to the creation of emerging themes. After each transcription session and coding session for each interview, the researcher wrote a memo. Memos included potential emerging themes, relationships with other interviews, what went well during the interview, what didn't go so well, what could be improved, how to improve the next interview, and who should be recruited next based on theoretical sampling.

Theming

Every three to four interviews, the researcher reviewed the codes and memos from each interview and categorized them into emerging themes. The researcher sought thoughts, opinions, and attitudes that were consistent across most participants. At the conclusion of the theming process, the researcher found five overarching themes and two subthemes; societal judgment, taking advantage, amplified struggles and solutions with subthemes of caretaker complex and parenting, put like and like together, and who am I to judge; love it love.

Member Checking

Member checking was implemented once the final themes were created. Member checking is a way to increase rigor and validity in qualitative research by ensuring the final results are credible. It involves providing the participants with the final themes and asking them if they believe these themes accurately reflect and resonate with their beliefs (Birt et al., 2016). The researcher asked each participant at the end of their interview if they would be open to member checking and explained what it would entail. Participants were informed that if they felt the themes did not resonate with their thoughts and opinions, they were welcome to discuss their concerns with the researcher through email, phone call, Zoom call, or in an in-person meeting. All 11 participants agreed to member checking. Upon completion of creating the final themes, the researcher emailed each participant the themes and asked them if these themes accurately reflected their beliefs. Only two participants responded to the member checking, and both stated that the themes accurately represented and resonated with their thoughts and opinions on the research topic.

Results

Societal Judgment

Every Participant discussed how they believed an intellectually inter-abled couple would receive lots of negative judgment from society. Participants talked about how society tends to not be approving of anything that is out of the 'ordinary', especially regarding relationships. They talked about how family, friends, and strangers may think the relationship is odd and may disapprove of the relationship. 'Because it [an intellectually inter-abled relationship] is different and they [society] doesn't like different...It could be hard just going out in public and displaying your relationship. Others judge silently by stares and others judge loudly by saying something' (Participant 7). When asked further why society may be so judgmental towards intellectually

inter-abled couples, participants mentioned how society is discriminatory towards intellectually disabled people, and they generally view them as incapable. 'They [society] believe that they're [people with intellectual disabilities] not as capable of doing stuff on their own' (Participant 1).

When asked how the couple could overcome the negative judgment from others, every participant said the couple should simply ignore it. 'Ignoring it, literally just ignoring it like people are gonna hate regardless. So like, you just gotta like, literally in one ear and out the other. Just don't listen to it. It's not anybody else's relationship, it's yours'. (Participant 4)

Taking Advantage

The largest concern participants had regarding intellectually inter-abled relationships was the fear that the disabled partner may get taken advantage of by the non-disabled partner.

Participants feared that the disabled partner may get taken advantage of in a myriad of ways; emotionally, financially, mentally, and most importantly, sexually. Participants were afraid that an intellectually disabled person may not have the intellectual ability to give true informed consent for sexual activity and may be coerced into having sex. 'There's a lot of risk of them [intellectually disabled people] being taken advantage of and certain individuals should be protected from that because they're in a compromising position and they aren't able to protect themselves...they could get manipulated into doing things they don't necessarily want'

(Participant 5). Many participants stated that non-disabled people should only get romantically/sexually involved with an intellectually disabled person if the disabled person can give true informed consent, and this would depend on the severity of their disability. '...there are various, I was gonna say like a scale, but like levels of intellectual disability and it fully depends on how, and I don't like the word functioning, but like depends on how able they are to understand what's happening. So if they are fully able to understand and consent, I don't see a

problem with it. But once you get into trickier disabilities like Down Syndrome like you were saying, sometimes they don't understand. And that's when it gets tricky'. (Participant 10). It also heavily depends on the intentions of the non-disabled person. If a non-disabled person is purposely seeking out individuals with an intellectual disability to be romantically/sexually involved with, that is *never* ok. Some participants mentioned non-disabled people may seek intellectually disabled people out due to a of a fetishization of disabled people, looking for an 'easy' way out, looking to control another person, pitying them, or they [non-disabled person] may want positive attention from others. 'They potentially might be taking advantage of the other person like sexually or for their money because they get the state. Sometimes. Some people get state like state health, disability, money and potentially maybe just like, maybe they that person might just like to control somebody else in a way.' (Participant 9) '...it's more like, trying to use the person with the disability to your...to try to make society look at you differently. Make it make it look like you're the better person' (Participant 2). However, if a person without an intellectual disability happened to meet someone with an intellectual disability naturally and they genuinely love and care about each other, then most participants agreed that it would be ok, and they would be at least mildly supportive of the relationship. 'Unless you met the person [with an ID] naturally, I guess like, OK, that's one thing, I could see how maybe you're not doing it to be malicious. But if you're a grown person seeking out people with disabilities, to me, that's perverted' (Participant 8). Overall, a person with an intellectual disability potentially being taken advantage of, specifically sexually, was a massive concern for every participant. However, if the disabled person could give informed consent and was not being taken advantage of participants were ok with a person without an intellectual disability dating a person with an intellectual disability.

Amplified Struggles and Solutions

When asked what struggles an intellectually inter-abled couple would face, many participants began to detail struggles, and then stopped and said they realized that many of these struggles were struggles that many non-intellectually inter-abled couples face. However, they clarified and said that these struggles would likely just be more intense in an intellectually inter-abled couple than in a normatively abled couple. The main struggles detailed were issues with communication, differences in lifestyle, difficulty raising children, and one partner potentially having to take care of the other partner (this will be elaborated on more in the subtheme, caregiver complex). 'Every relationship has complications at the beginning where you have to kind of vibe each other out. I think with an inter-abled couple they definitely have to focus on things like communication and understanding...getting on the same level of kind of understanding what they want from the relationship together. Which is something that all couples have to go through anyway, but it might be slightly harder [for an intellectually inter-abled couple]' (Participant 10). Complications surrounding communication was the biggest struggle that participants felt an intellectually inter-abled couple would face, since many intellectually disabled individuals struggle with communication. Participants felt that communication is integral for any relationship to prosper, so having a communication deficit may prove very difficult in a relationship. 'That is what a relationship is, effective communication and problem solving. If that's lacking, then trust lacks respect, lacks. And then that's just an overall unhealthy relationship. Poor mental health on both' (Participant 7). For differences in lifestyle, concerns were raised about the intellectually disabled partner possibly needing a slower pace, a more regimented routine, not being able to work, and being unable to do certain tasks. 'Now there's an extreme schedule that you have to follow, or life moves at a slower pace. You have to explain

things and you have to adapt to this' (Participant 8). Many participants were concerned that these lifestyle differences may be difficult, because the disabled partner may not be able to adapt their lifestyle, and it may be difficult for the non-disabled partner to adapt to their partner's needs. When asked about the couple having and raising children together, many participants had concerns. Some participants feared that the intellectually disabled partner may not be able to appropriately take care of the child, and that could be a dangerous situation for the child. 'There's like specific things you have to give a newborn, nutrition and stuff like that. That's like you don't know if you're the disabled person. You just don't really have an understanding of that stuff because you're not as smart. So you kind of mess up your because, your kids' now missing his needs as a newborn. And then that kind of just messing with his health or the baby's health.' (Participant 4). Many participants mentioned that all parents struggle with parenting in one way or another. However, they explained that it would be even more difficult for an intellectually inter-abled couple due to the one parent having an intellectual disability.

When asked how intellectually inter-abled couples could overcome some of these struggles, participants stressed the importance of communication. Specifically, learning how to effectively communicate with one another where one person struggles with communication. Participants suggested when having conversations, especially about informed consent for sexual activity, they should be long and in depth to ensure proper understanding. 'I think it [conversations about potential sexual encounters] would just need to be a lot longer and more specific [compared to typical couples]' (Participant 6). Many participants also discussed that it would be wise for the non-disabled partner to educate themselves on their partner's disability, how it affects them, and what they specifically need help with. 'Knowing what help they do need, knowing what potential struggles they have with their daily life' (Participant 9) , 'How their [the

intellectually disabled partner] emotions are. How do they feel? How are they communicating with each other, body language, eye contact. If they're able to do a task, see how they are interacting with different people or different things in their environments. Just the general insight of how these people with intellectual disabilities, how they interact and getting a general sense of the patterns of each individual' (Participant 11).

Subtheme: Parenting

As mentioned before, participants had many concerns about intellectually inter-abled couples having and raising children. When asked how they could work through the obstacles surrounding parenting, every participant said the exact same thing; get support from family. Participants also mentioned getting support from friends, the community, and daycare. 'Support from family, friends, daycare or even just classes on how to start taking care [of children]. (Participant 10). Participants also suggested the intellectually disabled parent attempt to educate themselves on how to effectively parent. Participants suggested taking parenting classes, watching YouTube videos, reading books, and asking others for advice. 'Maybe try to educate yourself...on everything you need to know about having a kid. How to take care of it. Nutrition for the baby, how to take care of it, how to hold it. Basics. What not to do especially. That's important... you could talk to your doctor about it...and YouTube...' (Participant 4). Even though participants were worried about a person with an intellectual disability raising a child, many agreed that as long as they utilized necessary supports and the child was well taken care of, they were supportive of them having children. I would say there will be, but that goes for any parents that there is definitely barriers for any parent that goes through raising a kid, especially if an intellectual, person with this disability, were to raise a child and you know it's a huge responsibility. But you know, that's part of the being educated about how to raise a baby and also

how to cope with this individual raising a baby too, and I feel like it is possible. It is plausible. It will definitely be...there will definitely be barriers raising a kid, you know. But you know, I feel like they're capable of doing it (Participant 11).

Subtheme: Caregiver Complex

Many participants raised concerns about the non-disabled partner potentially having to take care of their disabled partner. This is something that can occur in normative relationships, but participants felt was much more probable in an intellectually inter-abled relationship. Due to the one partner's intellectual disability, they may not be able to work, take care of their children independently, and may require substantial help with certain daily tasks. This would cause the non-disabled partner to have to work full time, take care of their children, and take care of their partner. 'If the person, the person with a disability, can't work, and the other person has to work, there could be an issue if the person also with the disability can't really take care of them by themselves, so you would always have to find someone to take care of the babies and the children while you're, the person without the disability is at work' (Participant 2). This large of a load would likely cause the non-disabled partner to become overwhelmed and burn out, and could make it feel as if the non-disabled partner is the disabled partner's caregiver rather than their lover, which would be unideal for both parties. 'You [person without an ID] may feel like their [person with ID] aide as well, so are you comfortable being their aid at that point?...There's many relationships where one person needs help and their caretaker is their spouse, and it takes a toll on the caretaker' (Participant 7). 'I feel like I am naturally like a caretaker, so I wouldn't want them to feel like I'm just there to take care of them...it could turn into just me taking care of them instead of giving them the relationship they deserve' (Participant 9). To prevent a caregiver complex from developing, participants suggested the couple set boundaries. 'I think definitely

you have to set boundaries and making sure like you're only doing what they ask you to do and not doing more than that' (Participant 9). Thus, participants feared that being in an intellectually inter-abled relationship could cause the relationship to feel more like a caregiver-supportee relationship, which could be hard on both partners individually, as well strain the relationship overall.

Put Like and Like Together

Many participants mentioned that intellectually disabled people may prefer to date another individual with an intellectual disability over someone without an intellectual disability. Many participants brought up how having an intellectual disability can pose unique challenges and life experiences that can only be understood by others who have intellectual disability. By dating someone who has also gone through those same one-of-a-kind experiences and has faced similar struggles, it could allow for both partners to be able to understand and relate to one another better. This increase in understanding and relatability, which could in turn increase emotional intimacy. 'The more you like relate to someone the closer you would be. And then I feel like it would just make the relationship stronger. Like similar life experiences' (Participant When asked to describe what these unique challenges and life experiences looked like, participants mentioned bullying, facing outside judgment, experiencing growing up (various doctor's appointments, being in special education, etc.), learning struggles, how they think, and how their disability affects them. 'They [someone with an intellectual disability] might prefer someone that has gone through the same things...so like the same support systems like possibly going through the same schooling, so more experiential things that they've undergone because of their disability' (Participant 3).

Who am I to Judge; Love is Love

While opinions were across a spectrum, every participant was at least somewhat accepting of intellectually inter-abled relationships, under the idea that it isn't anyone's business who someone chooses to date. As long as the person with the intellectual disability was not being taken advantage of in any way, participants were ok with intellectually inter-abled relationships. 'If that's [person with an ID] who they [person without an ID] want to be with, that's fine. I don't judge people for that. Two adults and they're both in a relationship and it's viable for both of them, who am I to say anything...there's nothing I would disapprove of...be careful that it's a protected population and they're susceptible to abuse and that type of thing and it's important to keep the person with the disability's best interest in mind.' (Participant 5). Many participants admitted they would not personally date someone with an intellectual disability, they were ok with other people choosing to do so, because they believed people should have the right to date whoever they want. 'I mean go for it [dating someone with an intellectual disability. I'm not one to judge, you know. Like that's not my life. You do you if that makes you happy go crazy. I mean what I think that's different? Yes. Would it take me some time to like, get used to it, but I'm sure like once I meet the person like they'll be great. So I'm no one to judge' (Participant 7). Hence, participants believed everyone has the right to their own volition when choosing who to be romantically involved with, as long as the disabled person is not being taken advantage of.

Discussion

Societal Judgment

Participants believing intellectually inter-abled couples would face judgment from society is very aligned with the current research. Society is generally very disapproving of any relationship that is not an able-bodied heterosexual relationship between two people of the same race (Kerney, 2021), (Morris, 2019). That said, generation Z tends to be more accepting and

supportive of diversity, which explains why the participants were generally supportive (Pichler et al., 2021). Society also tends to be very discriminatory towards people with intellectual disabilities. Society as a whole tends to believe that intellectually disabled people are incapable of doing things that non-disabled people typically do, such as being in a romantic relationship (Conrad, 2018).

Taking Advantage

Every participant was very concerned about the person with an intellectual disability potentially getting taken advantage of in an inter-abled relationship, and rightfully so, because intellectually disabled people are at an increased risk for abuse, especially sexual abuse. Even though 90% of people with intellectual disabilities can give informed consent, they are still at risk for being sexually abused (Bahner et al., 2023). Roughly 33% percent of intellectually disabled adults are sexually abused in their adulthood, meaning they experience a pattern of repeated sexual assault by the same offender (Tomsa et al., 2021). Women with developmental disabilities (which encompasses intellectual disabilities) are more likely to experience sexual, emotional, and physical inter-partner violence than non-disabled women, and the abuse often lasts longer and is more severe. Women with developmental disabilities who experience this abuse may not be able to recognize it as abuse, even if they do, not know how to report it due to their cognitive deficits. They are more likely to be dependent on their partner to help them with daily tasks and finances and find it difficult to leave due to this elevated level of dependence. (Paluski, et al., 2014). People with intellectual disabilities being taken advantage of is nothing new. Historically, people with disabilities have been viewed as subhuman or freaks (i.e., court jesters, freak shows). Some able-bodied people fetishize disabled people, want to have control/power over them, make fun of them, and enjoy pitying them (Ebrahim, 2014).

Amplified Struggles and Solutions

Research supports that the struggles that participants believed intellectually inter-abled couples may face, typical couples also face. The main difficulty participants felt intellectually inter-abled couples would face in their relationship is communication. Communication is an integral part of every relationship. It is necessary to initiate the relationship, find similarities, express how the partners feel about each other, and work through conflict. Communication is what defines a relationship, and without effective communication, the relationship will struggle (Vangelisti, 2002). In typical couples, lack of effective communication is one of the largest issues that negatively affects relationships and drives couples to seek counseling (Olarde, 2012). With intellectually disabled couples, this likely would be heightened due to intellectually disabled people being at high risk for having communication deficits. It is estimated that 58% of adults with an intellectual disability have some sort of communication deficit, and 24% have a severe communication deficit (Garcia et al., 2020). Therefore, having a lack of effective communication would be more difficult for an intellectually inter-abled couple, and this could cause challenges for the couple and negatively affect the relationship. To overcome this, the couples should focus on developing effective communication tactics by working with a communication specialist. After being evaluated, the specialist will give specific suggestions on how the couple should communicate with one another to maximize effective communication. This may include setting up structured opportunities in their natural environments to practice communicating, providing the disabled person with choices, using communication books, scripted routines, and schedules with pictures. It also may be suggested that the disabled person use an augmentative communication device (AAC) and continue working with the specialist to ensure both partners know how to use it correctly. (Bray & Grad, 2003). Communication is an essential aspect of a

prosperous relationship. With one partner potentially having a communication deficit, it may cause challenges within the relationship. However, if proper support is sought out, the couple may be able to push through this barrier and have effective communication.

Within communication, communication regarding sexual activity is especially important and requires unique considerations. To ensure the person with an intellectual disability can give informed consent, certain testing procedures should be implemented beforehand by a licensed clinician. Examples of these include the Lichtenberg and Strzeppek Instrument, Ames and Samowitz Instrument, Lyden approach, ABA/APA model, and Vancouver Coastal Health Authority themes. It should be ensured that both partners, but especially the disabled partner, meets all three legal criteria of consent, knowledge, intelligence, and voluntariness. Knowledge is defined as the recognition of the other person in the relationship, including who, what, where, and when and safety aspects of the sexual activity in question, such as the ability to identify body parts. Intelligence is defined as also known as rationality or understanding, which includes awareness of potential risks (pros and cons) of sexual engagement, appropriateness, consequences, correct familiarity of partner identity, and the ability to discriminate among fantasy, reality, lies, and truth. Voluntariness is defined as the decisional capability to engage or refrain from sexual activity and the ability to take self-protective measures against abuse and exploitation or other unwanted advances. This includes the ability to say “no,” either verbally or nonverbally and the ability to remove oneself from the situation when either they or their partner indicates stopping sexual behavior. It is also advised to take a holistic approach. Individualize communication to the disabled person's ability, evaluate their communication ability, allow the disabled person to lead the conversation, discuss sexual values, cultural/religious values, seek

opinions from family and friends and focus on the current situation. (Esmail & Concannon, 2020).

Subtheme: Parenting

When it comes to parenting, there are concerns about a person with an intellectual disability raising a child. About 7% of people with an intellectual disability have at least one child, and they may require assistance taking care of a child and learning how to take care of a child. They may require the information to be taught in an individualized way that they can understand (Morris & Walters, 2006). The use of parenting books designed for parents with intellectual disabilities has also been suggested to be effective (Coren et al., 2010).

Subtheme: Caregiver Complex

Participants mentioned that due to people with intellectual disabilities often requiring support with daily tasks, their partner may have to caregiver for them. This could make the relationship feel less like a romantic relationship and more like a caretaker-suportee relationship, which is unideal for both partners. It could also cause the non-disabled partner to burn out and face carer burden. Carer burden is when a carer becomes stressed out physically, emotionally, and mentally from being a caretaker. It can lead to increased anxiety and depression, and decreased quality of life. If the caretaker is the suportee's spouse, it can put strain on their relationship. While carer burden hasn't been looked at in intellectually inter-abled relationships, it has been researched and documented in physically inter-abled relationships (Cheung & Hocking, 2004).

Put Like and Like Together

Participants mentioned how they believed intellectually disabled people may prefer to be in romantic relationships with other intellectually disabled people. This viewpoint could be explained by society, often implicitly, believing that people should have social relationships, including romantic ones, with other people in the same entitativity (Castano et al., 2003). Entitativity is a feeling of “group-ness” for social units. It is a way for people to categorize the social units they observe (i.e., other people) or in which they participate (i.e., are members themselves) (Campbell, 1958). Participants mentioned that people with intellectual disabilities may prefer to date others with intellectual disabilities because they may be able to understand each other better. Research suggests that intimate relationships between people with disabilities can allow for greater understanding of one another and lead to a feeling of comradery and greater self-acceptance since they have experienced similar situations (Friedman, 2019).

Who am I Judge; Love is Love

Every participant (who were all a part of generation Z) mentioned that they would be at least somewhat accepting of an intellectually inter-abled relationship, and believed they have the right to a relationship. This is an accurate representation of generation Z. Generation Z is generally very open and accepting of all different types of people, and actively values, promotes, and supports diversity (Pichler et al., 2021). This level of acceptance could potentially be explained by Gen Z being the first generation to grow up with sophisticated internet access. This ability to become easily exposed to a wide variety of people and cultures all around the world starting from a young age is what is theorized to have caused Gen Z to be not just accepting of diversity, but to truly value and recognize the importance of it (De Witte, 2022).

Limitations

The main limitation of this study was social desirability bias. Social desirability bias is when a participant answers a question in a way that does not reflect their true beliefs, but rather in a way they believe is socially acceptable. This is done to avoid potential negative judgment from others (Bispo, 2022). Due to the study not being anonymous, participants may have felt they could not express any negative attitudes regarding intellectually inter-abled relationships out of fear that the interviewer may judge them. Even though the interviewer made it clear at the beginning of the interview and reminded participants throughout the interview that there would be no judgment for any of their answers, it is human nature to fear judgment. ‘Well, I don't want to sound politically incorrect...’ (Participant 7).

Another limitation was that the sample diversity was limited in some aspects. All participants were Generation Z SUNY Brockport students living in New York. Generation Z is generally a very open and accepting generation that actively values, promotes, and supports people’s differences compared to previous generations (Pichler, S., Kohli, C., & Granitz, N., 2021). New York is in the top half of the most inclusive states in the U.S., and having or currently getting a college education increases open-mindedness (Menendian, et al., 2023; Marketing, 2022). Therefore, this sample may have inaccurately represented how accepting the general population is of intellectually inter-abled relationships.

The final limitation is the lack of member checking. Only two out of the 11 participants responded to member checking, making it difficult to know if the final themes are an accurate representation of the participants’ beliefs.

Implications

The goal of grounded theory is for the researcher to develop a substantive theory based on the data. A substantive theory is a theoretical interpretation or explanation for the data and is exclusively based on the data collected and analyzed by the researcher (Tie et al., 2019). The substantive theory for this study is as follows; Generation Z college students are generally accepting of intellectually inter-abled romantic relationships as long as the person with the intellectual disability can undoubtedly give true informed consent and is not being taken advantage of. This theory is exemplified beautifully by Participant 6; 'I'd be happy if it [the relationship] was consensual. I'd report them to the police if it wasn't'.

Future Research

For future research, it would be wise to conduct the same study, but using a more diverse sample. A wider range of ages/generations, education levels, and geographic locations would be beneficial, since these characteristics were underrepresented in this study. This would greatly increase generalizability and potentially allow for a more diverse range of beliefs.

It would be extremely valuable to use an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) approach. IPA involves having the participants share their real lived experiences, how they understand these experiences, and how they believe these experiences have affected them. (Smith, 2011). IPA is a valuable research tactic because it allows the participants to share what is most meaningful to *them*, which is arguably the most important information to capture (Eatough & Smith, 2017). For future research regarding the study at hand, it would be valuable to use IPA to collect data from intellectually inter-abled couples and the people closest to them (friends,

family, support workers, etc). This would help gather first-hand accounts about what being in an intellectually inter-abled romantic relationship is like and what the people closest to them think about it and have witnessed regarding the relationship. While IPA would provide incredible insight, it is highly improbable due to the lack of intellectually inter-abled couples. Even if intellectually inter-abled couples were to be found, it would be difficult to gain IRB approval, due to people with intellectual disabilities being considered a vulnerable population and the discussion of potentially sensitive topics (bullying, sexuality, discrimination, etc).

To combat social desirability bias, it may be effective to conduct a completely anonymous version of the study. By not being in the presence of another person, participants are far less likely to fear social judgment (because there would be no one around to judge them) and they'd be more likely to be honest in their answers. This study could be conducted most easily through an anonymous online survey.

Conclusion

Overall, opinions regarding intellectually inte-abled romantic couples were across a wide spectrum. None of the participants were 100% supportive or 100% unsupportive of this type of relationship. Each participant showed at least some support in some aspects, and some concerns in other aspects. However, some participants were way more supportive than others and vice versa. Almost every participant unprompted claimed they thought the study was very interesting. Participants collectively claimed that they had previously never considered the possibility of intellectually inter-abled couples, and were glad that they had the opportunity to be exposed to the topic, learn about, discuss it, and begin to formulate an opinion on it. They spoke about how

this topic is something that is not discussed nearly enough, and should be discussed more. All in all, this study resulted in participants beginning to contemplate intellectually inter-abled couples, sparked interest in the topic, and began the conversation surrounding it, which was the overarching goal for of study.

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Appendix A

Questionnaire on Perceptions of Hypothetical Inter-Intellectually Abled Romantic Relationships

Hi my name is Vanessa and I am going to be asking you a few questions today for my research study. It will take about an hour.

Is it ok with you if I take an audio recording of our conversation?

Before we get started, I am going to have you read and sign a consent form. Let me know when you're done and I can show you how to electronically sign it.

Please answer all the questions as honestly as possible and from your personal point of view, not society's, unless I specifically ask about society. All of your answers will be confidential. If you ever want to skip a question, or end the interview at any time, please let me know and we will. If you choose to skip a question(s) or end the interview, I will not ask you why or pressure you to answer or keep going, we will simply skip the question(s) or end the interview with no questions asked.

Demographic Questions (beginning):

How old are you?

Would you consider yourself fluent in English?

What is your gender?

What is your sexual orientation?

What is your race?

What is your ethnicity?

What are/were your parents/guardians' jobs?

What is your religious/spiritual affiliation?

-Are you actively practicing?

Are you currently in a romantic relationship?

If they say NO: Have you ever been in a romantic relationship in the past?

Are you currently in college?

-What is your college major?

-What is your prospective career path?

What is your current job?

Interview Questions:

1) Are you familiar with the term 'intellectual disability'?

- Can you, to the best of your ability, describe it?

- I am going to give you a simple definition. Basically, an intellectual disability is when a person has an IQ below 70, which is very, very low, and a lack of adaptive behaviors, which are things such as daily living skills, planning, independent living, that sort of thing. Think of someone who has Down Syndrome.

Follow up: How confident are you in your understanding of intellectual disability? Do you need me to reexplain it?

- 2) Do you think it is ok for a person without an intellectual disability to date a person with an intellectual disability?'

Follow up: What made you come to that conclusion?

Follow up: Do you think it is ok for a person without an intellectual disability to *marry* a person with an intellectual disability?

- 3) Do you think people with an intellectual disability want to date people without an intellectual disability?

- 4) Do you think people without an intellectual disability want to date people with an intellectual disability?

- 5) What obstacles do you think an intellectually inter-abled couple would face?

Follow up: How do you think they could overcome those obstacles?

- 6) How would you feel if one of your friends who does not have an intellectual disability told you that they wanted to date someone with an intellectual disability?

- 7) What advice would you give your friend in that situation?

- 8) What are your thoughts on inter-intellectually abled couples having children?

Follow up: What obstacles do you think they would face?

Follow up: How do you think they could overcome those obstacles?

- 9) How do you feel about people without an intellectual disability having sex with someone with an intellectual disability?

- 10) How would you react if you found out one of your friends had sex with someone with an intellectual disability?

- 11) Would you date someone with an intellectual disability?

Follow up: Would you marry someone with an intellectual disability?

Follow up: Would you have children with someone with an intellectual disability?

12) Is there anything else you'd like to add?

Demographic Questions (end):

Have you ever worked with people with ID before?

-Could you please explain?

Do you have any family members/friends with ID?

Closing statement: Thank you so much for participating in the interview portion of my study!

Are you open to participating in member checking? For member checking, if you want to do it, I will email you your transcript in 1-2 weeks and ask you to read it over and let me know if everything I have written down in the transcript accurately captures what you said/meant in the interview. It will take up to an hour, but likely a lot less time. If you would like to participate, please share your Brockport email with me. If you read through the transcript and there is anything you'd like to change, you can either email me and let me know, or we can set up a time virtually or face to face to discuss it. This is optional but will help me get accurate data for my research.