Through the lens of a camera: Societal attitudes faced by young adults using assistive technology

Many young adults with disabilities use assistive technology to facilitate participation in everyday activities. However, the usefulness of assistive technology is susceptible to the environment in which it is used. In this qualitative study, the researchers combined symbolic interactionism (focused on meaning making at an individual level) with a critical perspective (focused on societal change) to explore how young adults with disabilities who use assistive technology perceived and experienced societal attitudes. Twenty young adults using assistive technology completed individual interviews before and after engaging in a photovoice process. Ten of the participants then took part in a follow-up focus group. Data were analysed inductively, yielding three primary themes: (a) Seen and Treated as Different, (b) Assumptions Made, and (c) Impatience. A fourth theme emerged through focus group discussion: (d) Photos as a Means of Consciousness-raising. Findings suggest that young adults with disabilities who use assistive technology regularly encounter negative societal attitudes that hinder participation. Further actions are needed to resolve this challenging participation barrier; these actions should draw on the perspectives and creativity of young adults who use assistive technology.