Foreword

I suspect like many scholars, I began working on scholarship related to disability for a personal and practical reason. I had just started my doctoral work in the early 1980s with a focus in interpersonal and relational communication. Not long before this time, my cousin in another state had endured a terrible car accident and he was now experiencing paraplegia. I followed the news coming from different family members during my cousin’s hospitalization and rehabilitation stays. The news was mostly about his physical condition—the nature of his injuries, his medical treatment, and prognosis for his recovery. There was honestly little mention of anything else. I wondered how he was doing psychologically and emotionally. Given my field of study, my mind started to turn to applied questions as I wondered about his life and how it might change. I wondered, did he have friends to support him? A girlfriend? How were the people in his life reacting and handling everything? I also started thinking about how I would (or should) interact with my cousin. Should I call him or visit? What should I say? Maybe more importantly, what should I not say?

Being a person who studied communication, I figured that the best way for me to address these questions was to hit the books. I scoured the literature and found information on physical adjustments to disability, independent living (a movement that was gaining steam at the time), and some fledgling comments about legislation that were being debated in Washington guaranteeing certain rights to persons with disabilities. However, I was more interested in the interpersonal part of all of this—what would help persons with disabilities in their everyday lives?

I found literature that seemed more geared toward the nondisabled, particularly an Attitudes Toward Disabled Persons scale that was being used to measure attitudes of different groups of people toward persons with disabilities. That just did not get at what I wanted to know. As I looked at the literature, it was fraught with disconnects. For example, one glaring problem was that researchers seemed to be talking about people with disabilities, but not with them concerning their own experiences. I found a couple of articles in my own field talking about self-disclosure, specifically prescribing that people with disabilities self-disclose to help nondisabled people feel less uncertain and hence more comfortable around them. That made some intuitive sense, but again this was from the perspective on the nondisabled persons—how would the prescription to self-disclose affect the person with the disability?

This question set me on the road to studying the social implications of disability, especially from the perspective of those experiencing disability themselves. I came to realize in my own work that becoming disabled was a process of cultural adjustment as one needed to adjust physically, psychologically, and socially (Braithwaite, 1990, Braithwaite & Braithwaite 2008). Another disconnect in the literature concerned that lack of focus on the social networks of persons with disability. It became important to realize and address that an individual person’s disability is experienced and negotiated by a social web...
of family, personal, and community relationships, including schools and the medical community (e.g., Canary, 2008).

This volume, Communication Technology for Students in Special Education Programs edited by Joan E. Aiken, Joy Pedego Fairley, and Judith K. Carlson shines a light on the disconnects that often appear in Special Education, where the emphasis is on communication disorders, by expanding the view to include the social aspects of disability, specifically communication education to help those with different types of disability adjust and successfully manage interaction and relationships as members of this communicative culture. The authors in this present volume share a commitment to the latest assistive technologies but within the larger goal of encouraging and facilitating effective communication and relationships, yet the editors seek to bridge the disconnects they see in research and practice that takes an interdisciplinary approach, bringing those with expertise in special education, educational technology, and communication together. Authors in this volume help envision a future where approaches to research, teaching, and support for people experiencing disability come together in collaborative ways to provide resources for special education teachers and those committed to the lives and well being of persons experiencing disability and their social networks.

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Dawn O. Braithwaite (Ph.D., University of Minnesota) is a Willa Cather Professor of Communication Studies at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. Her research focuses on how people in personal and family relationships communicate and negotiate family transitions and challenges. She studies family rituals, dialectical contradictions and change, and communicating social support for stepfamilies, voluntary kin, and people with disabilities. Dr. Braithwaite is the author of 80 articles in journals such as Journal of Social and Personal Relationships, Journal of Applied Communication Research, and Communication Studies, and has authored numerous chapters in scholarly books. Her five books include volumes with Leslie Baxter: Engaging Theories in Interpersonal Communication and Engaging Theories in Family Communication; and Handbook of Communication and People with Disabilities (with Teresa Thompson) and Case Studies in Interpersonal Communication (with Julia T. Wood). She was awarded the National Communication Association’s Brommel Award for Outstanding Scholarship in Family Communication and the University of Nebraska College of Arts & Sciences Award for Outstanding Research in the Social Sciences. She is a Past President of the Western States Communication Association and has received the association’s Distinguished Service Award. Dr. Braithwaite served on the Board of Directors of the Consortium of Social Science Associations in Washington DC. She was Director of the National Communication Association Research Board, before serving as the National Communication Association’s President in 2010.

REFERENCES

