Re-thinking the concept and measurement of community participation in the context of disability

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With the World Health Organization (WHO) conceptualization of disability and the emergence of the International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health (ICF) as a central framework to understanding disability, community participation (CP) has become pivotal in rehabilitation research. Resonating with the ICF, our recent review of literature on CP and people with disability suggests that CP has been medicalized. That is, CP is used primarily as an indicator of functioning, reflecting health in its most reductionist sense.

We argue that in the era of rights-based models which emphasize disability as a social, rather than medical, concept, CP needs to be re-examined to reflect current views of disability. In addition, we argue it is important to examine both subjective and objective measures as well as perceived personal, social, and environmental barriers to participation.

We will examine this understanding of CP in a survey designed to describe the extent and patterns of and barriers and facilitators to CP among adults with disabilities in the US. The measures we employ is based on an existing self-report survey designed to measure CP generally, not specific to persons with disabilities. We modified the measure to include subjective assessments of the importance of each type of activity and satisfaction with current levels of engagement in the activity. In addition, based on other barrier and facilitator checklists, we designed a measure to capture the extent to which personal, social, and environment factors influence, positively or negatively, CP.