

# What do service industry workers know about people with aphasia? A small scale questionnaire investigation

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## Background

This study was undertaken as part of the final year undergraduate degree programme at De Montfort University. In 2003 Code found that people with aphasia spent an average of twenty hours outside their home in a typical week. In this limited amount of time away from the family home, people with aphasia talked to family, friends and service industry workers. Brown, McGahan, Alkaleli, Seah, Howe & Worrall (2006) conducted research into the knowledge and attitudes of these service industry workers using two small focus groups. Their research concluded that attitudes to disability and a lack of knowledge about different types of disability were barriers to social participation. These studies prompted this research question: What do service industry workers know about people with aphasia?

## Method

50 questionnaires were given to employees in a single outlet of a national chain of shops. The questionnaire used in this study was based on interview questions that had been used by Simmons-Mackie, Code, Armstrong, Steigler & Elma in 2002. Simmons-Mackie et al's (2002) survey questions had identified that members of the public across three continents had very little understanding of aphasia.

### Simmons-Mackie, Code, Armstrong, Steigler & Elma (2002) adapted questionnaire

Section 1				
Have you ever heard of aphasia? <i>Please circle your answer</i>		Yes	No	Unsure
If no please go to section 3 on the last page of the questionnaire. If yes or unsure please continue.				
Use your own words to describe the following:		<i>Circle your answers</i>		
1	What is aphasia?	Yes	No	Unsure
2	What causes aphasia?	Yes	No	Unsure
3	What do you think can be done to help people with aphasia?	Yes	No	Unsure
Section 2				
4	Would you say people with aphasia...	<i>Circle your answers</i>		
	a) have trouble with pronunciation or speech?	Yes	No	Unsure
	b) have trouble with language or putting their ideas into words?	Yes	No	Unsure
	c) have problems understanding what people say to them?	Yes	No	Unsure
	d) have problems with thinking or general intelligence?	Yes	No	Unsure
	e) have 'mental' health problems?	Yes	No	Unsure
	f) have reading problems?	Yes	No	Unsure
	g) have writing problems?	Yes	No	Unsure
	h) have communication problems?	Yes	No	Unsure
5	Is aphasia caused by...	<i>Circle your answers</i>		
	a) brain damage?	Yes	No	Unsure
	b) emotional problems?	Yes	No	Unsure
	c) impaired intelligence?	Yes	No	Unsure
	d) mental problems?	Yes	No	Unsure
	e) stroke?	Yes	No	Unsure
6	Where did you hear about aphasia...	<i>Circle your answers</i>		
	a) relative or friend has/had aphasia	Yes	No	Unsure
	b) on TV/radio	Yes	No	Unsure
	c) newspaper/magazine	Yes	No	Unsure
	d) through my work	Yes	No	Unsure
	e) other (please specify)	Yes	No	Unsure
Section 3				
What can you tell me about communication problems in general? Please write anything you know about them.				

## Results

### Section 1

37 questionnaires were returned. 31/37 84% service industry workers were unable to provide any information about aphasia. 6/37 (16%) of service industry workers were able to describe aphasia.

P1	Inability to speak properly
P2	Communication disorder
P3	The inability or communicate numerically and speak properly, stammers and find reading numbers and words difficult to understand
P4	It is a communication disorder
P5	Aphasia is a communication disorder which is caused by damage to certain parts of the brain
P6	Is someone who has slurred talk and problems putting their words together

The 6 service industry workers also knew that strokes, brain damage and head injuries resulted in aphasia and were able to suggest that the following strategies may help them to communicate with people with aphasia.

P1	Counselling and medical help
P2	Giving the person eye contact, be patient
P3	Be patient and allow the person to finish the sentence
P4	Giving the person time to talk, keeping eye contact and if necessary letting them write down what they want to say
P5	Patience and understanding
P6	Use shorter words and speak slowly and clearly

### Section 2

All six participants identified that people with aphasia had difficulties with pronunciation (4a) and putting ideas into words (4b). These participants attributed their knowledge of aphasia to personal experience, listening to the radio or watching television. Less than three participants suggested that any of the other problems could be associated with aphasia.

### Section 3

Twelve participants did not provide a response to section 3. Of the 25 participants who responded to this part of the questionnaire 11/25 identified that deafness could cause a communication impairment. 6/25 suggested that autism could cause a problem with communication. Less than 5 participants suggested that blindness, struggling to speak, not being able to understand what other people are thinking, reading and writing difficulties, brain damage, drunkenness, physical disabilities, stammering and stroke could cause communication problems.

## Discussion

This small scale study has provided more evidence to suggest that service industry workers such as retail assistants, policemen, civil servants and transport employees may have very little understanding of the communication difficulties experienced by people with aphasia. This lack of knowledge about aphasia is a recognised barrier to social participation (Brown et al, 2006) and suggests that people with aphasia may have difficulty finding positive communication opportunities in the limited amount of time they spend away from home. The results of this study could be also be used to support the development of therapy interventions that are designed to help individuals with aphasia overcome the difficulties they encounter communicating with people who do not know how to support their conversational interactions.

## References

- Brown, K., McGahan, L., Alkaleli, M., Seah, D., Howe, T. & Worrall, L. (2006) Environmental factors that influence the community participation of adults with aphasia: The perspectives of service industry workers. *Aphasiology*, 20,7,595-615.
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