Abstract

The researcher interviewed three women at Beckwith Hall, a dormitory for students with physical disabilities, to find out if living in this dormitory has affected their views regarding their sexuality and pursuing romantic relationships. Overall, she discovered that Beckwith did allow the women to feel more comfortable with themselves in regards to dating, but did not change their views on sexuality.
**Introduction to the Issue and why it is Important to Higher Education**

Students with physical or orthopedic disabilities are becoming more and more prevalent in higher education institutions. Some researchers say that students with these types of disabilities represent 29% of students in post-secondary education (Singh, 2003). Although this may not seem like a large number statistically, they clearly make up a significant portion of the student population. Within the information presented in the next sections, it will be explained why it is important, in particular, to study factors related to romantic relationships for women with disabilities, and why it is particularly interesting to do so at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (U of I), and to specifically do so at Beckwith Hall.

**Literature Review**

**The “Typical” College Student Dating Experience**

Meeting people on a college campus who have dating, long-term relationship, or marriage potential is quite common (DeGenova and Rice, 2003). Dating is so much a part of American culture that, for many college students, there are “scripts” that dictate how dating is “supposed to” proceed. For example, in heterosexual relationships, the man is often seen as the one who takes the first step as far as proposing the date and the one who plans and pays for what occurs on the date. In contrast, the woman is often seen as the person who facilitates emotional interaction (Levinger, 1982). In a few studies men and women were asked to list activities related to a date, and it was found that men and women had very similar ideas about what each member of a heterosexual pair should do on the first date (e.
Clearly, young men and women who have the opportunity to gain experience with dating have a pretty clear idea of how the experience should proceed.

It should be noted that even for young adults without disabilities, social anxiety and anxiety in general with regards to interacting with peers of the opposite gender is often an issue (Robins, 1986). In fact, one study said that issues with dating are the number one problem for which help is sought at the counseling service (Martinson and Zerface, 1970). As will be evident below in the discussion of students with disabilities, young people in general seem to have issues with social skills when it comes to dating (e.g., Curran, 1977). Interestingly, it has been found that masculine characteristics aspects of one’s personality are correlated positively with having a perception of self-efficacy and negatively with nervousness when dealing with the opposite gender (Robins, 1986).

**Background Information on Students with Disabilities**

Students with physical or orthopedic disabilities are becoming more and more prevalent in higher education institutions. As noted above, some researchers say that students with these types of disabilities represent 29% of students in post-secondary education (Singh, 2003). Again, although this is not a large percentage, it is clear that students with disabilities have a large presence on campus.

In terms of information more directly related to this study, it is a well-documented fact that there are differences in the dating and marriage behaviors of women with and without disabilities. According to several studies, women with disabilities have a more difficult time finding and keeping partners than do women...
without disabilities. Specifically, it has been found that women with disabilities are less likely to be married, more likely to get married later in life, and more likely to be divorced (e.g. Bowe 1984; Hanna & Rogovsky, 1986). It is also interesting to note that, at least according to a survey from the 1980s, men with disabilities have a much higher rate of marriage than do women with disabilities; 60% of men with disabilities are married compared to 49% of women who have disabilities (Howland and Rinalta, 2001).

**Social Skills of People with Disabilities**

People with disabilities often have less socialization experience than do people without disabilities. There are several factors that influence this difference. One such issue can be found in a study that suggests, beginning in adolescence, children of both genders who have Cerebral Palsy – a disability that can appear in the first few years of the child’s life and can inhibit a person’s ability to co-ordinate his body movements (Mayo Foundation for Medical Education and Research, 1998-2009) - tend to spend less social time outside of school with their peers than do children without disabilities. It is important to note that the study that led to this conclusion also found that people with Cerebral Palsy who were older were even less socially active than those of a younger age (Stevenson et. al. 1997). Although this indicates a lack of socialization within only one disability group, there is evidence to suggest that lack of socialization is a problem for individuals with other disabilities as well (Howland & Rinalta, 2001).
Self-Esteem and Self-Efficacy

One important barrier that might arise from the lack of socialization is a lack of self-efficacy. Self-efficacy refers to a person’s belief that he or she can plan actions and complete activities that will lead to specific results (Bandura, 1997). It follows, then, that people with strong self-efficacy excel at using their energy to reach solutions to problems while people with weaker self-efficacy worry about how their solutions will be perceived, do not have confidence in their abilities, and assume failure will occur even before they attempt to solve a problem (Bandura and Wood, 1989). People with weak self-efficacy often experience greater levels of stress as well as other issues that can prevent them from accomplishing the desired goal (Coutinho, 2008). It is thought that self-efficacy is a very important aspect of developing social confidence. One seems to develop this by having positive experiences in social situations, having people role-model certain situations, and having some influence in social situations (e.g. Powers et. al., 1995).

A related concept is that of social self-esteem. This refers to how people feel about themselves and how confident they are in social settings or occurrences (Lawson, Marshall and McGrath, 1979). Individuals with low social self-esteem often behave awkwardly or without confidence around others (Marshall, Chernivasky and Malcolm, 1979). People who have social experiences that they do not consider positive are likely to perceive that they have little self-worth, have difficulty in social settings, and therefore avoid social interactions in the future (Girodo, Dotzenroth and Stein, 1981). Given the information on the social skills of people with disabilities presented in the section above, one might argue that many
people with disabilities likely have low social self-esteem by default due to their lack of experience with social situations. It should be noted, however, that there are studies that speak to the contrary. An example of this can be found in one study wherein adolescents with Spina Bifida and Cerebral Palsy reported that they feel physically attractive and truly feel included when spending time with their peers without disabilities (Meeropol, 1991). Further, in another study it was found there is not a great difference in self-esteem or satisfaction with physical appearance between adolescents with and without disabilities (Stevens et. al., 1996).

**Parents of Children with Physical Disabilities**

Another reason for the lack of socialization characteristic of women with physical disabilities might be the overprotective tendencies of their parents during their childhood (Nosek et. al, 2003). In fact, it has been found that the children of this generation are more protected by their parents than the children of previous generations. Research suggests these parents to wish to be more involved in the developmental processes and education of their children than did parents of past generations (Howe and Strauss, 2000). This is especially true of parents whose children have physical disabilities, because they are often troubled by concerns such as their children being in an unsafe environment (Taub, 2006). Such parents often encourage their children to participate in fewer activities than their able-bodied peers and also tend to expect them to take on fewer responsibilities. These attitudes may contribute to a lack of self-esteem and social skills as well as to a lifestyle that revolves more around one’s home. Physical dependency on one’s parents is also an issue. In one study it was found that while most adolescents with
disabilities describe their relationships with their parents as positive, many of these young people also say their parents treat them in ways that are inappropriate for their age and that their parents sometimes treat them in ways of which they do not approve (Blum et. al, 1991).

As for issues that are directly relevant to the research at hand, it was also found in a study of youth with Cerebral Palsy that only 50% of parents discussed issues of sexuality or marriage with their children (Blum et. al, 1991). In fact, in one study of youth with Cerebral Palsy it was found that parents tended to send their children negative feedback about marriage and their sexuality (Nosek et. al., 2003).

**Disability and Sexuality**

Among adolescents with disabilities, there is an apparent lack of knowledge regarding their sexuality (e. g. Nelson, 1995). As discussed above, adolescents with disabilities may experience isolation from counterparts of the same age. This may mean that they do not have the chance to learn about their sexuality or to engage in sexual experimentation (e. g. Strax, 1988). In one study it was found that adolescents with Spina Bifida seem to know little actual information about topics such as anatomy of sexual organs, how these organs function and sexual function in general (Erickson and Erickson, 1992). In a separate study done with other teenagers with this disability, fewer than 20% of these young people had looked up information about their sexual or reproductive capabilities (Cromer et. al., 1990).

When comparing adult females with and without disabilities, one study found that females without disabilities have higher scores when it comes to sexual
activity, and sexual response compared with their counterparts with physical disabilities (Nosek et. al., 1994). In another study, it was found that women without disabilities knew less about orgasms and sexual intercourse than women with disabilities. Researchers also learned that having sexual desires and fantasies was not affected by a women’s disability. When it comes to sexual interactions, disability does not have an effect on how intense or how often arousal occurs, how long foreplay lasts, how often women actually engage in or desire sexual intercourse, or the occurrence of an orgasm. It is important to note, however, that women with disabilities seem to be much less satisfied with their sexuality than women without disabilities (Vansteenswegen, Jans and Revell, 2003).

There are many issues that arise when considering sexual intercourse for women with physical disabilities. One of these is facilitated sex. Overall, this means the help a person with a disability needs – often this is help from a person without a disability - to explore their sexuality, but it can mean a variety of things to different people. It may mean assistance with going to parties or clubs. It could also mean helping to actually facilitate coitus, perhaps by undressing a person, or possibly assisting with masturbating when there is no other option. The fact that people with disabilities often need help with these aspects of life can be complex for several reasons. One of these is that Personal Assistants (PAs) often make value judgments about the type of assistance they provide. One study showed that PAs were more willing to provide personal and academic assistance as opposed to social assistance. Specifically relevant to the subject discussed here is the idea that PAs may be hesitant or even refuse to help with activities related to sexual intercourse if
they believe that the activities that a person is engaging in are objectionable in a moral sense. This is particularly true when a person’s sexual preference or wish is different from what is considered socially “normal.” One problem that a PA might face in such a situation is that due to the fact he or she do often not have previous experience as a PA before they begin their first job, they do not have enough knowledge to raise any issues they might have with being a PA before they arise. One way that they might compensate for such a situation is by adopting an aloof and professional attitude. However, no matter what attitude the PAs attempt to adopt, if they give help when they do not desire to do so, there will undoubtedly be tension between the PA and the resident he or she is trying to assist. Also, one might argue that if a PA is forced to help a student attend to sexual needs against his or her will, the PA’s rights are in fact being violated (Earle, 1999).

**Societal Attitudes Towards People with Disabilities**

It is also important to examine the views society has towards women with disabilities. It has recently been found that Americans, females in particular, have a more positive attitude towards people with disabilities than people from other countries such as Singapore and Taiwan (Chen et. al., 2002). However, there are still some unfavorable attitudes regarding individuals with disabilities (Howland and Rinalta, 2001). Traditionally, society seems to say that women with disabilities should not, and often do not, engage in sexual behaviors (e. g. Nosek et. al., 1994). Some perceive that women with disabilities should be grateful to anyone who pursues them, and that they should be thankful for whatever type of relationship they can get, healthy or not, because they are not considered “good enough” for
every man (Phillips, 1990). It has also been found that some people without disabilities may choose not to date people with disabilities because they are worried that the relationship will be unequal and cause them to feel burdened (Duck, 1986). Indeed, a qualitative study by Howland and Rinalta (2001), proves that many of these views are adopted by women with disabilities themselves, including the idea that no one would want to date someone who has a disability.

Physical attractiveness may be another issue. During first meetings, when people have little to consider about a person except what they can see with their eyes, physical attractiveness plays a large role in a person’s decision regarding whether or not they would consider a person as a dating prospect in the future (Stroebe, Insko, Thompson, & Layton, 1971). In many situations, being considered physically attractive increases the likelihood that dating will occur (Sprecher & McKinney, 1987).

Interestingly, on the surface one study seemed to disprove this research. In this study, people were asked to read paragraphs and view pictures – taken from the shoulders down – of people described as having and not having various evident disabilities. The researchers then determined whether the participants viewed the people as romantically attractive using several scales. They found that a person having a disability caused no reduction in romantic attraction in a group of college students. The authors themselves were surprised by this result and thought that it may have occurred because the people were too attractive in terms of their photographs and stories (Man, Rojahn, Chrosniak, and Sanford). A second suggestion that was offered by an alternative source for these results was that the
respondents answered the way they did due to the social desirability. This refers to the idea that a person often has a tendency to respond a question or situation in a manner in which he believes others – for example a researcher or society in general – will approve (Herbert, 2000). In other words, another hypothesis is that the participants in the study said that they felt an equal romantic attraction even if a person had a disability because they knew that the researchers as well as the majority of society would consider that a positive response.

Another societal issue regarding dating a person with a disability that a one might be concerned about is the fact that a person without a disability might be stigmatized for dating a person with a disability (Goldstein and Johnson, 1997). Indeed, it has been found that negative feelings and attitudes towards people with disabilities and those who are associated with them increases as the social distance between them lessens; for example people who date or marry people with disabilities have more stigma attached to them than people who work alongside them or share casual friendships with them (e. g. Deloach, 1994). Research has shown that not only does this stigma exist (Asch and Fine, 1988); but that people without disabilities are aware of it and it does affect their desire to date or marry a person with a disability (Fichten et. al., 1991; Siller, 1964). Specifically on the former point, it has been noted that:

Disabled women who have partners, especially if they are nondisabled men, are likely to discover that they and their partners are subjected to curiosity, scrutiny, and public misunderstanding. Ubiquitously perceived as a social burden, the disabled woman evokes pity that spreads to her partner, (Asch and Fine, 1988).

In one study wherein the participants were asked to imagine what the dating partner of a person with a disability might be like, the participants often described
the partners in extremely positive terms such as “sensitive and emotional.” The authors of this research wonder if these descriptions in and of themselves might be a form of stigma because being regarded as having unrealistic positive qualities might make one seem “different” in the same way that having negative qualities would. Other participants in the study described the hypothetical partners as having a lack of positive qualities. The authors note that either way it may be hard for people without disabilities to imagine themselves in the position of dating someone with a disability (Goldstein and Johnson, 1997) In short, regardless of whether research directly supports societal obstacles to dating people with disabilities or not, it seems that people who study disability are very aware that they do exist.

The College Experience of Students with Disabilities

There is very little literature available that specifically discusses the college experiences of students with physical disabilities. One article that focuses on the issue of assisting students with disabilities to explore their sexuality, includes some discussion of the role that PAs play in the lives of these students. According to this article, the PA is meant to provide assistance in the areas of “personal support” – meaning the daily activities such as eating and dressing that people with physical disabilities cannot always perform on their own, support with studies and support with socializing (Earle, 1999). As for information on living arrangements, there is not much information available on that subject either. One of the first students with a disability to live independently was Ed Roberts. Roberts was a man with Polio and this made it necessary for him to spend much of his time inside an iron lung. When he applied to Berkeley in 1962 the university initially refused to accept him,
citing that accepting students with disabilities in the past had been unsuccessful and there was no place on campus where he could stay (ILUSA, 1997-2008; Levy 1998). However, after Roberts advocated for himself, he was ultimately allowed to use the school’s infirmary as a dormitory, later advocating for others with disabilities (Levy, 1998).

**Importance of this Issue at University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign**

Students with physical disabilities have been a part of the U of I community since the academic year of 1947-'48. This is when a building that was previously a veteran’s administration hospital in Galesburg, Illinois was converted into a satellite campus at the University so that World War II veterans with disabilities could get an education. However, the campus was soon closed and in order to fight this closure, the veterans took their plight to the main campus of U of I where the program for students with disabilities was eventually transferred (College of Applied Health Sciences, 2007).

The 1950s was when the U of I began accommodating students with severe physical disabilities. The first place they did so was on an empty floor of a nursing home known as Greenbrier. The students lived there and were bussed to campus every day for school, physical therapy, and other social activities that “typical” students also participated in. In 1961, the students moved out of the nursing home into a house that was known as Tanbrier, where the students – more than the five that originally lived in Tanbrier – lived on one floor and pre-med students who assisted the students with Activities of Daily Living lived on the floors above them (College of Applied Health Sciences, 2007).
In 1982, Beckwith Hall opened. It was the first actual dormitory for students with disabilities, complete with sleep/study rooms, a computer lab, a dining area and a laundry area. Today, Beckwith houses approximately twenty-one students with severe physical disabilities and about seven Personal Assistants. The students hire their own Personal Assistants from a list produced by Beckwith - including those that live there - in addition to there being a person on call twenty-four hours a day (College of Applied Health Sciences, 2007).

Beckwith Hall is a very unique facility; there is none other like it currently (College of Applied Health Sciences, 2007). In essence, the researcher wanted to know if living in a community such as Beckwith influences the residents’ view of themselves as deserving and capable of romantic relationships and whether it allows them to gain the skills necessary to pursue those relationships, for example self-efficacy. In short, the researcher feels it is very important to study this unique aspect of the U of I campus.

Results

One theme that was very apparent was that all three women who were interviewed were that they were one of very few – or in some cases the only - people in their high schools who had physical disabilities but were “typically-developing” in a cognitive sense; this had a profound effect on them. One participant reported that her school was not at all accommodating towards her in terms of her disability and that this resulted in her feeling like she was not really
part of things much of the time. Another woman said that she felt “different” in
high school and she only had a few friends. The third woman noted that it was
sometimes assumed in high school that just because she had a physical disability
she had a cognitive one as well and because of this she was often nervous in new
situations that people would judge her based upon her physical disability only.

In terms of the effect that their parents had on their dating lives, the issue
that two of the women said was most prevalent in this area was that at home it was
necessary for their parents to drive them places and that it would be awkward for
them to do so in a dating situation. The third woman said that the role of her parents
in the dating process was not really an issue for her since she only required their
help the last two years she was at home.

In one form or another, the women also seem to feel that living at Beckwith
has given them emotional support. Two of the women emphasized that they felt like
they could talk to people at Beckwith about things that their friends without
disabilities would not understand. One made particular note of the fact that she
liked that there were people who were older than herself to whom she could ask
questions and that she likes that she can take on a mentoring role because she is
older now. One of the women noted that she feels like she can relate to having a
disability in general, but wishes that there was someone at Beckwith who had her
exact disability.

All three women said that living at Beckwith gave them opportunities to use
or practice social skills that they did not have before. As mentioned above, they
attributed this to being somewhat of an anomaly in their high schools and thus
Women at Beckwith feeling isolated to some degree. One of the women also noted that she feels it is not just Beckwith that has allowed her this opportunity but the U of I as a whole because it is so accommodating towards people with disabilities and because of the academic caliber of the students as well as their ages.

Living at Beckwith has had an impact on the women’s perspectives regarding dating. One way that this is clear is that all three women mentioned examples of current or past Beckwith residents who are having or who have had relationships in their interviews. Two of the women said that these examples demonstrated or further proved to them that women with disabilities can pursue romantic relationships, one woman said that since the relationships she knows about are between women with disabilities and men without disabilities, it makes her think that men are cruel and would not want to date women with disabilities.

None of the women seemed to feel that living in Beckwith specifically changed their views on sexuality. One woman said that because she had a suitemate who was very interested in the sexuality of people with disabilities she got exposed to things she might not be aware of otherwise, such as pornography featuring people with physical disabilities. The same women noted that she certainly understands how living in Beckwith might change others’ views of sexuality, especially if they have never had friends with disabilities with whom to talk about issues of sexuality with before.

All of the women noted that being at Beckwith has improved their feelings of self-esteem and the researcher noted that for two of the women this directly relates to their feelings on dating. One woman said that being at Beckwith has made
her more comfortable with seeing her disability as part of her identity, and as previously stated, another of the women feels much less like a “freak” now that she lives at Beckwith. It has improved their self-efficacy too, two of the women talked about how in high school they experienced crushes but they felt too shy to make their feelings known. Now, however, they both said that they would feel more comfortable pursuing a relationship.

One woman shared with the researcher that during her first two years at Beckwith she had liked a man, but due to her self-esteem she had not been sure that he would like her so she did not say anything. She found out later that this was a mistake because both she and the person she was interested in had liked each other. The next time she felt interest in a boy she did indeed make her interest known, although she said that this was partly due to the fact that she felt so comfortable with him.

Another theme that seemed to come up was that two of the three women said that they would not want to date another person who has a disability – at least not a physical one - and the main reason they sited for this was that it would be difficult to date someone who also uses PAs. One woman used the words “awkward and weird” to describe how this situation would be for her. The third woman did not appear to find dating another person with a disability much of an issue at all.

A final theme that came up was that two out of three of the women noticed that society does have an effect on their thoughts about dating and sexuality. One woman said that it does not change how she views herself, and another said that it does not really lessen her desire to date, but both of these women stated that it
seems to make dating harder for them. The third woman said that she does not feel it affect her personal perspective on dating and sexuality.

**Discussion**

Interestingly, though the research heavily emphasized that parents might affect the dating and sexual experiences of their children, none of the participants mentioned this. Their comments about the awkwardness of having their parents drive them around during dating experiences points to another issue that is reflected in the literature: physical dependency on parents can often impede individuals with disabilities from having typical dating experiences.

The fact that the women felt that Beckwith gave them an opportunity to practice social skills, and the fact that they attributed their previous “lack” of opportunity to feeling isolated within their high schools certainly relates to the literature, which indicates that people of all ages with disabilities tend to socialize less than their able-bodied peers (e.g. Stevenson et. al. 1997). The fact that the women’s ability to practice these skills increased their self-efficacy regarding dating also makes sense, as the literature notes that having good experiences in social situations increases one’s self-efficacy (e.g. Powers et. al., 1995). It is also interesting that two of the three women seemed to feel that examples of current or past Beckwith residents encouraged or confirmed to them that they too could have successful relationships. Indeed, research also shows that having people role-model certain situations also increases self-efficacy (e.g. Powers et. al., 1995), and while this is not role-modeling in the strictest sense, the researcher can infer that it may serve the same purpose.
In terms of the apparent lack of affect that Beckwith had on the women’s sexuality, the researcher finds that interesting for a couple of reasons. From her own experience at Beckwith, she knows that as a dormitory Beckwith does not often make exploring one’s sexuality a priority. As such, it might be that living at Beckwith does not necessarily mean that women have the opportunities to gain knowledge and experience with sexuality. This made vary among residents, however, a truth that is made clear by the woman who not only shared that she gained exposure to specific aspects of disability and sexuality due to the knowledge of her suitemate, but also pointed out that she can see how living in Beckwith could change a person’s view of sexuality especially if they have never had others with disabilities to discuss issues regarding sexuality with before.

The participants’ views on the affects that PA’s had on their views about dating and sexuality were also interesting. Though none of the specific themes discussed in the literature were mentioned, the researcher would argue that the women had a sense of the types of issues that might come up, an example of this can be found in the negative language (“awkward and weird”) that one woman used to describe her feelings on dating another person who uses a wheelchair. In other words, the author hypothesizes that whether the women have much formal knowledge of, for example, some of the potential PA issues mentioned in the literature review or not, because they think about their disabilities every day as well as how their hopes and dreams are interrelated with them, they probably have at least vaguely considered some of these issues.

**Reflectivity**
It is certainly possible that the results and discussion presented here could be greatly affected by the researcher’s personal bias. This is because she decided to study people who are very similar to her in a descriptive sense. Like her participants, she is a woman with a disability. Not only that, but she knew all of the women she interviewed, and even lived at Beckwith Hall with them at some point. Clearly, this means that she had assumptions and hypotheses about how her participants would answer some of the questions she posed. Some of the answers did surprise her, and a few bothered her; some because she was hoping an answer would contain richer content than it did and some because she did not agree with the answers that were given. On the other hand, she still believes that her familiarity with the population she interviewed helped her to understand the information that her participants conveyed in a unique way as well as helped her to pick up on nuances and subtleties that others may not have. The researcher also believes that it was helpful that she understood concrete issues about the backgrounds of her participants - such as how inconvenient it can be to be unable to drive – and how this factored into other areas of their lives, such as romantic relationships. It was even pointed out in class that it is possible that the people who were interviewed were more honest with her because she knew them. In short, while the researcher is aware that she had a lot of bias in terms of both the population and subject that she studied, she feels that her intimate knowledge helped her understand her population as well as her results better.
Ultimately, she can truly say that she believes her opinions did not affect her results nor her interpretation to a great extent and she is pleased with her work as a researcher.

**Limitations and Directions for Future Research**

There are many important avenues for future research that are made clear by the information presented here as well as the limitations of this study. Perhaps the most important limitation is that due to the fact that this was ethnographic research as well as the small sample size, is that it is difficult to determine if the information learned here is generalizable to women with physical disabilities who do not live in Beckwith Hall or live on other campuses. To determine this, it may be necessary to conduct a larger set of ethnographic interviews. Whether the themes and relationship to the literature that was found here are at all applicable to others is also definitely important to consider. On a related note, a longitudinal study of these women might also be beneficial, because another limitation of the study is that it only captured the women’s perspective at this time in their lives, so longitudinal research would show how the women’s college experiences affected them in later life.

Also, there is even less research on men with physical disabilities than there is on women, and this is part of the reason why the researcher decided to focus her study on females. She realizes, however, that this is another factor that could prevent the research from being applicable to other populations. Thus, an important area for future study is what similarities and differences there are in the way men and women with physical disabilities experience romance and relationships;
especially because the research does suggest that there are differences (e.g. Bowe 1984; Hanna & Rogovsky, 1986).

Another issue that could be seen as a limitation, or at least an interesting area to explore is whether the information garnered from this research would have been different if the researcher had not had relationships with the participants. As alluded to above, the researcher hypothesizes that the participants were more honest with her due to the relationships, but it is possible that the reverse is true. If this is the case for even one of the participants, then this could be a limitation of the study, and as such it might be beneficial to do further research comparing the results that are found when there is a relationship between the participant and the researcher to when there is not. Additionally, because of the potential bias discussed above, it would be advantageous to conduct research comparing results of interviewers with and without disabilities.

Another avenue to explore might be to go into greater detail about women with disabilities who need to use PAs and the affect that has on relationships, as the researcher laments that she did not explore this in greater depth within the study. Since the women said that using PAs caused them to believe that it would be difficult to date others who use PAs it might be helpful to go into greater depth about exactly why the women think this might be difficult, as well as to explore other reasons they might be hesitant to date others with disabilities.

It might, it is important to examine the relationship experiences of people with other types of disabilities. The author believes it is evident from this research that one’s disability does have an impact on the perception and pursuit of romantic
relationships, and she can infer that it would be very different for people with different types of disabilities.
Appendix 1: Interview Protocol and Timeline for Completion

To gain the information discussed above, the researcher conducted an ethnographic interview from a constructivist paradigm. This procedure was chosen because the interviewer wants to know how individual people within the disability culture in a college setting in general and at the U of I at Beckwith Hall specifically act or behave. In other words, according to research (Manning & Stage, 2003; Ortiz, 2003), this procedure would be the most effective way to do so because the constructivist paradigm makes it clear that the researcher wants to focus on how people act within a specific culture and the ethnographic interview allows the writer to focus on individuals within that culture.

Due to the Beckwith director being unable to help with the recruitment of participants, it was necessary for the researcher to individually contact students via e-mail. She was able to obtain an agreement to participate from three women with severe physical disabilities from Beckwith Hall: one second semester freshman, one junior, and one student who has lived at Beckwith for several years (she is a graduate student). Once she found her participants, she arranged via e-mail to meet with them for one hour each. To the interview she brought a tape recorder in order to capture the interview on tape, her prepared questions, as well as the confidentiality form and the form on counseling recommended by the instructor as well as the IRB representative. Before conducting the interview, she went over the basic goals of her research – to find out about how the women view themselves in terms of being romantic and sexual people, their overall thoughts and experiences with dating before and after coming to Beckwith Hall, how dating and sexuality is
affected by various aspects of life at Beckwith and how their thoughts and experiences may or may not have changed since coming to Beckwith. She also distributed the confidentiality forms appropriately as well as gained the participant’s permission for the interview to be taped.

The timeline for the completion of this project is as follows, with some dates overlapping as appropriate (paper due 5/13/09):

- **March 3-10 2009**: Location of participants for interviews
- **March 3-16 2009**: Gathering information and completion of literature review
- **March 10-20 2009**: Conducting ethnographic interviews
- **March 20 2009–May 11 2009**: Analysis of data/completion of paper
Appendix II: General Question and Sub-questions

General Question: Does living in Beckwith Residence Hall help college women with disabilities to think of themselves as deserving and capable of romantic relationships and does this environment give them the skills to pursue those relationships?

Sub-questions:

In what ways do the women feel that their attitudes towards romance and relationships have changed since coming to Beckwith?
Does living in Beckwith give the women unique emotional support since they are in a community of people who have some commonalities?
Does living in Beckwith give the women opportunities to address issues relating to disability and romantic relationships that they would not have an opportunity to or felt comfortable discussing with others?
Does living in Beckwith give the women opportunities to practice social skills that they would not otherwise have had?
Do the women feel more capable of pursuing a romantic relationship since coming to Beckwith should they desire to do so?
How has the fact that the women no longer live with their parents affected their ability and attitude towards pursuing a romantic relationship?
Have any of these women had a romantic relationship or interest before coming to Beckwith? If so, how did it work out? If they had a relationship/romantic interest since coming to Beckwith, how did that work out in comparison?
How, if at all, has needing to utilize PAs affected the participants’ thoughts and actions regarding romance and sexuality?
How, if at all, has living at Beckwith affected the participants’ self-esteem and self-efficacy?
How has society’s view of the participants affected their desire to date and pursue their sexuality? Has Beckwith had changed anything with regards to that?
Do the women have anything else they would like to add?