Breaking into the business: experiences of actors with disabilities in the entertainment industry

Olivia Raynor and Katharine Hayward
University of California, Los Angeles, USA

The pursuit of an acting career is a difficult one for anybody. However, studies have yet to factor how disability affects casting opportunities. This study describes the employment of actors with disabilities, along with the unique barriers they encounter in the audition and casting process. Actors with disabilities from the Screen Actors Guild (SAG) were recruited to participate in focus groups and complete a questionnaire. The results indicate having a disability amplifies difficulties in gaining employment, particularly for females. Participants aged 40 years and over were more likely to work in a lead or supporting role compared to those under 40. Participants identified several barriers to employment in the entertainment industry including industry attitudes about working with actors with disabilities; being restricted to disability specific roles; and fears about requesting an accommodation.

Introduction

An estimated 54 million Americans are living with a disability, representing approximately 20% of the population (McNeil, 2001; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2005). While the prevalence of disability continues to increase, employment rates of those with disabilities remain low. In 2006, the employment rate of working-age (21–64 years) people with disabilities was 37.7% compared to 79.7% of those without disabilities. Employment rates were higher among those with sensory and physical disabilities compared to other disabilities such as mental and self-care disabilities (Rehabilitation Research and Training Center on Disability Demographics and Statistics, 2007). The unemployment rate of people with disabilities who do not have a job but are actively looking for work is nearly 2.5 times those without disabilities, that is, 14.1% compared to 5.8% (Cornell University Disability Statistics, n.d.).

A survey by the Heldrich Center for Workforce Development identified several reasons why employers are reluctant to hire individuals with disabilities, which include their own discomfort in working with a group they do not have past experience with; a belief that those with disabilities are unable to perform the required tasks of the job proficiently; and concerns over the cost of providing accommodations. While the majority (85%) of employers indicated their company was physically accessible, there were several other measures of accessibility that required further action. Areas in need of improved accessibility included developing recruiting methods and advertising specifically for people with disabilities; changing the format of job applications; changing the tests or evaluations used in hiring or promoting; changing the company website; and making recruiting/interviewing sites accessible (Dixon, Kruse & Van Horn, 2003). A survey of small business employers identified the top three concerns of hiring people with disabilities as matching skills and job needs; supervision and training; and costs associated with safety and medical insurance. Furthermore, there were concerns about legal liabilities and making work site accommodations (Harrison, 1998).

While the cost of accommodations is a common concern of employers, the data indicate that the average cost of an accommodation is $200 and results in increased productivity and retention of employees (Harrison, 1998; Komp, 2006). Furthermore, many accommodations can be provided at no or little cost, and are often similar to many of the adjustments companies make to assist non-disabled workers do their jobs more efficiently. While costs are a concern, the biggest barrier remains employer attitudes. There are several misconceptions about the capability of individuals with disabilities to do the work. Linda Richman, Deputy Executive Director of Liberty Resources, believes many employers presume that if they hire a person with a disability they are 'automatically compromising somehow on the quality or volume of work' (Komp, 2006). Reasearch by Gouvier, Systma-Jordan and Mayville (2003) indicates that hiring practices are also a function of the disability type, job complexity, and the extent to which the worker would interact with the public. Applicants with a physical disability were rated more favourably overall as a candidate than those with mental disabilities (Gouvier, Systma-Jordan & Mayville, 2003). Employers' fears tend to be more reflective of a lack of awareness and experience in working with individuals with disabilities than actual difficulties.

Employment in the entertainment industry

Actors are defined by the Department of Labor as individuals involved in stage, television, radio, video or motion picture

productions. Using this definition, the U.S. Department of Labor estimated 51 880 actors were employed in 2006 with median hourly earnings of $11.61 (U.S. Department of Labor Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2007). The Screen Actors Guild (SAG), an American labour union of film and television performers, estimated 30% of their members earned zero dollars from contract work in 2003. Nearly half (48%) earned between $1 and $7500 (Screen Actors Guild, 2005).

The nature of an acting career is difficult and very few ever reach star status. Acting jobs are usually of short-term duration ranging from one day to a few weeks. Very few actors secure employment for more than 3 months. Actors, therefore, experience high periods of unemployment and often rely on other sources of income. The work schedule is often erratic as well. Actors often must endure long and unusual hours during film and television production (U.S. Department of Labor Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2007).

Several reports indicate differential hiring practices of actors based on gender, ethnicity and age breakdowns. The SAG annually produces a Casting Data Report that provides the industry with an analysis of hiring practices in film and television related to gender, ethnicity and age. Males occupy the majority of television and theatrical roles (Gerbner, 1998, Screen Actors Guild, 2004, 2007). This discrepancy is exacerbated for women aged 40 years and over. Men aged 40 years and over comprise 40% of all roles whereas women aged 40 years and over represent 26% of all roles for women. Males aged 40 years and over appear to fairly consistently attain lead and supporting roles, that is, 39% and 40%, respectively. Women aged 40 years and over acquire slightly more supporting roles (29%) compared to lead roles (23%). Ethnicity is another area where large discrepancies exist. Caucasians dominate the screen (72.3%), although this has gone down 0.6% since 2005. The largest increase is in the Unknown/Other category with 1.2%. Asian/Pacific Islanders have also seen a small increase (0.3%) in television and theatrical roles while decreases exist among African Americans (0.3%), Latino/Hispanic (0.4%) and Native Americans (0.2%) since 2007.

Disability, alone or in combination with another minority status, compounds the difficulties of actors pursuing employment. Actors with disabilities are often relegated to disability roles, but even then the majority of disabled roles are played by non-disabled actors (Black & Pretes, 2007). Furthermore, actors with disabilities are rarely considered for roles where disability is not the focus. Teal Sherer, an actress with a disability, reflects:

> 'There just aren't that many parts that are written for a wheelchair user. My goal is to get into the audition. I can play a teacher, a girlfriend, I can do anything else anyone else can do, I don't have to play disabled characters.' (Vetter, 2007)

Representation of disability in film and television
The proportion of people with disabilities portrayed in television and film is vastly lower than the actual number of Americans living with a disability. During the course of daily life, people may have limited or no direct experience with people with disabilities. The media can therefore have an important role in providing vicarious experiences in which people learn from observing others' behaviours and the consequences (Bandura, 1994; Byrd, 1989; Kar, Alcalay & Alex, 2001). Media provide a symbolic environment that begins to shape what individuals view as reality. The more people rely on these vicarious experiences, the greater the potential impact of the media (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan & Sigorielli, 1994; Morgan & Signorielli, 1990; Potter, 1993).

The media are seen as contributing to the cultivation of negative attitudes through prolonged exposure of stereotypic images (Gerbner et al., 1994; Morgan & Signorielli, 1990). Characters with disabilities are often placed into the role of victim, villain or victor. Characters with disabilities are commonly treated as tragic figures who evoke feelings of pity, sympathy and fear of what could be (Elliott & Byrd, 1982; Greenberg & Brand, 1994; Johnson, 1992, 1993; Wang, 1992, 1998; Zola, 1985). Disability is also used as an easy way to indicate the 'bad guy' in the story (Harnett, 2000; Lewis, 1998). The victor or 'supercrip' role emphasises a character who with perseverance and hard work is able to overcome his disability (Black & Pretes, 2007; Farnall & Smith, 1999; Harnett, 2000). Rarely are characters with disabilities allowed to develop into fully-rounded individuals, thereby reinforcing stereotypical views.

In television, the presence of characters with disabilities is minimal. Characters with disabilities rarely speak; are likely to have a physical disability; and are included as part of a storyline centring on disability (Gardner & Radel, 1978; Gerbner, 1998; Greenberg & Brand, 1994; Zola, 1985). Representation of disability is more common in film; portrayals of disability increased from 8.7% to 17.8% in a decade. Analysis of Academy Award winning films further demonstrates this trend. The percentage of films with disability themes winning Academy Awards rose by 26.3% between the 1970s and 1990s (Black & Pretes, 2007; Safran, 1998). Although representation of disability is greater in films, psychiatric disability is vastly over-represented, occurring in nearly half of all films featuring disability (Black & Pretes, 2007; Byrd, 1989; Byrd & Elliott, 1985; Safran, 1998). Characters with physical disabilities are depicted as unable to live a full and happy life, bitter, self-pitying, and in need of assistance from others. One of the most disturbing portrayals to disability activists supposes a person with a disability is better off dead (Black & Pretes, 2007). It is this depiction highlighted in the film *Million Dollar Baby* (2004), which prompted outcry from members of the disability community (Haller, 2006).

Aims of this study
The SAG represents 120 000 film and television performers and background performers (extras) worldwide. Performers are eligible to join SAG if they have a principal or speaking

role in a SAG contract or if they had a background role lasting a minimum of 3 days (Screen Actors Guild, 2008). In July 2003, the initiation dues were $1356 to join and basic membership dues cost $100 annually (Screen Actors Guild, 2008).

SAG negotiates and enforces collective bargaining agreements with producers that establish equitable working conditions, compensation and benefits. Based on this agreement, producers who are signatories of the SAG provide annual casting data for all productions from theatrical feature films, low budget films and television episodic/non-episodic programmes. Annually, SAG publishes casting data reports that examine hiring trends within the industry of traditionally underemployed and minority groups within the union.

While SAG tracks the employment of actors of different ethnicities, ages and gender, disability is not currently captured in this way. In response to this gap in information, the SAG commissioned a study in 2004 to collect baseline information on the employment of performers with disabilities in the entertainment industry (Raynor & Hayward, 2005). This study expands upon that report. The purpose of this study is to describe the employment of SAG actors with disabilities, and, when possible, compare them to the general SAG membership. This study also highlights the unique issues faced by actors with disabilities in the audition and casting process.

Method

Participants
For the purposes of this study, a participant was defined as any performer who self-identified on SAG's Diversity, Special Skills and Talent Survey as having a disability and/or using adaptive equipment. All members are offered the opportunity to complete the Diversity, Special Skills and Talent Survey to highlight specific skills or characteristics that may be of interest to potential employers in the industry, including presence of a disability. The disabilities listed on the form are generally associated with visible characteristics. For example, the kinds of disabilities listed are amputee, cerebral palsy, little person, Down Syndrome or quadriplegia. In 2003, this database was the only mechanism through which SAG identified its members with disabilities. Through this database, approximately 1% of the SAG membership was identified as having a disability or using a piece of adaptive equipment.

Procedures

Focus groups. Four focus groups were conducted in 2004 with a total of 32 participants. Two focus groups occurred in two sites, Los Angeles (LA) and New York (NY). For each location, we invited 100 actors with disabilities with the highest earnings from SAG contract work in 2003. The purposes of the focus groups were to assist in the development of a questionnaire and to discuss members' experiences of working in the industry. Each focus group

lasted approximately 2 hours and was transcribed. There were 24 participants in NY and 8 in LA.

In NY, participants ranged in age from 28 to 84 years, and in LA, from 35 to 86 years. In both LA and NY, there was representation from individuals of various ethnicities and disabilities. The majority of participants were White (77.4%), although there were also individuals who identified as Latino/Hispanic, African American, Asian/ Pacific Islander, and Other. The participants reported having the following disabilities: multiple sclerosis, polio, quadriplegia, cerebral palsy, mobility impairment, visual impairment, blind, hard of hearing, amputee or unspecified. The groups discussed how they get an audition; the types of roles they are cast; how and if they request a reasonable accommodation; and recommendations for change.

Questionnaire. All 1237 SAG members with disabilities, aged 18 years and older, were sent a questionnaire accompanied by a postage paid return envelope. Questions were arranged into nine main categories: SAG employment history; employment trends; professional training and development; getting work; disability characteristics; disclosure and accommodations; health benefits; SAG activities; and demographic information. Alternative formats included an accessible online version of the survey and the option to complete the questionnaire over the phone. A reminder postcard was sent 2 weeks after the initial distribution of the survey. A total of 496 surveys were returned, yielding a 40.1% response rate. The sample was generally representative of SAG performers with disabilities in terms of disability, adaptive equipment used, age and income.

According to the disability categories of SAG's Diversity, Special Skills and Talent Database, the largest share of participants indicated that they had an unspecified disability (28.4%). This included individuals who had asthma, arthritis, diabetes, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder, along with other medical conditions. After unspecified disabilities, mobility (26.6%) and hearing (23.8%) impairments were the most commonly reported disability categories. Additional questions revealed that 11.9% identified as having an emotional or mental disability, 10.9% as having a learning disability, and 7.3% as having a speech or communication disability. The majority (70.3%) indicated they were either born with or acquired their disability before 40 years of age. On a scale from slight to very severe, the largest share (42.2%) reported their disability as moderate. Nearly two-thirds (63.5%) of participants used at least one piece of adaptive equipment. The most commonly used pieces of adaptive equipment included a cane used for assistance in walking (21.2%) and hearing aid (19.4%). The use of canes and hearing aids coincides with the large percentages of participants who indicated having a physical and/or hearing disability.

The typical participant was a Caucasian male between the ages of 40 and 59 years. Males represented 62.7% of the

participants. Over three-quarters of the participants were White. They ranged in age from 20 to 97 years, with a mean age of 54 years. Approximately 83% of participants were aged 40 years and over. Survey participants primarily resided in states with the three largest branch offices: California (54.4%), New York (15.5%), and Florida (4.6%). Participants demonstrated extensive educational and professional experiences prior to joining SAG. These included having performed for pay in television/movie (64.9%), in a commercial (49.6%), and in a stage production (45.0%). In addition, 28.6% had a college degree in theatre and 78.8% had taken acting courses.

Results

Number of days worked and earnings

Among all participants the number of days worked ranged between 0 and 99 days for a total of 2147 with a mean of 4.6 days. Excluding those who worked solely as background actors (i.e. non-speaking roles), the number of days worked totaled 1357 with a mean of 4 days. Both means are depressed by the fact that roughly two-thirds had no work at all in 2003 on a SAG contract production. Looking at those with speaking roles in 2003, the mean number of days worked increased to 14 days, with a median of 5 days.

Almost a third of all participants earned no income from SAG contract work in 2003. Another 35.7% earned between $1 and $1000, and 17.7% earned between $1001 and $5000. A little less than 10% earned between $5001 and $20 000 and only 4.8% made over $20 000. Approximately 9% of participants had health insurance through SAG, which in 2003 required earnings of at least $9000. Because of the predominantly low earnings of SAG members with disabilities, participants supplemented their SAG income in numerous ways. The most common sources of supplemental income are other income (32.3%), social security (31.7%) and family support (24.6%). Nearly half

(47.3%) of participants augment their income through part-time or full-time non-SAG work.

Lead and supporting roles

A total of 103 SAG members with disabilities (20.8%) reported being cast in at least one lead or supporting role for a total of 426 lead roles and 357 supporting roles. As can be seen from Table 1, males dominated females in all roles, comprising 96.7% of all lead roles and 87.9% of all supporting roles. Only 6.9% of all roles were awarded to female members with disabilities. Older participants, those of age 40 years and over, held the majority of male roles. More than 90% of male lead roles were occupied by those aged 40 years and over. Likewise, 82.9% of supporting roles were secured by male SAG members aged 40 years and over with disabilities. Female members with disabilities indicated a similar pattern, although not to the extent of their male counterparts. Females aged 40 years and over were cast in lead (62.5%) and supporting (61.9%) roles nearly twice as often as those under 40.

Using the 2003 SAG casting data as a basis for comparison, the majority of employed actors are male amongst both the general membership and those with disabilities. Female SAG members account for 38.5% of all roles compared to 6.9% who have disabilities. In contrast to those with disabilities, SAG members as a whole display a reverse pattern when it comes to age. More than 60% of both lead and supporting roles are occupied by those younger than 40 years of age. Females aged 40 years and over experienced a loss in roles compared to those under 40, that is, 29.8% of all roles compared 43.3%.

For SAG members with disabilities, a gender bias is again apparent when looking at the number of days worked by lead and supporting categories. Male SAG members with disabilities worked a mean of 14.4 days in a lead role compared to 5.3 days for females. In supporting roles, males worked a mean number of 12.7 days compared to 7.3

Table 1: Comparison of lead and supporting roles by Screen Actors Guild (SAG) actors with disabilities and general SAG membership

	2003 study with SAG members with disabilities			2003 SAG casting data		
	< 40	≥ 40	Total	< 40	≥ 40	Total
Lead roles						
Male	18 (7.6%)	219 (92.4%)	237	6102 (60.3%)	4010 (40.0%)	10 112
Female	3 (37.5%)	5 (62.5%)	8	5495 (77.0%)	1641 (23.0%)	7136
Lead total	21 (8.6%)	224 (91.4%)	245	11 597 (67.2%)	5651 (32.8%)	17 248
Supporting roles						
Male	26 (17.1%)	126 (82.9%)	152	9746 (59.1%)	6741 (40.9%)	16 487
Female	8 (38.1%)	13 (61.9%)	21	6596 (69.3%)	2925 (30.7%)	9521
Supporting total	34 (19.7%)	139 (80.3%)	173	16 342 (62.8%)	9666 (37.2%)	26 008
All roles	55	363	418	27 939	15 317	43 256

Note: The number of roles by gender and age categories is lower than the overall totals for lead and supporting roles for actors with disabilities because of missing data.

Table 2: Comparison of days worked in lead and supporting roles between Screen Actors Guild (SAG) members with disabilities and general SAG membership

	Days worked			
	SAG members with disabilities		SAG membership	
	N	Per cent (%)	N	Per cent (%)
Lead				
Male	360	91.8	82 640	59.8
Female	32	8.2	55 494	40.1
Supporting				
Male	723	83.3	74 961	65.4
Female	145	16.7	39 714	34.6

Table 3: Opportunities for actors with disabilities to audition and be cast (1998–2003)

	Audition opportunities (%)			Casting opportunities (%)		
	More	Same	Less	More	Same	Less
Film	10.2	45.8	44.0	10.1	44.9	44.9
TV	16.1	41.7	42.2	14.2	42.0	43.8
Commercial	8.8	41.6	49.5	8.4	43.2	48.4
Disability specific roles	14.4	50.1	35.5	13.4	49.1	37.5
Non-disability specific roles	7.0	45.8	47.2	7.1	45.2	47.7

days for female members with disabilities. Female SAG members with disabilities represent only 8.2% of the days worked in a lead role contrasted with female SAG members who worked 40.1% of the days in a lead role (see Table 2). The gap lessens slightly when looking at the number of days worked in a supporting role. Female SAG members with disabilities worked 16.7% of the days in a supporting role compared to 34.6% among females in the general SAG membership.

Unique barriers for actors with disabilities

> *'So in essence this business is challenging to begin with. And I think if you have a disability that's more to your disadvantage.' (Focus group participant, Los Angeles)*

Participants acknowledged that the entertainment business is, in general, a difficult one to which to gain entry. Focus group participants frequently discussed the need for commitment and perseverance to realise 'the dream'. Gaining employment in the entertainment industry was perceived as a lifelong pursuit. 'Disabled actors have to do the same thing that any actor does' – participants understood the importance of training, practising their craft in a variety of ways, including showcases or student films and networking.

While actors with and without disabilities may follow similar paths to getting an audition and being cast, those with disabilities encounter specific barriers related to having a disability. In addition to acknowledging a lack of acting jobs in general, survey participants identified the top three greatest barriers to gaining employment: only being considered for disabled roles (48.4%); getting an audition (41.4%); and not being taken seriously by the creative team (39.4%).

Getting an audition is an important step in being cast. Correlation analysis indicated a positive association ($P < 0.01$) between the number of auditions and number of days worked across all contract areas. The more auditions one has, the greater the likelihood of securing work. However, survey participants felt opportunities to audition

in film, television and commercials had remained the same or decreased within the last 5 years (see Table 3). There was a small indication that more opportunities to audition for television (16.1%) existed than in the previous 5 years. Likewise, participants indicated *status quo* or a reduction in casting opportunities. Only 13.4% of participants perceived more opportunities to be cast in disability-specific roles, and even less (7.1%) believed casting opportunities for non-disability-specific roles had improved.

A partial explanation for this may be related to the sense that casting directors were very literal in their interpretation of character breakdowns. A breakdown refers to specific preferences for particular roles often noted in the casting announcement (Robinson, 2006). For example, the character may be described as someone of a particular gender, age, ethnic group or exhibiting certain disability characteristics. The casting director uses these breakdowns to help fulfil the artistic vision of the director or producer. As one focus group participant commented: 'There's also, in the arts there's something called, this is legal, artistic interpretation, where anyone can wiggle out of that mandate by saying "It was my interpretation that this character did not ..."' Thus, very few may think to hire an actor with disability for a role if it is not specified.

Focus group participants told of losing out on casting opportunities in multiple ways. Many felt they were consigned to disability-specific roles that often called for certain physical characteristics: 'I believe that the number of roles that are disabled-specific are few and that's how we proceed – Okay we need a one-armed girl ... Not thinking out of the box at all.' However, participants also discussed that the majority of disability-specific roles are played by those without disabilities. Furthermore, participants did not perceive that the industry was open to hiring an actor with a disability for a mainstream or non-disabled role. It appeared that no matter what the role, having a disability was not considered an advantage, even when auditioning to play a character with a disability: 'We miss out on traditional casting, now we're missing out on non-traditional. Now, I mean, it's certainly not non-traditional to use a disabled person in a disabled role.'

Accessibility and reasonable accommodations were also frequently discussed by focus group participants as unique issues they faced when trying to gain employment. Auditioning and filming sites were often described as physically demanding: '... accessibility is a big problem. Because a lot of times you go to work on a movie, the holding area is up two flights of stairs, five blocks from where the set is, you go up and down the stairs.' Other participants who were diabetic or had disabilities where regular eating was an issue described the difficulty of waiting for hours for their scene, often without access to food. A little over a third (37.6%) of the survey participants felt that an accommodation would help them in their work. Many of these accommodations dealt with access to food; a nearby bathroom; large print scripts; having the director or production staff speak louder; assistance in walking long distances or climbing stairs; or a place to sit while waiting. However, the majority never asked for an accommodation because of the fear of (1) being perceived as unable to do the work; (2) not being asked back; (3) losing their job; and (4) being perceived as slowing down production. Stories told by focus group participants validated these concerns:

'It's like, if they think you're disabled in any way, then you're permanently and totally disabled, as opposed to just I can't walk up and down stairs a lot, you know, like I've been doing the last, 5, 6 hours.'

'I had to sign a paper that said I wasn't going to walk anywhere. Because it would be a physical liability and the insurance company that insured the film was not going to cover me unless I signed that paper.'

'But we found in a lot of cases the casting directors that know her use her a lot. ... But the ones that don't, if we come in with the wheelchair, they are petrified. Or if she comes in with the walker, petrified. And some are very blunt about [it] saying, "Will she be able to stand up the whole day and work?" '

When participants were hired, production staff expressed surprise that they were so easy to work with. One participant commented on being told she was 'less trouble' than they had anticipated. There seemed an underlying assumption an actor with a disability would create additional difficulties by increasing liability, taking more time to do the job or being less reliable. It is because of the fear of being considered a problem that many participants simply would not disclose a disability or ask for an accommodation: 'If you appear to be a problem on a set, you may not be invited back.' If participants perceived their disability or a request for an accommodation would limit their opportunities, they would forego their own comfort and often their own health. A few of the more experienced focus group participants discussed that it was only after reaching a certain level of success and status that they felt comfortable in asking for an accommodation:

'The perception of weakness is something we fear revealing. It is so strong. ... I was a regular for 3 years before I asked for a special thing with rails to get up to my trailer. Because they have to know you. They have to trust you. You have to be part of the family so to speak before you can start asking for stuff.'

'So I would say that my experience has been that when they want you in this business, they will do anything for you. And they will try to really accommodate you. Because they have an investment in you. If they picked you out of so many other people, they do have an investment in you at that point.'

'And since I have done this series, auditions have been coming up more regularly. But I broke through that – the producer, my boss, gave me that break. Then so many agents wanted me because I got the series. Agents that wouldn't see me for 10, 15 years. So, it is hard to get that first foot in the door.'

Creating change

Media have a reflexive role in society. Focus group participants discussed how the media reflect public perceptions about disability: 'I guess the one thing that strikes me – I just think the public in general have a negative, visceral reaction to disabilities. So of course that transposes into what is produced.' However, public perception of disability does not necessarily correspond to the reality of the disability experience. Media, however, can be an important mechanism in creating a new image of disability. As one participant said:

'This is how we are going to change the perception of disability. ... It's going to be done by film and television and our media, and our print ads. When people become used to seeing the disabled just like other ethnic groups in the past, we'll become inured to the scariness and it will be just like "Oh, this person is just different." '

Participants also recognised that the involvement and support of key individuals in the film and television industry is necessary to create change in the portrayal and hiring of actors with disabilities. A participant with a physical disability commented on how he was used in multiple scenes because of his visible disability:

'Now that's a director who can adjust, who actually wanted it to look real. A real commuter scene has people with disabilities in it. A real commuter scene shows a person in a wheelchair.'

Others saw the cusp of change through outlets such as cable television, emerging writers with disabilities, and the next generation of television and film industry workers: 'But when I meet with current film students from Columbia or NYU [New York University], I feel like that generation, maybe their 20s, early 30s, they're very open.' Participants discussed the industry, and particularly casting directors or producers, as being rigid in their interpretation of characters and storylines. For them, the message actors with disabilities want to convey is be open, be creative, be authentic – 'we are more.'

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to provide a baseline description of the employment of actors with disabilities within the context of the film and television industry. This study illustrates that individuals with disabilities encounter similar, as well as unique, difficulties just like others pursuing an acting career. Similar to the majority of actors, those with disabilities experience high levels of unemployment, jobs lasting only a few days, and extremely low earnings requiring income from other sources. However, actors with disabilities also face unique barriers to gaining employment in the entertainment industry such as being exclusively considered for disability-specific roles; fear that disclosure or a request for accommodation will trigger stereotypes or stigma by employers regarding their ability to do the job; and lack of physical access to the audition and work site. Focus group participants described long days and waits as frequently part of a production schedule and their concern that they would be perceived as demanding or 'a problem' through accommodation requests.

Overall the majority of working actors are predominantly White, mostly male and young. Several reports demonstrate a discrepancy in hiring practices based on gender and age. Whereas a gender bias favouring males is consistent with the literature, a much larger gap appears when comparing male and female actors with disabilities. Female SAG members with disabilities accounted for 6.9% of lead and supporting roles in 2003 compared to 38.5% of females in the general membership. This finding suggests the need for further research which explores the ways in which gender interacts with disability, and how these factors accompanied by ethnicity may compound difficulties actors with disabilities face in being cast.

In contrast to overall trends suggesting actors under age 40 years occupy a larger share of roles, those with disabilities aged 40 years and over fared better than their younger counterparts. This difference may be in part due to the large percentage of participants in this study aged 40 years and over. Alternative explanations requiring further investigation include an association of older age with disability, where disability may seem a more appropriate and realistic trait of older persons. This finding also raises the question of whether disability portrayal is viewed as more appropriate or acceptable among characters of a certain gender, ethnicity or age.

This study provides baseline data on a previously ignored group, but is limited in two ways. The Diversity, Special Skills and Talent Survey used to identify SAG members with disabilities for this study focused primarily on capturing information about actors with more visible disabilities. As the Special Skills and Talent Survey was used largely for actors to specify characteristics of interest for the purposes of casting, it is not known how many SAG actors may have a disability, but did not see a benefit in disclosing. It is also important to keep in mind when interpreting the results that this study focused on actors who had worked enough at some point to qualify for SAG membership. There may be many other individuals with disabilities pursuing an acting career, who do not yet qualify for membership in unions such as SAG. Further research is needed to continue to provide a fuller picture of employment by examining the career trajectory of actors with disabilities. As one focus group participant stated: 'Zeroes speak louder than invisibility.'

The presence of disability in film and television continues to be disproportionate to the actual number of individuals with disabilities and is often used for purposes of storytelling. Findings from this study demonstrate that actors with disabilities perceive a lack of opportunities to audition and be cast in roles where disability is not central to the character. Furthermore, actors with disabilities did not necessarily feel their opportunities were any better for disability-specific roles. Focus group participants commented that many characters with disabilities are played by those without. A rare example of an actor who has a disability and whose character's disability is incidental to the story is Robert David Hall who plays Dr. Al Robbins, the coroner on the television series *CSI*.

The way disability is chosen to be represented in film and television has major implications for actors with disabilities. To a certain extent the opportunities that exist for actors with disabilities are related to the way in which those in the entertainment industry choose to interpret the meaning of disability, whether it has to do with perceived abilities of the actor or interpretation of a character. This points to the need for writers, casting directors and key individuals in the production process to think of disability in different ways. Many participants felt that change was possible with the advent of new film and television professionals in the industry, including an emergence of writers with disabilities. Expanding how the entertainment industry thinks about disability creates opportunities for actors with disabilities to showcase their talent, change attitudes and propel the creative process.

Address for correspondence
    Katharine Hayward,
    University of California,
    Los Angeles Tarjan Center
    300 UCLA Medical Plaza
    Suite 3316
    Los Angeles,
    California 90095–6967,
    USA.
    Email: KHayward@mednet.ucla.edu

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