[INside the OUTcomes: A Rehabilitation Research Podcast](https://www.youtube.com/@centerforrehabilitationout390/podcasts)

Episode 21: Enhancing the Accessibility of Air Travel for People with Disabilities  
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SHARON PARMET, HOST:

Welcome to [INside the OUTcomes: A Rehabilitation Research Podcast](https://www.sralab.org/research/labs/cror/projects/inside-outcomes-rehabilitation-research-podcast). I'm your host, Sharon Parmet.

On this episode, I'll be talking about a new [$2.5 million, five-year grant](https://www.sralab.org/research/labs/cror/news/improving-airline-travel-people-physical-disabilities) to generate new knowledge that will improve air travel for people with physical disabilities. Grant, funded by the National Institute on Disability, Independent Living and Rehabilitation Research, is led by [Dr. Shu Cole](https://news.iu.edu/live/profiles/862-shu-cole), Professor of Health and Wellness Design in the Indiana University School of Public Health, Bloomington. Researchers in the [Center of Rehabilitation Outcomes Research](https://www.sralab.org/research/labs/cror), including CROR Director, [Dr. Allen Heinemann](https://www.sralab.org/researchers/allen-heinemann-phd), and [Dr. Jacqueline Kish](https://www.sralab.org/researchers/jacqueline-kish-phd-otrl), a postdoctoral fellow in CROR, are co-investigators on the grant. My guests today are Dr. Cole and Dr. Kish. So welcome to the podcast.

DR. COLE:

Thank you for having me.

DR. KISH:

Thank you, Sharon

SHARON:

Dr. Cole, I would like to start with you. Can you provide a general overview of the grant and its components?

DR. COLE:

Okay, Sure. First of all, thank you for having me today. This grant is about the air travel experience for people with disabilities. And we know that flying can be stressful for any for anyone but is especially challenging for people with disabilities.

A lot of travelers with disabilities have reported facing significant barriers during air travel, and the research has confirmed these challenges. For example, one of the biggest concerns for wheelchair users is the risk of their chair being damaged during the flight. If that happens, they might not even be able to participate in the activities they have planned for once they get to their destination. And even for older adults who have mobility limitations can also feel very overwhelmed by the long distances they have to walk at airports. So although airlines and airports try to provide a seamless experience for all customers, people with disabilities often don't experience the same level of ease or comfort during travel as passengers without disabilities. And because of these barriers, some people with disabilities end up avoiding air travel altogether.

So this project is about finding ways to improve the air travel experience for people with physical disabilities and older adults who develop mobility issues as they age.

And the project has three main components in this in this five-year project. First of all, we will conduct both qualitative and quantitative research to better understand the travel barriers and what makes air travel more accessible for people with physical disabilities and older adults from different cultural and ethnic backgrounds. We will

start by reviewing the literature on the barriers and facilitators of air travel for people with disabilities, including looking at policies, regulations and the current practices in passenger travel. So we hope that this will help us identify any unmet needs in making air travel more accessible and inclusive.

So after the literature review, we will collect data from focus groups. Responses will inform a national survey, and these results will give us important insights on how airlines and airports could improve their services for customers with disabilities and older passengers. So that was the first component.

So the second component of the project is to develop an accessibility training program for aviation employees. And in this effort, we will collaborate with ODO, the [Open Doors Organization](https://opendoorsnfp.org/), to develop that training program. So currently, the airlines are already providing their own accessibility-related training. And ODO has been a major force in providing the various accessibility related training for aviation services. However, the training needs to be standardized and they need to be more accessible and more flexible for employees to participate in. So together with ODO, we will develop research based training that includes microlearning modules and hands on sessions. The ODO will also pilot the program with an airline. The goal here is to develop a standardized accessibility training protocol that aviation services can adopt in improving their own training. So that was the third component, but that was a second component.

The third component of the project involves sharing our research findings and our activities with stakeholders through newsletters, social media and podcast, like what we're doing right now. We will also create an online clearinghouse of air travel resources for people with disabilities. The goal is to provide accessible and easily digestible information on accessible air travel using tools such as infographics and one-page notecards. So those are the three main components of our project.

SHARON:

To give a little bit more context, can you describe someone with disabilities, a hypothetical person, and what it might be like to take a flight? What are some of the barriers they may face?

DR. COLE:

Well, for example, since wheelchair users can't use their own chair to stay in their own chair during the flight, they have to be transferred from an aisle chair to the airplane seat. So unfortunately, some passengers can sometimes get injured during the transfer when airline staff are helping them. And another big concern is that many in-flight lavatories are not accessible for wheelchair users. Of course, these barriers are not limited to just the airport or the flight ground transportation that doesn't accommodate wheelchairs. Shuttle buses with broken lifts, or the lack of assistance with luggage from the parking lot to the terminal are all issues. And sometimes when people use trying to rent an automobile, some people have to pay more for a larger vehicle in order to get hand controls. So these are all of our issues. During the travel journey from leaving home to get to the parking lot, from parking lot to the terminal and from terminal to the gate and then to ground transportation. So our goal is to hopefully making this travel experience to be seamless and overcome these barriers.  
  
SHARON:

Dr. Kish, so transportation and travel for people with disabilities is a main research interest of yours. And you were even a former guest on the podcast talking about accessible travel. Can you talk a little bit about your role in this grant coming from the Center for Rehabilitation Outcomes Research?

DR. KISH:

Yes. Thank you for this great question.

My primary responsibility collaborating on this grant is going to be focused on the qualitative research components. And there are two components. The first is to organize local and national focus groups to explore the air travel experiences of people with physical disabilities from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds. So these focus groups will center on personal experiences, the interpretation of barriers to travel and the role that air travel does or doesn't play in their lives.

The second part of the qualitative research for this project is a participatory approach using accessible visual media. Usually, we call this approach photo voice, which is where people take pictures of their experiences and describe them in their own words. But because of the dynamic nature of flying and all of the various processes and procedures that you heard from Dr. Cole, other media like videos, voice memos or written memos might be more accessible and available, as well as being safer to document experiences for participants traveling on, traveling and flight. So this part of the project seeks to capture activities throughout the air travel journey from the very beginning of planning and booking that flight to preflight preparations to the flight and post-flight activities. C

So this project aims to provide a nuanced and detailed description of those barriers and facilitators in air travel, including those encountered in regular operation and in such situations when unexpected things happen, which they often do when you're flying. So again, this research seeks to really delve into the personal experiences, emotions and challenges that are experienced by individuals during air travel in order to capture really their firsthand accounts and their perspectives involving people with physical disabilities. Our research promotes inclusion and ensures that their voices are heard and considered in decision making.

Both of these activities are intended to inform the development of a survey that's tailored for a much broader sample. So we're first trying to capture experiences in detail, and then we're going to open this up and ask everyone, Hey, is this true for you? What's different for you or do you agree? So both of these activities are aimed to inform the development of a survey that's tailored for a much broader sample. So with these qualitative research activities, we're trying to capture experiences in detail and prioritize things that are happening often for folks and then ask everyone via survey, you know, is this true for you? Do you agree? Are these the main issues or for you what is different so that we can inform future training, dissemination and advocacy efforts.

SHARON:

Right. So the results of the participatory research is going to feed into a survey and that survey will be a nationwide survey of people with disabilities who use airline travel.

DR. KISH:

That survey will be disseminated to people nationally who utilize air travel.

SHARON:

And I know from our previous conversations in the last podcast that transportation equity is really important to you and it's one of your main interests. Can you discuss a little more like what is travel equity and why is it important?

DR. KISH:

So to start off, the Air Carrier Access Act is a law that makes it illegal for airlines to discriminate against passengers because of their disability. But just because discrimination is prohibited, it does not necessarily assure accessibility.

Speaking from my own perspective, I view accessibility as a much more nuanced experience that's determined by people with disabilities. So some examples. You know, if somebody cannot board a plane in the way that they prefer

because airline staff are either not able to or willing to comply with transfer techniques that Dr. Cole referenced to make the consumer feel safe, then to me, that's not accessible. You know, if there's unexpected construction that requires a major detour within the airport causing someone to risk missing their plane, or when that detour has stairs and they use a wheelchair for mobility, or the automatic door for the bathroom in the airport is out of service. All of those are not accessible.

So this idea of accessibility or sometimes the lack thereof can really impact community participation and integration, inclusion and to community settings that demand a means to travel. So travel is really important to travel to specialized doctors who are not available where they might live. You need to fly there. Similarly, to attend social or cultural events, you may need to travel to another city also for work reasons, right? To travel, to meetings or conferences, and also for leisure or vacation. So accessible air travel can better support these types of participation, which is why I think that this project matters so much as we investigate the barriers, but also facilitators. What are the things that help people get to where they need to go in order to improve the systems, the training and efforts towards improved participation?

DR. COLE:

Can I add one thought? I wanted to talk about the importance of travel for aging adults, right? So older adults, they probably have a set of social networks, but as they got older, they still want to keep connected with their social network. So air travel can help them to continue that relationship with their family, friends and people they want to see. But the travel, the barriers that they have encountered have reduced their participation in air travel, which means that they can only see people that they can drive to see, but not necessarily through air travel. So that's why it is important for not only people who have been having a disability for most of their lives, but also for older adults who are aging to about mobility limitations.

SHARON:

Can you talk a little bit more about the partnership with the Open Doors organization? What are they? What do they do? How will they be involved in the grant?

SHARON:

Okay, so you had already been with Shirley, Ryan AbilityLab for some other services?

DR. COLE:

Okay, so ODO, Open Doors Organization, is a nonprofit organization located in Chicago, and their mission is to make travel and tourism accessible for people with disabilities. And they provide accessibility training for many travel services domestically and internationally. It offers a range of training programs to try and to help businesses to enhance their service quality and also to ensure their accessibility compliance.

For example, ODO currently provides the DOT approved Mandatory Complaints Resolution official training for over two dozen U.S. and international airlines. I don't know if people know about this. Department of Transportation requires that airlines have a compliance resolution official who can respond to complaints from passengers with disabilities. And these roles must go through training, initial training and refresher training. So open doors, organization, conduct these training that's approved by DOT for, of course, several airlines internationally and domestically. They also offer training for over 2,000 airline service providers such as wheelchair pushers or sighted guide. And they have also they also provide mobility device stowage, training program and a disability awareness training program. So they're truly the leading organization specializing in accessibility training for the aviation industry.

So in this project, we have collaborated with ODO in the past on several different accessible travel and hospitality programs. So now what we would like to work with them is to improve their training program, existing training

programs. We would like to work with airlines and airports to see, to identify their training needs so that we can standardize the training that is being offered by ODO and are creating new programs that meet the needs of airlines and airports. And they have agreed to pilot test this training program with one of their airline clients. So the results of that, the effectiveness of that training will help us to develop a standardized training protocol for the aviation services.

SHARON:

It sounds like a very exciting grant. I am happy to be personally a part of it, working on some of the knowledge translation components, and I'm sure that we'll have you back on the podcast to report back on findings and results.

Thank you both for being on the podcast and until next time. Have a great day. And. This has been INside the OUTcomes: A Rehabilitation Research Podcast. I'm your host, Sharon Parmet, signing off.