

Introduction to Disability Oppression

Oppression & Justice (Fall 2013)

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First-Person Perspectives

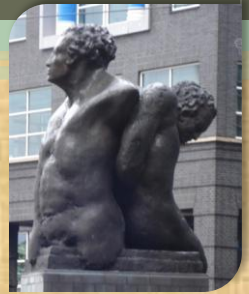


- Aimee Mullins on TEDTalks
- What are some ways in which stereotypes or misperception of disability can negatively affect disabled individuals' identities?
- What are some of the small-scale and large-scale barriers to well-being that impaired individuals generally face in today's society?
 - Is diminishing these barriers merely a matter of non-interference?

What Is Ableism?

- **Ableism:** discrimination against, disregard for, or oppression against those who are viewed as disabled or physically/mentally “abnormal”
 - Relies on assumption that impairment is a defect, rather than a dimension of difference
 - Related to **able-bodied** and **able-minded biases**
- **Erroneous assumptions behind ableism*:**
 - 1) Chronic illness or disability precludes possibility of happiness, well-being
 - 2) If a disabled person experiences isolation, powerlessness, poverty, unemployment, or low social status, these are inevitable consequences of biological limitation

Disability & Impairment



- **Impairment:** “associated with a particular medical condition, which may (or may not) lead to a disability, with a disability being associated with various social and political restrictions” (Smith 18)
 - Can be associated with talents, benefits
- **Union of the Physically Impaired Against Segregation:**
 - “Disability is the loss or limitation of opportunities to take part in the normal life of community on an equal level with others due to physical and social barriers” (qtd. in Smith 19)
- **World Health Organization**
 - “an identifiable variation of human functions” with three dimensions: “impairments, activity limitations and participation restrictions” (qtd. in Ells 599)

Some Models of Disability*

	Interpretation	Understanding of Disability/Disorder
Medical/Biological Models	full-essentialist individual deficiency interpretation (FEID)	Disability is caused by fixed medical characteristics that inevitably prelude a life of deficiency and 'abnormality'.
	part-essentialist individual deficiency interpretation (PEID)	Whilst disability is caused by the above medical characteristics, these can be partially alleviated by changes in the social environment, so as to enable some degree of 'normal living'.
Social Models	politics of disablement interpretation (POD)	Disability is caused by social practices that systematically exclude impaired people from the activities of 'normal citizenship'.
	social construction of disablement interpretation (SCOD)	Disability is caused by the way impairments are defined and associated with characteristics that are necessarily assumed to have a negative impact on personal identity, development, and fulfillment.

*Chart from Smith, pg. 22

Interpreting Disability

- **Biological determinism**
 - Impairment necessarily results in disability.
 - Disability is a) caused by biological mechanisms within the individual and b) inherently a negative experience that entails suffering or deficiency.
 - “denial of the common social experiences which unite disabled people, and a focus on medical dimensions of difference” (T. Shakespeare)

Interpreting Disability

- As a social process
 - Disability as a direct result of social, economic, and political barriers
 - Disability as a minority, oppressed group
 - Disability as a social policy category
 - Disability as a studied category of persons
 - Disability as a cultural category informed by discursive practices
- In relation to the continued oppression of disabled persons, what difference does it make how the condition is interpreted or modeled?

Dimensions of Oppression

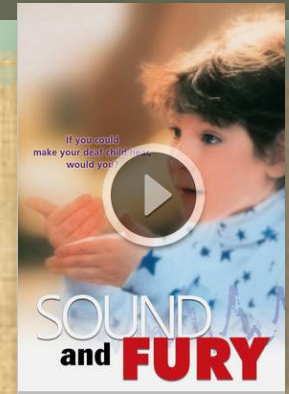
- “systems or structures that marginalize [disabled] people for political-economic and sociocultural reasons” (Charlton 22)
- Oppressive systems can create
 - Acute dependency
 - Exclusion/lack of participation
 - Limited social and educational environments
 - Internalization of ableism
 - Alienation from self, others, humanity



Dimensions of Oppression

- Political-Economic
 - On average, far less power, privilege, and opportunities
 - Can be reliant on other individuals or welfare
 - → reinforces stereotypes of pitiful, weak, diminished, useless existence
- Sociocultural
 - Subject to increasing pathologization, medicalization
 - → infantilization, paternalism, pressures to conform medically
 - Images of being defective, deformed, abnormal, freakish

Discussion: *Sound and Fury*



- Given the numerous barriers to well-being that disabled persons can face, what are the distinctive moral responsibilities of parents who have deaf children? What are moral reasons for and against cochlear implants at a young age?
- What is your evaluation of the reasoning presented by the hearing parents in this film?
- For individuals wanting to combat disability oppression, how should they respond to movements like Deaf Pride?

Additional References

- Asch, Adrienne. “Disability, Bioethics, and Human Rights” in *Handbook of Disability Studies*. Eds. Gary L. Albrecht, Katherine Delores Seelman. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, Inc., 2001: 297-326.
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- Smith, Steven R. "Social Justice and Disability: Competing Interpretations of the Medical and Social Models". *Arguing about Disability: Philosophical Perspectives*. Eds. Kristjana Kristiansen, Simo Vehmas, and Tom Shakespeare. New York: Routledge, 2009. 15-29.
- Ells, Carolyn. “Lessons about Autonomy from the Experience of Disability.” *Social Theory and Practice* 27.4 (October 2001): 599-615.

Questions? Comments?