
A tiny and very incomplete guide to ableism

I think you are compassionate and kind. Sadly, society isn't. This pamphlet isn't made to shame you, or to tell you what 'bad' things you are saying or doing. Instead, it is an attempt to show you how the system we live in oppresses disabled people. By knowing how this system works, we can fight ableism – the oppression of disabled people – together.

Ableism is an under discussed, yet very pervasive form of oppression. It's very common, but few people are aware of it. A definition can never cover the whole subject and all of its forms. That's why I'm going to start off by introducing two types of thinking instead.

Way of thinking one:

The Social Model

The social model comes down to the following: it's not the functioning of our bodies or brains that limit us, but the way society is built. It proposes we change society in such a way that all bodies and all brains are accepted, respected, and supported. As an example: a deaf person not hearing is not the problem. The problem is that sign language has not been seen as a legitimate way of communicating up until the 1960's.¹ Still, not many people are able to communicate in sign language. A social model way of including deaf people would be to make sign language widely available instead forcing them to use audible language.

Second way of thinking:

The Medical Model

The medical model is how most people, usually unconsciously, currently think about disability. Instead of changing society, the medical model looks to change the individual to fit into society. In this model a strict mold of what a human should be is forced onto everyone. It consists of a list of abilities a person is expected to have, like being able to walk or to speak with your mouth parts.

Using a wheelchair, or a text-to-speech computer are not seen as legitimate solutions. In many cases, when a medical intervention is not available, people are segregated from society.

An example of medical-model-thinking is choosing to give a deaf person cochlear implants² instead of teaching them sign language. Hearing and speaking with mouth parts is the most common way of communication. Medical intervention is then used to make people conform.

Another example is conversion therapy. While this example comes from a movement outside of disability justice it does show very clearly how medical-model-thinking works. Conversion, or ex-gay therapy, is based on the flawed idea you can train someone not to be gay. Here, again, there is a societal norm: being straight. Then there is a medical intervention to make people conform, in this case harmful 'therapy'.³

This example shows us two very important things:

- 1) The ableist mold is narrow but malleable over time. What is considered a disability is arbitrary and changes all the time.
- 2) Ableism has the tendency to wedge itself in all kinds of nooks and crannies of other oppressions.

Let's delve deeper into that last point:

Vertical intersectionality

Coined by Mel Bags⁴, vertical intersectionality refers to a form of oppression at the root of another.

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- 2 Cochlear implants are medical devices implanted in a deaf person's skull to make them hear.
 - 3 Conversion therapy also intersects with ableism because homosexuality is, in these cases, still seen as a mental illness. This used to be the official position of the American Psychiatric Association until 1972.
 - 4 Mel Bags was a disability justice badass. They advocated for the rights of (nonverbal) autistics and other disabled people. Mel refused to live in an institution, where society thought they belonged. You can find the article here: <https://ballastexistenz.wordpress.com/2016/05/01/there-is-ableism-somewhere-at-the-heart-of-your-oppression-no-matter-what-your-oppression-might-be/>

1 <https://www.startasl.com/history-of-sign-language/>

Take for example the racist and disproven notion that black people have lower IQ's. Underneath that statement lies the assumption a person isn't worthy of respect, dignity, or even life if their IQ dips below a certain value. The ability to learn is deemed so important that it defines the way we can treat people. So, underneath this racist statement we find an ableist one. If we learn to recognize the ableist assumptions underneath other oppressions, we can tackle those oppressions more effectively. Understanding ableism will make us better activists.

To deepen your understanding as much as I can in a pamphlet as small as this, I'll send you off with two common micro aggressions.

Inspiration Porn

A common way to talk about disabled people is to describe them as inspirational. Disability, in this case, is seen as an inherently bad thing and the person 'enduring it' as exceptional. The main problem with this kind of thinking is that it objectifies one group of people for the benefit of another. Disabled people are living their lives, just like you. They do this not for your inspiration, but for themselves.

The Supercrip

Considering a disability as something bad that has to be overcome has another form. Sometimes a disability is presented as something that needs to be counter weighed by extraordinary feats or qualities. It suggests human worth is not innate to a person but needs to be earned with certain abilities. If one of those abilities is missing, human worth needs to be deserved by another ability.

An example of this a joke from the badly aged TV show *How I met Your Mother*. The show's womanizer explains his 'hot/crazy scale'. A woman needs to have a certain amount of hotness to redeem unconventional behavior.

Looking at these ways of thinking and these concepts we can start to form a definition of ableism. It's not just seeing people with a disability as inferior to others. It's having a very strict mold in mind of what a person can and

should be, of how a person can and should behave, and to also always expect them to be able to do so.

If you want to read more than just this:

*Kafer, Alison, *Feminist, Queer, Crip*, 2013

*Taylor, Sunaura, *Beasts of Burden. Animal and Disability Liberation*, 2017

*Young, Stella, *I'm not your inspiration, thank you very much*, TED talk, 2014

*ballastexistenz.wordpress.com

cool youtube channels:

*Jessica Kellgren-Fozard

*Bootstrap paradox

*First as Tragedy

This was written as a short primer on ableism for the people of Taste Before You Waste Utrecht. Want to know more or talk? Get in touch with Renate.

Feel free to spread or duplicate this pamphlet.