

Ableism Fact Sheet

The term “ableism” refers to stereotypes, negative attitudes (prejudice) and acts (discrimination), as well as the promotion of subtle and direct social oppression aimed at people with disabilities, the largest minority group in the United States. Ableism serves as a means—sometimes intentional, sometimes not—to marginalize the experiences, contributions, and well-being of disabled people.

Disability encompasses conditions, which are broadly defined, to include physical, intellectual, developmental, and sensory disabilities, as well as less apparent or “invisible” disabilities, such as mental health issues and chronic health conditions, among others.

Ableism occurs when nondisabled people and their psychosocial, physical, and health qualities are arbitrarily idealized, which simultaneously undermines or supplants the status of people with disabilities.

Ableism occurs when any individual is not recognized as being fully human because they do not conform with perceived norms or standards (e.g., being born with a congenital disability, such as missing a left arm). The emphasis on perfection is tied to the Eugenics movement in early 20th century America and Nazi Germany.

Ableism often operates subtly and unconsciously, meaning that many times these biases are implicit; in other words, non-disabled people may be completely unaware of their prejudice and the ways in which their behavioral is detrimental

Ableism has a cumulative, harmful effect on disabled people. Even within the disability population, those with certain disabilities (or multiple disabilities), such as people with cognitive, intellectual, and psychiatric disabilities experience the most severe stigma.

Ableism is studied by psychologists and also is associated with the field known as Disability Studies, a discipline dedicated to characterizing and exploring disability as a social, political, and cultural state of being.

Ableism often occurs when a nondisabled person offers un-sought help to a disabled individual in an everyday setting (e.g., racing to a bank of elevators to press the call button before a person in a wheelchair has the chance to do the same for herself). When done in a very public way, such interferences garners positive reactions from nondisabled bystanders, who see the “helper” as a good citizen. The fact that such acts are annoying or even infantilizing to the recipient is overlooked.

Ableism occurs when disabled people are pitied or blamed for their disabilities or the consequences all too often associated with being disabled (e.g., low income, under- or unemployment, limited educational opportunities, limited social mobility). At the same time, ableism is present when a particular disabled person is praised or recognized for accomplishing

something that would go unnoticed and unmarked if performed by a nondisabled person. Disabled children who serve as “team mascots,” “biggest fans,” or “team managers” are often celebrated (however briefly) in this manner, which makes the audience of nondisabled people feel good about themselves. This is also referred to as “inspiration porn”.

Ableism is analogous to other forms of social oppression, such as racism, sexism, and heterosexism. Ableism also co-occurs with these other forms of social oppression. For multiply marginalized disabled individuals, it is important to acknowledge and recognize the systemic weight of this.

Ableism is especially problematic during crises like the Covid-19 pandemic because there is a very real danger that disabled individuals could be denied necessary or even lifesaving care due to the presumption that their conditions make them somehow less worthy of intervention (e.g., they likely won’t survive the virus if infected, so why waste precious resources on them?). This situation is further complicated by the growing evidence that Black and Latino communities are disproportionately affected by COVID-19 and may also be disproportionately affected by ableist policies.

In health care settings, some medical providers operate under their presumption that disability results in a lesser quality of life. Although the scientific research does not substantiate that assumption, it is pervasive throughout society and in health care. These ableist beliefs fail to take into account the insider perspective of disabled people themselves.

For additional reading:

Bogart, K. R., & Dunn, D. S. (2019). Ableism special issue introduction. *Journal of Social Issues*, 75(3), 650-664.

Nario-Redmond, M. R. (2019). *Ableism: The causes and consequences of disability prejudice*. John Wiley & Sons. More about this book: <https://ableismbook.com>

<http://www.stopableism.org/p/what-is-ableism.html>

<http://cdmns.org/blog/uncategorized/ableism/>