

Disability Prejudice: Causes, Consequences, and Implications for Policymakers

Similar to sexism, racism, and ageism, **ableism** is full of assumptions about what it means to be normal, whose lives are worth living, and why certain types of minds and bodies need to be controlled, protected, or improved. By understanding how ableism manifests at the interpersonal, intergroup, and institutional levels—and engaging disabled people as expert knowers—we can acknowledge the reality that some of the most persistent difficulties disabled people face are not those associated with their biological conditions but rather the damaging policies and practices that fail to include them as equal citizens.

What is disability?

According to the World Health Organization, disability is a status on the rise both globally and in the United States. One in five people currently qualify as living with a disability, and many more will acquire the status on either a permanent or temporary basis the longer they live. Some people are born into disability. The vast majority of impairments, however, occur after birth, through accidental injury or the progression of a disease. According to US projections, given a 75-year life expectancy, newborns will average 11 years with disabilities that limit their activities, and those who live past 75 can expect an additional four to five years of disability.

The concept of disability itself is highly contested. Who qualifies as disabled continues to be a moving target since defining characteristics change depending on source, setting, and historical time period. For example, the same person who is considered disabled at school may not qualify as disabled at work.

To address the complexities, the International Classification of Functioning, Disability, and Health (ICF) defines disability as an umbrella term that incorporates impairments, activity limitations, and participation restrictions.

What is ableism?

Ableism may have evolutionary and existential origins (fear of contagion, fear of death). It may also be rooted in belief systems (Social Darwinism, Meritocracy), language (“suffering from” disability), and unconscious biases.

Ableism can be both blatant and unintentional, involving both hostile and compassionate reactions and practices that compromise the participation and equality of people with disabilities. For example:

Hostile attitudes and interactions may result when feelings of contempt, jealousy, and a sense of begrudging admiration are aroused, which can in turn drive actively harmful behaviors including aggression.

Theories of **ambivalent** prejudice predict that when disabled people are assumed to be incompetent but warm, they are also the targets of disrespectful, condescending attitudes, and infantilizing actions.

Paternalistic attitudes and beliefs have been used to reward disabled people for their subordination, docility, and gratitude with supportive services and care, which then justifies the use of exploitation and control under the guise of protection.

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Effects of ableism

When people feel stressed or threatened by the possibility of being the target of stereotypes or prejudice, their well-being and achievement can be undermined.

One way to cope is through **individualistic strategies** that attempt to escape ableism by distancing or hiding from disability. Yet, deliberately concealing a major aspect of one's self or refusing accommodations can also contribute to self-blame, the internalization of hate, and a sense of hopelessness.

An alternative approach to coping involves **group-level strategies** that focus on improving the status of disabled people as a group. Under certain conditions, pervasive experiences with prejudice trigger stronger identification with the disability community, feelings of pride, and a sense of empowerment to advocate for disability rights.

What works to reduce ableism?

Much anti-prejudice research has focused on interventions to increase contact with minority groups under the assumption that friendly interactions will produce more equitable outcomes.

Increased access to higher education, employment, and public spaces may be more important than friendship when it comes to creating the optimal conditions for contact between groups on an equal status basis.

Some of the most enduring, positive impacts on ableist practices have been policy-based, including structural changes for inclusive integration at school and work, access to the built environment, and anti-discrimination legislation.

Finally, although stereotypes are resistant to change, they can be altered, especially when individuals are sufficiently motivated to update their current understandings. Cultural stereotypes can also change over time in response to changing social circumstances.

References and resources

Nario-Redmond, M.R. (2020). *Ableism: The causes and consequences of disability prejudice*. Hoboken, New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons, Inc. Retrieved from <https://www.wiley.com/en-us/Ableism%3A+The+Causes+and+Consequences+of+Disability+Prejudice-p-9781119142072>

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Download a PDF of this brief at: <https://www.spssi.org/ableism>

Watch a recording of Dr. Michelle R. Nario-Redmond's congressional briefing on ableism at: www.youtube.com/spssi

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