Recognizing, Understanding, and Avoiding Ableism\(^1\)

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Recognizing, Understanding, and Avoiding Ableism

Ableism is ubiquitous, a problem of daily life for people with disabilities as well as nondisabled individuals. The term ableism refers to the stereotyping, prejudice, discrimination, and frequent social oppression directed—knowingly or unknowingly—towards people with disabilities (Bogart & Dunn, in press-a). Sometimes ableism is blatant, as when a nondisabled person expresses sympathy or pity to a person with a physical disability (“It’s a shame that you can’t run and play like other boys”); worse still, of course, is obvious prejudice (“Must be nice to sit in that fancy wheelchair and be pushed around by somebody all the time”). Ableism also occurs when a prospective employer interviews a disabled person and then elects not to hire her because he assumes her disability will prevent her from “doing a good job” or will “make clients uncomfortable,” and so on. Ableism can also be subtle, even appearing to be positive, as when a nondisabled stranger offers to help a disabled person open a door, call an elevator, or complete some other mundane task of daily living without being asked to do so (see Dunn, 2019a). This form of “help” appears innocuous to observers, but to the disabled person, it can feel patronizing, even infantilizing. For a detailed discussion of ableism, see Bogart and Dunn (2019, in press-a, b).

Sadly, it is often easier to see ableism in the behavior of others than in how we ourselves act. One reason we don’t recognize our own ableist tendencies is that the majority of us suffer from a self-serving bias, which allows us to assume that our social behavior and engagement with others is either always positive or at least benign (see Dunn, 2019b, for a discussion of various social biases directed at people with disabilities). In other words, if I offer help to a disabled person, that help is sincere; if someone else does the same thing, her intentions are
unknown and could be ableist. To people with disabilities, the nature of such intentions or motivations do not really matter because the situations where they occur quickly become ableist.

**Understanding: Why Does Ableism Occur?**

Why does ableism occur? For various reasons, of course, but very often for a lack of understanding of what the experience of disability is actually like. Most nondisabled people have no experience with disabled individuals, so they often end up projecting their usually negative expectations onto them, concluding that disability must be awful as well as a constant preoccupation (Dunn, 2015, 2019c). Disabled people, who have lived experience, know that disability is but one aspect of their lives—and often a small aspect therein—that only becomes salient when others inquire about it or the situation necessarily draws attention to it (e.g., lack of a ramp or a curb cut, respectively, prevents a wheelchair user from entering a building or navigating a street).

There are many triggers for ableism—that is, ableist thinking or behavior—including:

*Curiosity.* Social psychologically speaking, we are drawn to people who stand out, that is, are salient, for whatever reason. The solo woman in an all-male physics course or the single white player on a team that is most comprised primarily of African-Americans necessarily draw a person’s attention. Similarly, people with disabilities often stand out when they are in a setting—a hotel lobby or an airport lounge, for example—filled with nondisabled people. Observers wonder about how the disability happened (i.e., congenital or acquired?), what it might be like to have it, how it affects daily life, and so on. Unfortunately, while understandable, such curiosity can lead nondisabled people to reach erroneous conclusions about people with disabilities.

*Desire to be “helpful.”* The problem posed by trying to be helpful or a “good person” around disabled individuals was mentioned earlier. Such acts seem benevolent on the surface but
send a message to the disabled person that “I believe you cannot do basic things for yourself” or “I know you are dependent on people like me,” and so on. The wise choice for nondisabled people who sincerely wish to help is to wait for the disabled person to ask for help—rest assured, if help is needed, it will be sought. If no request is made, then no help is needed. This approach can be a challenge for some people in our culture—they truly wish to “do good” in the world—but they fail to realize how tiring it would be to have one’s abilities to be routinely questioned by others—often by perfect strangers—on a daily basis.

*Unrealized privilege.* Oddly, perhaps, the desire to be helpful or the act of helping can actually mask other ableist tendencies on the part of nondisabled people. Being helpful to a stranger who happens to be disabled is a form of ableism because it sends a social message to other causal observers that the nondisabled person is doing a good deed, an act of _noblesse oblige_ that accrues social credit from others (i.e., affirming smiles, knowing nods; see Dunn, 2019c). In turn, the helper experiences positive affect, feeling good about helping “this fellow who is much worse off than me” (e.g., Isen, 1987; Steger, Kashdan, & Oishi, 2008). This sort of intervention represents a form of privilege for some nondisabled people who end up feeling, thinking, and acting in a manner that promotes their social and psychological interests over those of people with disabilities (see Dunn, 2019c, Goodley, 2014, Perrin, 2019, and Wolbring, 2007, for greater detail regarding this argument).

*Prejudice, discrimination, and stigma.* People with disabilities represent a minority group (perhaps the largest one in the United States) and disability is a marker of minority status similar to race, gender, sexual orientation, social class, and religion, among other possibilities (Dunn & Hammer, 2014). Yet many people do not see disabled persons as being a minority; indeed, they are sometimes referred to as an “invisible minority” group because their conditions are not
viewed like more familiar minority markers (e.g., Dunn, 2019c). However, as a minority group, they are often subjected to prejudicial attitudes and discriminatory acts because they are perceived as being different. Disability, then, can also be a form of stigma (Goffman, 1963; Jones et al., 1984), leading to negative perceptions from others. In short, some nondisabled people engage in ableist actions simply because they view disabled persons as being different from themselves—they are simply members of a group seen as distinctly different from their own (e.g., Corrigan, 2014; Crocker, Major, & Steele, 1998).

**Avoiding Ableism: Acquiring Some Cultural Competence Regarding Disability**

How can nondisabled individuals avoid reacting in ableist ways when they encounter people with disabilities? First, nondisabled people must come to recognize disability as another form of diversity. By doing so, they can begin to develop cultural competence and learn how and when to appropriately engage with people with disabilities (e.g., Andrews et al., 2019; Forber-Pratt, Mueller, & Andrews, 2019; Dunn & Andrews, 2015). Second, until widespread educational efforts and policy work tackle ableism, there are basic steps anyone can remember when interacting with people with disabilities. These include the following, which were adapted from Andrews et al. (2019), Dunn (2015, 2019c) and Wright (1983):

- Don’t link disability with suffering or assume a disabled person’s daily life is negative.
- Focus on the person and not his or her disability; remember, it is only one of the person’s qualities.
- Being curious is understandable, but do not ask about a disability unless the person who has it bring the matter up.
Never use false euphemisms for disability, such as “special,” “multi-abled,” “physically challenged,” or “handi-capable.” Terms like these are inherently ableist because they imply that disability is a bad thing.

Don’t be solicitous: Offer help only when a disabled individual asks for it.

Avoid using ableist clichés (e.g., “that’s lame,” “the blind leading the blind”) in writing or speech.

Inspirational stories about disabled people who overcame great problems seem positive but they are usually ableist, as is trying to find inspiration in the experience of a disabled individual you just met.

Address disabled people directly as your equal: Don’t try to find out the person’s needs by asking an attendant or family member.

Don’t ask people with disabilities personal questions that you would not want to answer if asked.

These guidelines are a good beginning for avoiding ableism—but they are only a start. Psychology professionals—practitioners, researchers, educators, and students—as well as anyone who wants to be an ally of people with disabilities must learn to be vigilant for both obvious and more nuanced instances of ableism in everyday exchanges as well as in traditional and social media outlets. Work to recognize ableism and redress it.
References


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