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## Disability, Stigma, and the Pursuit of Social Justice: Future Research Directions

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### Recommended Citation

Hossen, M. M., & Reed, B. (2023). Disability, Stigma, and the Pursuit of Social Justice: Future Research Directions. *Journal of Applied Rehabilitation Counseling*, 54(4), 287-299. <https://doi.org/10.1891/JARC-2023-0015>

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## **Disability, Stigma, and the Pursuit of Social Justice: Future Research Direction**

This conceptual paper aims to analyze the interrelated problems of disability, stigma, and the pursuit of social justice, describe how these problems affect the lives of people with disabilities (PWD), and propose future lines of research. The paper will discuss the different initiatives and strategies that have been used to advance social justice for PWD such as campaigns to improve accessibility, dispel myths and prejudices, and promote the interests and rights of PWD. Highlighted will be the complexity and subtleties of the pursuit of social justice for PWD. This article will contribute to the ongoing conversation about disability, stigma, and the pursuit of social justice as well as highlight the struggles and victories faced by people with disabilities in their quest for equality and inclusion in society. The article will conclude with recommendations for promoting social justice, decreasing stigma, and future research recommendations.

### **Background of Disability, Stigma, & Social Justice**

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC] (2020), disability is a phrase used to describe any physical, cognitive, or mental impairment that interferes with a person's everyday activities and social interactions. Quality of life and stigma is a social construct that is built on unfavorable opinions, prejudice, and discrimination attached to a specific group or identity; on the other hand, the fair and equal allocation of resources, opportunities, and rights within a society is referred to as social justice.

The inner relationship between disability, stigma, and social justice has influenced numerous historical, social, cultural, and political variables. For example, disability has been viewed as marginalization, exclusion, and oppression in Western societies for a long time

(Agmon et al., 2016). In the past, PWDs were frequently thought of as cursed, possessed, or even divine and they were also regarded as sinners, beggars, or outcasts in medieval Europe (Grant, 2016). According to the U.S. Department of the Interior [USDI] (2017), people with disabilities were confined to institutions, asylums, or workhouses during the 18th and 19th centuries when disability was pathologized and medicalized. Research by Magana-Valladares (2022) suggested that the eugenics movement, which sought to purge the gene pool of "undesirable" features and persons through sterilization, death, and forced segregation, strengthened this segregation.

These historical stereotypes and myths, according to the Rehabilitation Research and Training Center on Aging with Physical Disabilities (2016) represent people with disabilities as helpless, reliant, and inferior to able-bodied people who are at the center of the stigma associated with disability. The media, literature, and popular culture sometimes portray people with disabilities as sorrowful, tragic, or heroic beings who transcend their condition, which has served to maintain this stigma (Maier et al., 2014). The "superscrip" stereotype contributes to the idea that disability is a personal tragedy rather than a social problem by setting up unreasonable expectations (Harris, 2021; Pack et al., 2016; Sutton, 2018). Society has frequently stigmatized people with disabilities as being unable to fully engage in society, which led to discrimination and marginalization (Aspis, 2021).

Discrimination and marginalization can take many different forms including attitudes, beliefs, behaviors, and institutional practices. Due to misconceptions and a lack of knowledge about their capabilities and needs, people with disabilities are frequently the target of stigma (Han et al., 2021). Social justice for individuals with a disability is significantly hampered by stigma, which feeds harmful preconceptions and restricts opportunities for full participation in society (Curtis, 2019). Others may then adopt unfavorable attitudes and actions such as

avoidance, snobbery, or presumptions about their capacity. Additionally, stigmatizing behaviors can result in restrictive access to necessary services and resources as well as discriminatory actions including hiring practices, housing segregation, and educational segregation.

Stigma can result in fewer prospects for employment, education, and social interaction (Link & Phelan, 2022). Internalized oppression, low self-esteem, and feelings of shame and guilt can result from unfavorable attitudes and beliefs about disability. The consequences of stigma can be exacerbated for persons who identify with numerous marginalized identities such as people of color, LGBTQIA+ people, or those from low-income socio-economic status. The cycle of exclusion and marginalization can be further reinforced by the way it can lead to emotions of guilt, loneliness, and low self-esteem (Link & Phelan, 2022).

According to the United Nations Organization [UNO] (2022), more than 1 billion people worldwide, or 15% of the total population, have some kind of disability, yet they are frequently excluded from full participation in social, economic, and political life. Thus, stigma and discrimination still permeate many aspects of life, despite the strides achieved in recent years to increase the inclusion and acceptance of individuals with a disability.

### ***Context of Disability***

Goering (2015) mentioned that an individual's capacity to function freely and fully participate in society can be impacted by a variety of physical, mental, and emotional impairments, which together make up the broad concept of disability. The World Health Organization [WHO], (2022) describes disability as "a complex phenomenon reflecting an interplay between aspects of a person's body and features of the society in which he or she lives."

Therefore, disability can be considered "an umbrella term, covering impairments, activity limitations, and participation restrictions" (WHO, 2022).

The idea of disability is dynamic and has changed over time to reflect shifting attitudes and views about what it means to be disabled. Research by Clarke (2022) suggested that disability has always been seen as a medical or personal issue, a flaw or anomaly that needs to be fixed or eradicated. This focus on rehabilitation and cure rather than the social and environmental barriers hindered persons with disabilities from participating fully in society (Clarke, 2022).

White Vidarte (2021) suggested that a social model of disability was promoted by the disability rights movement, which was born in the middle of the 20th century and opposed the medical model. According to this paradigm, a person's impairments and societal restrictions interact to produce the phenomenon of disability, which is a socially produced phenomenon. The social model holds that a person's impairment is a product of the constraints placed on them by society, rather than a trait that they were born with or acquired (White Vidarte, 2021).

### ***Context of Stigma***

The definition of stigma is "a mark of shame or contempt" (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). Medical sociologists coined the term "stigma" to describe how people who depart from social standards are perceived (Livingston & Rossiter, 2011). Stereotypes, unfavorable views, discrimination, and exclusion from social and economic activity can all be examples of stigma. Stigma in the context of disability refers to unfavorable attitudes and notions held by society toward people with disabilities, which can result in exclusion and discrimination. Stigma can also refer to how people with disabilities internalize these unfavorable beliefs, which causes

them to experience guilt and low self-esteem (Dobson & Stuart, 2021). According to Han et al. (2021), a stigma is an unfavorable stereotype or assumption that is associated with a certain group of people, for example, individuals with disabilities.

When it comes to disabilities, stigma frequently results from a lack of awareness and understanding of the struggles that those with disabilities face (Iezzoni, 2016). Examples of negative stereotypes that can result in discrimination and exclusion include the perception that persons with disabilities are frequently passive, reliant, and unproductive. Stigma has a significant effect on people with disabilities and can have negative effects such as limiting their access to housing, work, education, and other crucial services.

Stigma towards people with disabilities can have serious detrimental effects on their mental and physical health as well as their social and economic well-being (American Psychological Association [APA], 2020). According to the APA (2021), stigma can decrease self-esteem, job opportunities, education, and community involvement and increase anxiety and depression. This can result in a vicious cycle of marginalization and increased harm to people with disabilities. Stigma can cause discrimination and prejudice, lower quality of life, social exclusion, negative impacts on mental health and well-being, and low self-esteem.

According to Kolb et al. (2022), stigma can raise obstacles that make it harder for people with disabilities to access the same opportunities and resources as those without disabilities. For people with disabilities, stigma can result in various negative outcomes including a decreased quality of life and social isolation (Dobson & Stuart, 2021). Accessing the same opportunities and resources as people without disabilities can be made more difficult by stigma, which can lead to obstacles and problems (Kolb et al., 2022). Reduced access to healthcare, work, and education are just a few examples of how stigma may result in a decreased quality of life.

According to Nguyen et al. (2019), developing unfavorable attitudes and ideas about one's disability internally can result in low self-esteem and unfavorable feelings toward oneself, both of which can be harmful to one's mental health. Dobson and Stuart (2021) wrote that stigma may negatively affect people with disabilities' mental health and sense of self-worth in several ways with negative effects. Corrigan and Rao (2012) found that internalizing unfavorable attitudes and beliefs about people with disabilities can result in low self-esteem and depressive thoughts about oneself. Negative mental health effects might also result from social exclusion and isolation (Corrigan & Rao, 2012). Similar studies by Jung et al. (2022) contend that internalizing discriminatory societal attitudes and ideas regarding disability might result in low self-esteem and a negative self-image.

According to Kendall (2019), language and media portrayal may also be to blame for the negative opinions that society has about people with disabilities. When PWDs are subjected to language that is disparaging or insulting, it helps to promote stigmatizing attitudes. Similar studies by Claassens (2013) indicated that media representation of disability that is stereotyped or unduly concentrated on the medical elements of disability can contribute to unfavorable attitudes and beliefs.

PWDs are impacted by the complicated problem of social exclusion in many different facets of their lives. According to Fidzani (2020), social exclusion happens when people are treated unfairly and are stigmatized as being different from the norm. Understanding how social exclusion creates stigma and strengthens inequality for people with disabilities is crucial in the quest for social justice. According to Cook et al. (2018), social exclusion can limit people's engagement in society and result in fewer possibilities for education, work, and healthcare. The negative effects of social exclusion can be severe and pervasive, emphasizing the need for

inclusive policies and practices that address societal attitudes toward people with disabilities at their roots (Hernandez & Schimmel, 2021).

### ***Context of Social Justice***

Bhattarai et al. (2020) described social justice as a concept that aims to ensure that all members of society have equal access to opportunities, resources, and benefits regardless of one's background, ethnicity, gender, religion, or level of impairment. In recent years, there has been an increase in awareness of the need to fight stigma and prejudice against an individual with a disability as well as to advance more social justice and inclusion for people with disabilities. This has prompted initiatives and policy adjustments at the national and international levels. The adoption of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities aims to promote the full and equal participation of people with disabilities in all spheres of life (UNO, 2022).

### **Importance of Social Justice**

Regardless of a person's disability status, social justice aims to promote fair and equitable treatment for all people by addressing systemic disparities. Social justice is a fundamental value that aims to ensure that all members of society have equal access to opportunities, resources, and benefits regardless of one's background, color, gender, religion, or level of impairment (Cox & Maschi, 2022). Social justice, as related to disability, necessitates overcoming the obstacles that impede individuals with a disability from fully participating in society such as stigma, discrimination, and a lack of access to necessary services and resources (Cox & Maschi, 2022).

Adopted in 2006, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) is an important step toward advancing social justice for those with



disabilities. According to Rosenthal (2021), the CRPD established a framework for protecting the rights and dignity of people with disabilities and acknowledges the significance of removing obstacles and advancing equal opportunities for them. In addition to anti-discrimination and accessibility measures, the CRPD also included provisions on the right to work, education, health, and access to information and communication (Steel, 2022).

According to Bonaccio et al. (2019), discrimination in the workplace caused by stigma is a common occurrence for people with disabilities. Although there have been improvements in the field of disability rights, many PWDs still confront formidable obstacles to employment (Bonaccio et al., 2019). Because of unfavorable stereotypes and concerns that they would be unable to perform work adequately, employers frequently hesitate to recruit people with disabilities. Due to high unemployment rates among people with disabilities, social marginalization and poverty may become more severe. The Center for American Progress [CAP] (2019) stated that stigma in the workplace must be eliminated and inclusive employment policies and practices must be promoted (Sundwall, 2019). This could entail making modifications such as flexible work schedules or assistive technology to make sure that people with disabilities can participate in the workforce to the best of their abilities.

The need to confront unfavorable preconceptions and ideas is another crucial part of stigma in the context of social justice for people with disabilities (Devendorf et al., 2020). This can be accomplished through educational and public awareness campaigns, which seek to foster a more welcoming and inclusive society by raising awareness of the experiences of individuals with disabilities. Goering (2015) stressed that education gives people the chance to learn about other people's experiences and to build a more in-depth and sympathetic understanding of

disability. Education can also assist in empowering people with disabilities by giving them the knowledge and abilities they need to fight for their rights and confront prejudice and stigma.

From the perspective of social justice, reducing stigma is also essential as it can lessen prejudice and expand possibilities for people with disabilities. For instance, a study by Tepper and Hwang (2017) discovered that exposure to positive media representations of people with impairments enhanced positive sentiments toward them. The authors concluded that media portrayals are vital in combating stigma and advancing social justice for people with disabilities.

### **Strategies for Promoting Social Justice and Combating Stigma**

To achieve social justice for PWDs, it is necessary to remove social, cultural, and physical barriers that support stigma and discrimination that restrict access to opportunities and resources (CDC, 2020). This can be accomplished by including public education, advocacy, policy changes, and community organizing. A study by Stuart (2016) suggested that to overcome the social and cultural hurdles that support stigma and discrimination, public education and awareness campaigns are crucial strategies. Through these initiatives, misconceptions about people with disabilities can be contested and positive representations of them encouraged. By improving the diversity and portrayal of people with disabilities in television programs, films, and other media, the media can also contribute to the advancement of social justice for people with disabilities.

To advance social justice and reduce stigma against people with disabilities, Loufty (2022) proposed strategies such as activism for and advocacy of disability rights, educational and awareness campaigns as well as policy changes to advance inclusion and accessibility. According to Fisher and Purcal (2016) working to advance the rights and equality of people with disabilities is considered disability rights activism. To combat negative attitudes and policies and

to promote inclusion and accessibility, this can include advocacy work at the individual, community, and policy levels. According to Galer's (2018) research, activism for disability rights entails supporting the rights and equality of people with impairments.

Participating in protests and demonstrations, engaging in media advocacy, offering legal advice and representation, and pushing for legislative changes to improve accessibility and inclusiveness are a few examples of disability rights activism (Bower & Sheppard-Jones (2020). To ensure that public places, transportation, and other services are accessible to PWDs, Galer (2018) also stated that disability rights organizations may advocate for legislative reforms at the local, state, and federal levels. Organizations working for disability rights may utilize media platforms to lobby for change and promote awareness of disability issues such as social media or traditional media. For those with disabilities who have suffered discrimination or had their rights infringed, disability rights organizations may offer legal counsel and support (Bower & Sheppard-Jones, 2020).

Scior et al. (2012) suggested that education and awareness campaigns can aid in enhancing understanding and information regarding disability as well as combating unfavorable attitudes and views. Numerous strategies, including media campaigns, workshops, and seminars, can be used to accomplish this. Examples of education and awareness initiatives include workshops and seminars, media campaigns, instructional resources, disability pride festivals, and more (Scior et al., 2012). To inform the public on issues related to disabilities and to combat ableist attitudes and ideas, organizations may offer workshops and seminars. Educators or medical professionals, for example, maybe the target audience for these events, or they may be available to the general public.

To increase awareness of disability issues and refute unfavorable attitudes and views, disability rights organizations may use media platforms including social media, traditional media, or public service announcements. To inform the public about disability concerns and encourage understanding and inclusion, organizations may offer educational resources like pamphlets, fact sheets, or movies (Scior et al., 2012). Disability pride activities, such as parades or festivals, can promote awareness of issues relating to disabilities and highlight the variety and accomplishments of the disability community.

To encourage inclusion and accessibility for people with disabilities, policy reforms at the municipal, state, and federal levels can be helpful. Guarantee that public areas, transportation, and other resources are accessible, this may entail making modifications to the laws and regulations. The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), the Fair Housing Act (FHA), and accessibility of public transportation are a few examples of policy improvements that encourage inclusion and accessibility. The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) is a federal law that prohibits discrimination against those with disabilities in several contexts, including employment, public accommodations, and transportation. According to the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA, 2020), all public spaces, including governmental and commercial buildings, must be accessible to people with disabilities and set guidelines for accessibility in the built environment.

Similarly, disability-based housing discrimination is illegal under the Fair Housing Act, a piece of federal legislation. It also requires that reasonable modifications be made for those with impairments and that housing be accessible to those with disabilities. To increase the accessibility of public transportation for people with disabilities, policy changes could be undertaken at the municipal, state, and federal levels. For those who are unable to use standard

public transportation, this can entail adding wheelchair ramps to buses and providing paratransit services (ADA, 2020).

To reduce stigma and advance social justice, we can challenge ableist attitudes and conduct in our daily lives (Bogart & Dunn, 2019). Speaking up against ableist speech and conduct, backing organizations and causes that support people with disabilities, and promoting accessibility and inclusion in our communities are a few examples of what this might include. Speaking out against ableist language and other ableist practices are a few examples of how to combat ableist attitudes and actions in daily life (Dunn, 2015). It is crucial to speak up and reject ableist rhetoric when we hear it being used (Williams et al., 2017). This can be accomplished by gently correcting the offender and informing them of the language's negative and offensive implications.

Supporting the disability community and promoting change can be accomplished by contributing time, money, or resources to organizations and issues related to disability rights. Supporting measures and programs that advance accessibility and inclusion, such as the installation of wheelchair ramps or the availability of audio descriptions at events, allow us to speak out for accessibility and inclusion in our communities (Baglieri, 2022). Bogart and Dunn (2019) suggested that learning about disability issues and educating others about them can support inclusion and understanding by posing questions about ableist attitudes and practices.

### **Research gap**

Even though there is a growing body of research on the effects of stigma on people with disabilities, more in-depth studies are still needed to better understand how stigma and the pursuit of social justice for this community are related (APA, 2020). The APA (2021) emphasizes the necessity for research that examines the interaction of various stigmas, such as

those connected to disability, race, gender, and sexual orientation. Research is also required to better understand how stigma affects the social justice efforts and well-being of marginalized groups within the disability community, such as those who have intellectual and developmental disabilities.

In addition, there is a dearth of research on the efficacy of measures taken to advance social justice for people with disabilities and lessen stigma (APA, 2020). For this population, evidence-based interventions for decreasing stigma and fostering inclusion and equality require further research.

### **Implications**

Ongoing initiatives are required to advance inclusivity for PWD. To advance inclusivity, it's critical to consistently refute unfavorable attitudes and ideas about disabilities, support legislative measures that would advance accessibility and inclusion, and inform us and others about the challenges related to disabilities (Baglieri, 2022). Additionally, ongoing initiatives are required to guarantee the rights of people with disabilities are upheld and that they have equal access to opportunities and resources. This includes making sure that accessible public areas, transportation, and other services are available as well as that people with disabilities are not subjected to prejudice in the areas of healthcare, employment, or education. Recognizing that ableism and discrimination against people with disabilities is a ubiquitous and continuous problem will help us understand the need for continued efforts to fight it and advance inclusivity (Bogart et al., 2019).

### **Future Research Directions**

Future research on disabilities, stigma, and the pursuit of social justice should be multidisciplinary, intersectional, and based on social justice viewpoints and the direct perspectives of PWD. This will entail interacting with ideas and theoretical frameworks that address the intersections of oppression and how they affect the realities of people with disabilities (Prilleltensky & Prilleltensky, 2018). Specific research recommendations include:

- According to Shakespeare (2021), researchers, educators, and clinicians should keep advancing the social model of disability, which acknowledges that impairment is not a personal flaw but rather the result of social and environmental impediments. This strategy emphasizes how important it is to foster social inclusion and deal with structural disparities.
- PWDs should have the ability to speak up for themselves and take part in decisions and research that impact their lives. Researchers, educators, and clinicians should encourage the growth of self-advocacy abilities and push for the inclusion of persons with disabilities in all facets of research (Fisher, 2016).
- The intersections between disability and other social characteristics such as race, gender, sexual orientation, and socioeconomic status should be the subject of future research. By using this strategy, we can better understand the special difficulties and experiences that people with disabilities who are members of numerous marginalized groups encounter (Gard et al., 2023).
- There is a need for research that looks at the obstacles that persons with disabilities face when trying to find a job and suggests tactics to encourage their inclusion in the workforce (Morwane, 2023). This entails tackling problems including workplace

modifications, accessibility to education and training, and biased employment procedures.

- There is a need for research that examines the relationship between mental health and disability, and the impact of stigma and discrimination on the mental health of people with disabilities (Maiti, 2021). This includes addressing issues such as access to mental health services and the intersection of disability and trauma.
- Analyzing the influence of the media on how the general population views those with disabilities. Explore how portrayals of individuals with disabilities affect attitudes and beliefs, this may entail examining news coverage, advertising, and popular culture (Babik & Gardner, 2021).
- Inspecting the effects of laws and policies on the lives of those with disabilities. The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and other laws intended to safeguard the rights of people with disabilities may be evaluated in this regard (ADA, 2023).
- Investigating the perspectives of those with disabilities who also belong to other disadvantaged groups, such as people of color, the LGBTQ+ community, and women. Examining how these intersections affect their efforts to achieve social justice may be one approach to this (Lockett et al., 2022).
- The interconnections of digital and physical places and how these spaces affect the experiences of persons with disabilities will be key subjects of future research (Kirwan, 2019). This will entail examining the effects of accessibility in physical settings as well as online spaces on the capacity of people with disabilities to engage in society (Lai, 2019).



Research on disability, stigma, and the pursuit of social justice will move in a direction that is informed by the perspectives and experiences of people with disabilities and communities of people with disabilities. It will also be grounded in a commitment to advancing social justice and putting an end to prejudice and marginalization of people with disabilities. Future studies in this area will probably concentrate on gaining a deeper knowledge of the connections between oppression and disability and the effects that this has on the pursuit of social justice. Researchers will need to use a variety of methodologies, including qualitative and quantitative approaches, as well as interact with various communities of disabled people, to do this (Case et al., 2020; Goodley, 2011).

## **Conclusion**

It is crucial to combat stigma and advance social justice for PWDs. Discrimination and stigmatization can make it difficult for people with disabilities to participate fully in society and to take advantage of equal opportunities (Dobson & Stuart, 2021). To ensure that people with disabilities have equal opportunities and may participate fully in all elements of society, promoting social justice and combatting stigma is essential (Stangl et al., 2019). Disability-related negative attitudes and beliefs can result in social exclusion, reduced quality of life, and worse health outcomes for PWD (Nguyen et al., 2019). The lives of those with disabilities can be made better by addressing stigma and advancing social justice (Stangl et al., 2019). Recognizing and valuing the variety of the disability community is necessary to combat stigma and advance social justice (Ali et al. 2013). To achieve this, it is necessary to acknowledge the special needs and experiences of people with disabilities as well as to work toward ensuring their full inclusion; comprehensive, disability-focused research will further this effort.

This conceptual paper emphasizes the necessity of changing cultural perceptions of disability and promoting inclusion and equality for people with disabilities. To overcome this issue, it is critical to confront and alter social perceptions of those with disabilities through lobbying, legislative change, and education. As an advocate for disability rights, Judy Heumann stated "We must continue to work for the full inclusion of persons with disabilities in all sectors of society, and for a world where everyone can live with dignity and respect."

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