What is Ableism?

Ableism is the devaluing, exclusion, and aversion to disability, neurodivergence, and chronic health conditions which is embedded in social structures and systems. It works in tandem with racism, colonialism, sexism, patriarchy, homophobia, and transphobia. Ableism excludes disabled people, neurodiverse people, and people with chronic health conditions from full societal engagement and perpetuates inequitable distribution of resources, opportunities, and power. Let's briefly explore each in turn.

Resources include products, services, and supports that enable a person to maximize their engagement with society and secure a life that does not impede their autonomy and desired level of independence. These include money, assistive technology, education, social network, and support or advocacy services. Ableism impedes pathways to accessing each of these, whether through under-resourcing, social aversion, devaluation, or acts of violence.

Opportunities are pathways for personal growth, educational or professional development, and employment. They make it easier to secure long-term independence and autonomy. Disabled people are often required to be overqualified for positions to counter-balance employers' presumptions of their incompetence or lower (usually quantity) output. Fear of financial costs of accommodation or other access-related 'liabilities' can increase reluctance to hire a disabled person. Universities and other educational institutions can further limit opportunities when they are inaccessible due to normalized heavy workloads, practices and policies for work productivity based on time-to-complete, inflexible attendance and participation formats, and other barriers.

Power has many definitions depending on the level at which it operates. Generally, power is the ability to accrue and mobilize resources and opportunities to serve one's goals. It determines whose interest gets advanced when different interests collide or vie for the same resources and opportunities. Power is most concentrated along the lines of social hegemony – white supremacy, patriarchy, heteronormativity, cisnormativity, colonization, and ableism.

Access to resources, opportunities, and power is affected by current social injustices. The more ways white supremacy, racism, patriarchy, heteronormativity, cisnormativity, and colonialism oppose one's identity, the less access one has to means of securing resources, opportunities, and power.

Aversive ableism refers to the subtle, indirect, or implicit ways that even well-intended people may perpetuate ableism (Friedman, 2018). A common example is responding to disabled people with avoidance and discomfort. Good intentions may lead to behaviors such as charity or protectiveness. While these may have positive intentions,

when these are the primary responses to disability, disabled people are effectively infantilized, seen as passive recipients of goodwill with nothing to contribute to society, and systemic injustices oppressing them are not recognized.

Ableism is at once personal, political, and structural. Whereas hate speech, violence, and hostility are the most explicit forms of ableism, aversion and misunderstandings are the bedrock of exclusion. Microaggressions are indirect or passive acts of invalidation or violence. They are often unintentional and stem from ignorance rather than malice. These include assuming somebody else speaks on a disabled person's behalf, congratulating a disabled person for being out in public, or treating a neurodivergent individual as if they are unintelligent. Acknowledging these practices and assumptions is the first step to dismantling them.

*This work reflects our current knowledge and will be updated as needed. We also welcome your feedback at Equity@umanitoba.ca

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