

What is Critical Disability Studies? What is Disability Justice?

Critical Disability Studies seeks to articulate the social inequities and systemic injustices that devalue disability, neurodivergence, and chronic health conditions, preventing people from fully engaging with and contributing to society. This requires identifying barriers actively excluding disabled people from personal relationships, professional opportunities, public spaces and services, and democratic processes.

Attitudinal barriers are prevailing attitudes and misperceptions which alienate disabled and neurodivergent people, and people with chronic health conditions. These often include feelings of contempt, pity, awkwardness, or hostility. *Physical* barriers are the ways society is physically organized to be inaccessible. Buildings with stairs, heavy doors, or distant parking may prevent entrance. Even if these features are accessible, features within the building such as doorways, standing-level receptions, and lack of large-print and accessible signage may make for an inaccessible environment that have obstacles between pockets of accessibility. *Environmental* barriers also exclude people with various sensory sensitivities. Fluorescent lighting or excessive brightness can make a space very discomforting. Certain acoustics can have similar affect. People can also be excluded if chair shapes and sizes do not account for varying body sizes. *Economic* barriers are the often hidden costs of living with a disability, such as assistive technology, mobility aids, programs and software, and housing modifications. These are compounded by disproportionate levels of unemployment and lack of access to education.

Disability justice is a concept developed by Patty Berne, Mia Mingus, and Stacey Milbern, members of Sins Invalid, “a disability justice-based movement building and performance project that celebrates disabled people, centering and led by disabled Black, Indigenous, and people of the global majority, and queer, trans, and nonbinary disabled people” (Sins Invalid, n.d.). The 10 principles of disability justice as outlined by Sins Invalid are:

1. intersectionality – “Ableism, coupled with white supremacy, supported by capitalism, underscored by heteropatriarchy, has rendered the vast majority of the world ‘invalid’”;
2. leadership of those most impacted – “‘We are led by those who most know these systems’ (Aurora Levins Morales)”;
3. anti-capitalist politic – “In an economy that sees land and humans as components of profit we are anti-capitalist by the nature of having non-conforming body/minds”;
4. commitment to cross-movement organizing – “Shifting how social justice movements understand disability and contextualize ableism, disability justice lends itself to politics of alliance”;

5. recognizing wholeness – “People have inherent worth outside of commodity relations and capitalist notions of productivity. Each person is full of history and life experience”;
6. sustainability – “We pace ourselves, individually and collectively, to be sustained long term. Our embodied experiences guide us toward ongoing justice and liberation”;
7. commitment to cross-disability solidarity – “We honor the insights and participation of all of our community members, knowing that isolation undermines collective liberation”;
8. interdependence – “We meet each others’ needs as we build toward liberation, knowing that state solutions inevitably extend into further control over lives”;
9. collective access – “As brown, black and queer-bodied disabled people we bring flexibility and creative nuance that go beyond able-bodied/minded normativity, to be in community with each other”;
10. collective liberation – “No body or mind can be left behind – only moving together can we accomplish the revolution we require” (Sins Invalid, n.d.).

Disability justice identifies and deconstructs ableism by also identifying and deconstructing the other forms of oppression which ableism both supports and depends on. This means de-centering whiteness, patriarchy, heteronormativity, cisnormativity, and colonization within disability activist efforts and highlighting intersectional support systems, organizations, advocacy, communities, and literature. Intersecting issues of race, colonialism, gender, sex, capitalism, and incarceration have been underdeveloped or left out of ‘mainstream’ disability activism. The lives and wisdom of all disabled people must drive organization and activism, centering the perspectives which have been erased, criminalized, and devalued in ‘Western’ society. Piepzna-Samarasinha (2018) articulates disability justice as follows:

To me, disability justice means a political movement and many interlocking communities where disability is not defined in white terms, or male terms, or straight terms. [...] Disability justice centers sick and disabled people of color, queer and trans disabled folks of color, and everyone who is marginalized in mainstream disability organizing. [...] More than that, disability justice asserts that ableism helps make racism, Christian supremacy, sexism, and queer- and trans-phobia possible, and that all those systems of oppression are locked up tight. (p. 22)

Here, we would like to highlight sanism – social and structural discrimination against those with real or perceived mental conditions. Mad activists contribute to disability justice by advocating for deinstitutionalization, raising awareness about psychiatric abuses, acknowledging disproportionate targeting of racialized populations for psychiatric detainment and experimental interventions (Schalk, 2022), correcting misinformation about mental health, and destigmatizing mental health services.

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

References

- Altman, B. (2001). Disability definitions, models, classification schemes, and applications. In G. Albrecht, K. Seelman & M. Bury (Eds.), *Handbook of Disability Studies* (pp. 97–122). Sage Publications.
- Crenshaw, K. (1989). Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex: A Black feminist critique of antidiscrimination doctrine, feminist theory and antiracist politics. *University of Chicago Legal Forum*, 1, 139–167.
- Garland-Thomson, R. (2002). Integrating disability, transforming feminist theory. *NWSA*, 14(3). <https://doi.org/10.1353/nwsa.2003.0005>
- Friedman, C. (2018). Aversive ableism: Modern prejudice towards disabled people. *Review of Disability Studies: An International Journal*, 14(4), 1–21.
- Hansen, N., & Philo, C. (2007). The normality of doing things differently: Bodies, spaces, and disability geography. *Journal of Economic and Human Geography*, 98(4), 493–506. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9663.2007.00417.x>
- Oliver, M. (1983). *Social work with disabled people*. Red Grove Press.
- Piepzna-Samarasinha, L. L. (2018). *Care work: Dreaming disability justice*. Arsenal Pulp Press.
- Schalk, S. (2022). *Black disability politics*. Duke University Press.
- Sins Invalid. (n.d.) *About Sins*. <https://sinsinvalid.org/about-sins/>
- Sins Invalid. (n.d.) *10 principles of disability justice*. <https://sinsinvalid.org/10-principles-of-disability-justice/>
- United Nations. (n.d.) *Article 1 – Purpose*. <https://social.desa.un.org/issues/disability/crpd/article-1-purpose>