

Models of Disability

A model of disability is a way to think about how people with disabilities exist in society. There are many models of disability; in this article we will discuss four prominent models.

The Charity Model of Disability

The charity model is rooted in a false or misguided sense of compassion. It pities disabled people, who are viewed as helpless victims of their circumstances. The charity model was very popular prior to the advent of modern medicine as its goal was to remove the stigma that someone is at fault for their disability (e.g. that God was punishing the person or their family), but it is extremely harmful and limiting to disabled people today.

The Medical Model of Disability

The medical model is heavily focused on the individual and their diagnosis. It posits that having a disability reduces the quality of life, and that as a society we should invest in resources to correct or cure illness or disability, i.e. we should manage disabilities medically. The medical model considers disability to be an individual characteristic; assistive technology is used to fix the disability and allow the person to have a more “normal” life and exist in society in the same way as non-disabled people. This leads to technology such as cochlear implants and standing wheelchairs, which address the disability on an individual level (as opposed to on a societal level).

The Social Model of Disability

The social model believes that the interaction of the individual with physical, social, and cultural systems is what creates the disability; in other words, “what makes someone disabled is not their medical condition, but the attitudes and structures of society”¹. This model is focused on removing systemic barriers and social exclusion. The social model makes a distinction between an impairment and a disability; impairments are the attributes, or lack of attributes, that affect a person, while disability refers to the restrictions caused by an inaccessible society. For example, in the social model, an impairment might be the inability to walk, but the disability is the lack of a ramp or elevator. The social model views eliminating disability as a societal change (as opposed to an individual one). The idea is that if physical, social, and cultural systems were accessible for people with impairments then they would not be disabled.

The Identity Model of Disability

The identity model views disability as part of an intersectional identity. This model is still emerging. It emphasizes **identity-first language** and encourages people to embrace disabilities as part of their identity. This model incorporates many aspects from the social model, including a heavy emphasis on demanding equal access from society.

Sources

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