

Social and Medical models of Disability: Definitions

Social Model

The Social Model of Disability has been developed by disabled people and used since 1976. It recognises that the disadvantage or restriction of activity caused by contemporary social organisation, takes little or no account of the needs of disabled people. This often results in their exclusion from taking part in mainstream society. Disability is not caused by an individual's particular 'impairment', but by the way society fails to meet their needs.

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The definition of disability accepted by national and international representatives of organisations of disabled people is:

“Disability is the disadvantage or restriction of activity caused by contemporary social organisation which takes little or no account of people who have disabilities. This excludes them from taking part in mainstream society. Disability is not caused by an individual's particular 'impairment', but by the way society fails to meet their needs.” (This is generally referred to as the Social Model of Disability).

The Union of Physically Impaired against Segregation, 1976

Social model: Promotes maximum independence for everyone; that disabled people should be treated with equal rights. This view suggests disabled people's individual and collective disadvantage is due to a complex form of institutional discrimination as fundamental to our society as sexism, racism or heterosexism. If a building is inaccessible then the problem lies with the building and not the disabled person.

Society is slowly accepting this way of thinking, and is beginning to cooperate to remove barriers. Often these barriers affect others too; ramps and elevators benefit mothers with children as well.

The emphasis of the Social Model of Disability is on changing society and its attitudes.

The Social Model.

This model concentrates on the person as a valued member of a very diverse society. It suggests that the disabled person is a unique individual who has the right to the same opportunities in housing, education, transport and facilities as anyone else. It recognises that a person's impairment does not make them less of a human being.

In this model the "disability" is seen as the common oppression brought about by the non-disabled world. This suggests that a person can be disabled by society and this is why those who subscribe to the Social Model use the expression "disabled people". It is fair to say that much of the oppression is not deliberate but comes about because the non-disabled world has been taught consistently over a period of time that disabled people are different and somehow not normal. Any segregated provision, such as in the work place, in education or leisure, while very likely being offered at the highest level could prolong the movement to the often expressed goal of a more inclusive society. It could also maintain and even add to the negative reactions some of us have towards disabled people.

The solution according to this model is to bring about attitudinal, environmental and organisational changes within present day society. The move towards inclusive education, although in its early stages, is an example of this new thinking. As well as this it is felt that disabled people need to be encouraged to play an equal part in decision making processes, particularly when the decisions affect them personally.

Social Model: Impairment and chronic illness exist and they sometimes pose real difficulties for us. The position of disabled people and the discrimination against us are socially created. This has little to do with our impairments. The 'cure' to the problem of disability lies in the restructuring of society. Unlike medically based 'cures', which focus on the individual and their impairment, this is an achievable goal and to the benefit of everyone. This approach suggests those disabled people's individual and collective disadvantage is due to a complex form of institutional

discrimination as fundamental to our society as sexism, racism or heterosexism.

Medical Model

Medical model: Disabled people are viewed as victims of a personal tragedy, a 'burden' on society, and with limitations. They are in need of help from non-disabled people to be able to lead any sort of life. They are seen as relying on charity (the goodwill of others) to survive. Consequently, it is these limitations that have to be 'cured'. In this view of disability the illness or condition is said to be seen first and the person second.

The method of bringing about change for the disabled person is seen to lie within the medical and associated professions. Increasing numbers of people now regard the Medical Model as one that creates a negative approach and tends to offer a somewhat limiting and outdated view of disability. However the mainstream of our society still tends to take this view. Much of present day law, as it affects disabled people, is still based on the Medical Model.

'Medical model:' sees the disabled person as the problem. We are to be adapted to fit into the world as it is. If this is not possible, then we are shut away in some specialised institution or isolated at home, where only our most basic needs are met. The emphasis is on dependence, backed up by the stereotypes of disability that call forth pity, fear and patronising attitudes. Usually the impairment is focused on, rather than the needs of the person. The power to change us seems to lie within the medical and associated professions, with their talk of cures, normalisation and science. Often our lives are handed over to them. The medical model of disability sees the disabled person as the problem. We are to be adapted to fit into the world as it is. If this is not possible, then we are shut away in some specialised institution or isolated at home, where only our most basic needs are met.

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