The Disability Rights Movement in the United States

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From handicap parking spaces to Braille on signs, the victories of the disability rights movement are present in everyday life. However, to many nondisabled people, these are minor inconveniences at best. Few people give thought to the movement that has led to equal access to public spaces, education, and rights for people with disabilities. What is the disability rights movement, and what accomplishments and ideas have resulted from it?

While people with disabilities have had an impact on society since its conception, our understanding of their history is muddled. Catherine Kudlick (2005) states that throughout history, words associated with disabled people have become standard insults, from John Knox's writings referring to women as "mad" and "blind," to modern liberals referring to George Bush as "insane" and "deaf and dumb." Because we see disability as being so shameful, disability history is rarely addressed. Prominent figures, such as Helen Keller, are often considered individually instead of as part of a larger disability rights movement (p. 558). Thus, this part of history is often overlooked.

The Anti-Defamation League (n.d.) gives a brief overview of the disability rights movement. In the 1800s, people with disabilities were generally unable to access most aspects of life, or worse, confined to institutions and asylums. The movement began to form after World War I, when many veterans returned from the war with disabilities. This caused nondisabled Americans, who respected these former soldiers, to change their perception. However, the movement didn't fully kick off until the 1960s. The ADL states that during this period, many advocates started pushing for equal treatment; for example, parents demanded that their children be taken out of institutions and asylums and educated alongside children who weren't disabled.

Due to the civil rights movement taking place at the same time, activists fought alongside other minority groups for equality (p. 2).

The ADL claims that one of the first successes came after an activist-led march on Washington, and the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 was passed a year later. Section 504 of this act mandated equal access to public services for people with disabilities. There have been several successes since then, including the Education for All Handicapped Children Act—which stated that all disabled children have a right to education—and the Americans with Disabilities Act, or ADA. The ADA can be compared to the Civil Rights Act of 1964 in that it was the first piece of legislation to prohibit discrimination based on disability. According to the Anti-Defamation League, "businesses were mandated to provide reasonable accommodations to people with disabilities…public services could no longer deny services to people with disabilities…[and] all public accommodations were expected to have modifications made to be accessible to people with disabilities" (n.d., p. 4). Thus, the Americans with Disabilities Act finally demanded equal treatment in employment, public services, transportation, and telecommunication.

Sara Goering, a philosophy professor at the University of Washington, asserts that one new idea that was born from this movement is that of the social model of disability. The social model states that what is considered a disability does not depend on impairment in relation to the person, but on impairment in relation to their society. An example that Goering gives is that of a blind man who had been blind since birth. Ever since he had been born, he had dealt with the world as a blind person; he did not want to "gain" sight because in doing that, he would have to give up not only his blindness, but the way he interacted with the world. He saw himself as perfectly healthy, and only othered by the fact that he was blind. However, he would be

considered disabled because most of the people in our society can see, putting him at a disadvantage. If everyone was blind, the obstacles that he faced would be gone (2015, p. 135).

The social model of disability is one of the ideas fueling the push for acceptance in the disability rights movement, which is continuing today. More recently, advocates have separated the social model from the medical model in order to acknowledge that the social model doesn't work for chronic illness or other conditions that only negatively impact a person. This ensures that people who are advocating for cures, such as people who have cancer or chronic pain, are supported by the movement just as much as people who are advocating for acceptance, such as autistic people, Deaf people, and paraplegic people who consider themselves healthy (Goering, 2015, p. 136).

From this, it is clear that the disability rights movement is spurring a new way of viewing disability. An overwhelming amount of progress has been made since the nineteenth century, and there is still much to be done. Yet, the history of people with disabilities is not taught in schools—even though many students have Section 504 plans themselves. If the history of the disability rights movement is so relevant to our society, why is it hardly mentioned in textbooks?

One factor may be our society's reluctance to accept people with marked disabilities as deserving of equal social status. People who can't work are seen as burdens until proven capable, and people who are able to prove their capability are expected to hide where their disability impacts them to remain profitable. As Kudlick (2005) notes, many people with disabilities that can be made invisible have been pushed "into the closet" in order to keep the respect of others, leading to their part of history being completely silent (p. 559).

Because of this, disability is seen as a type of laziness that must be overcome for the person to deserve any more than the basic necessities. According to Kudlick, this "othering" of

people with disabilities is partially due to how willing our society is to discredit them, to the point that disability is even used as an excuse for oppressing other groups. The fact that the insults that we consider the most benign— "stupid," "dumb," or "lame"—are based on disability shows how pervasive this problem is (2005, p. 558). Including disability history in our textbooks would require putting people with disabilities on the same level as other historical figures and acknowledging that this attitude towards people with disabilities is unacceptable, which is something that many people are unwilling to face.

The history of people with disabilities deserves a place alongside other civil rights movements born in the mid twentieth century. By teaching our youth about the accomplishments of this movement, our society might further a push away from its view of disability as an insult, towards a wider acceptance of the social model of disability. This change would lead to better accommodations, more income equality, and fair treatment of people because of, not despite, their disabilities.

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