



Right to Control Briefing Session

The Social Model of Disability

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Introduction

In this briefing you will learn about two ways in which people think about disability. These are called the **medical model** and the **social model** of disability. These models are very different and have arisen in different ways.

The medical model is the way in which most people think of disability. This way of thinking focuses on the impairment as the problem and leads to a society that has negative views about disability. These ideas and assumptions have come about because of the way that disabled people have been treated historically.

The social model of disability has been developed by disabled people and the organisations which they control and run. They developed this way of thinking because they disliked the way they were treated as disabled people and wanted to challenge that treatment.

The Medical Model of Disability

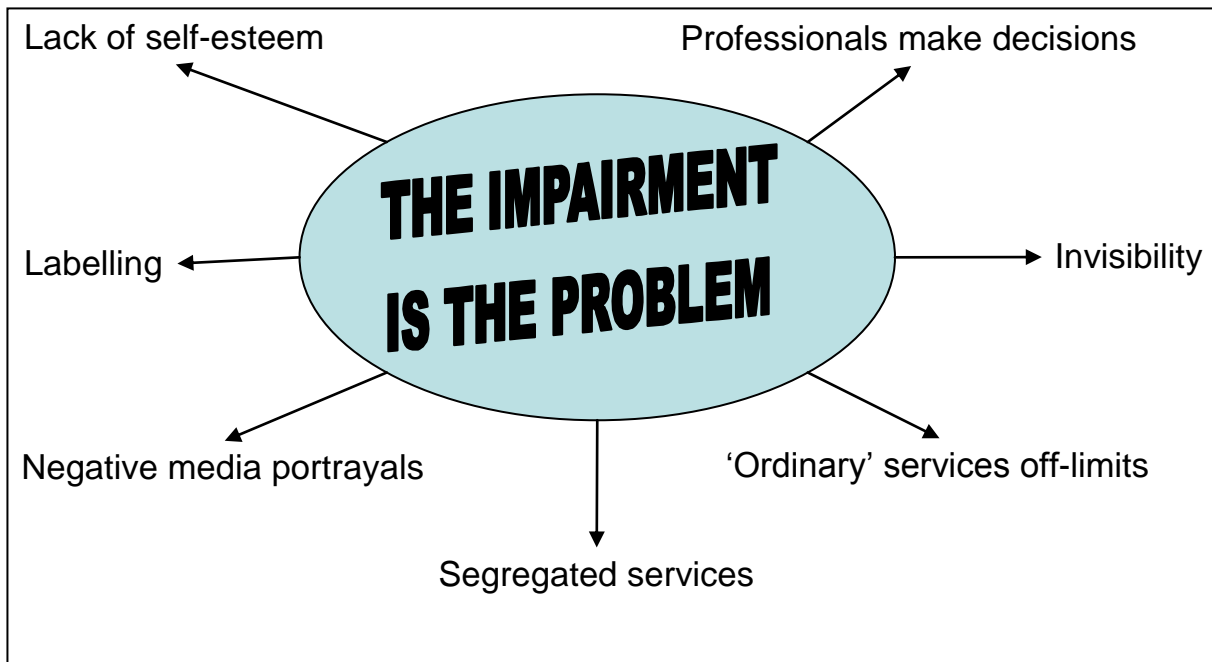
This way of thinking assumes that a disabled person's medical condition is the reason why they are prevented from leading a full life. However it is not surprising that people would regard disability as a medical problem. People believe the things they do and act in the ways they do because of the images and representations that they have heard and seen about disability and disabled people. Our culture is full of medical

model portrayals of disability in the media, books, films, comics, art and language. Many disabled people internalise these negative views of themselves, developing feelings of low self-esteem and underachievement.

So if somebody has an impairment - a visual, mobility, hearing or speech impairment, for example – then the medical model regards this as ‘disability’. For instance:

- I may be a wheelchair user. If you think in terms of the medical model, you will say that I cannot play a full part in society because, for example, I cannot climb the stairs in my house or walk to the shops.
- I may be visually impaired. If you think in terms of the medical model, you will say that I cannot play a full part in life because I cannot read information in ‘standard’ size print.
- I may have a speech impairment. If you think in terms of the medical model, you will say I cannot play a full part in life because I cannot speak as quickly as other people.

The diagram below illustrates the effects of medical model thinking:



Doctors and other health and social care professions have traditionally tried to use medical cures and rehabilitation to make people with impairments fit in with society's idea of what is normal.. This is not to deny that doctors and other healthcare workers have a role in keeping many disabled people alive and reducing their pain and discomfort. However disabled people have said that doctors should not have power over what opportunities they have in life, by deciding what they can or cannot do. For example, the medical profession may currently decide:

- where disabled people go to school;
- what support they get;
- where they live;
- what benefits they are entitled to;
- whether they can work;
- whether they are born at all;
- whether they are allowed to have children themselves.

Disabled people have objected to the medical model by pointing out how environments can limit their opportunities. The medical model would say these problems are due to a defect of the disabled person's mind, body or senses. But to disabled people, the cause of these problems is the social barriers that disable them and curtail their life chances. These barriers are encountered when they try to access school and higher education, employment, leisure and entertainment facilities, private and public transport, housing or social life. Therefore increasingly the medical model is being rejected. Many people feel strongly that it is wrong to require disabled people to change in order to 'fit in', and that our world should adapt instead.

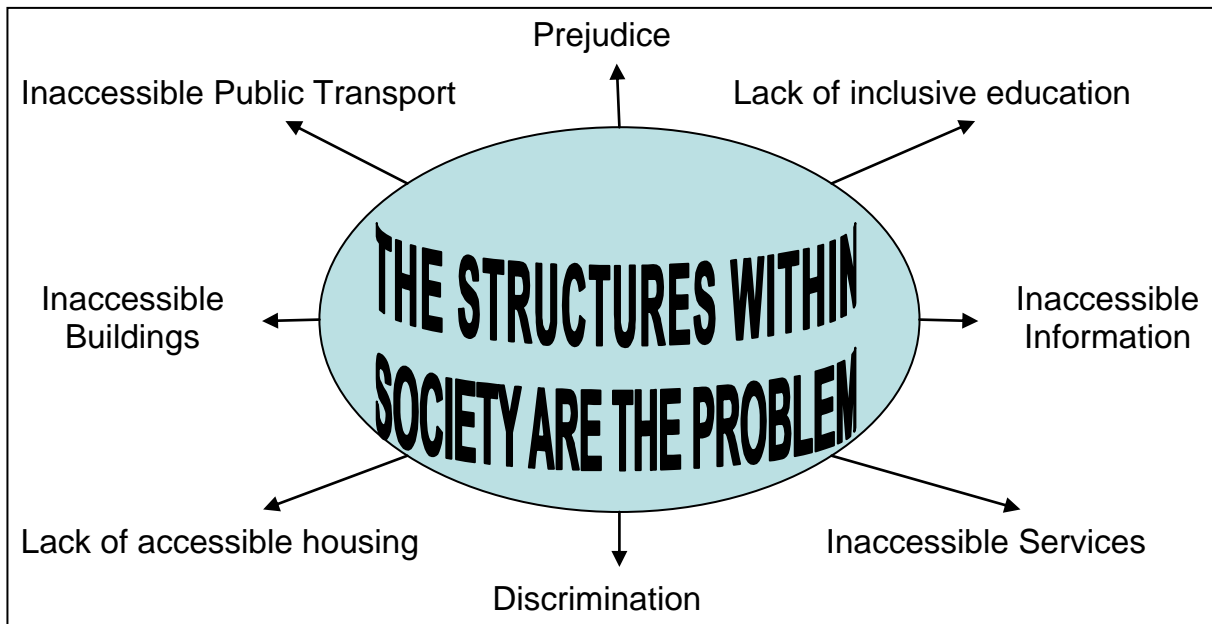
The Social Model of Disability

In recent years disabled people have created a different way of looking at disability called 'the social model of disability'. During the sixties and seventies, newly-formed groups of disabled people started to challenge the way they were treated by society. They believed that all disabled people have the right to be part of their local community. However they found that the education, employment, housing, information and public transport systems were planned and delivered without taking their needs into account. They stated:

“In our view it is society which disables... impaired people. Disability is something imposed on top of our impairments by the way we are unnecessarily isolated and excluded from full participation in society.”

(UPIAS, 1975)

The diagram below illustrates how social model thinking redefines the ‘problem’ as being with society:



According to this way of thinking, the meaning of disability is changed from *something that we have* to *something that is done to us*. Therefore disabled people do not ‘*have disabilities*’, they are ‘*disabled by society*’. The social model defines ‘impairment’ and ‘disability’ as very different things:

“Impairment is the loss or limitation of physical, mental or sensory function on a long-term or permanent basis.

Disablement is the loss or limitation of opportunities to take part in the normal life of the community on an equal level with others due to physical and social barriers.”

Disabled People's International 1981

The fact that impairments exist and sometimes pose real difficulties is just a part of nature. However disabled people are often made to feel that it is their own fault that they are different. This is because many of

us have not been brought up to accept all people as they are; in other words, to value difference.

Discrimination develops through fear, ignorance and prejudice. This is what disables people with impairments. Therefore using the social model, disability is no longer seen as a medical problem but as a social issue. It is the result of society being organised to meet the needs of the majority of people who do not have significant impairments. It is a type of oppression, similar to sexism, racism and heterosexism.

Disabled people have come to believe that the 'cure' to the problem of disability lies in changing society. Unlike most medically-based cures, this is a practical, achievable goal that would benefit everyone. The obsession with finding medical cures distracts people from looking at the causes of disability.

So to summarise...

- Impairment is a limitation to a person's mind, body or senses
- Disability is the disadvantage that people with impairments experience when society excludes them