Models of Disability

Throughout history, people with disability have been considered by the world in an evolving variety of ways. Whether you view someone with disability as being excluded by society because of their disability, or because of the environment they live in depends on the lens through which you view disability. These lenses are referred to as 'models' of disability and they influence how people with disability are defined, valued, viewed, treated, thought and spoken about.

Today, we recognise four different models of disability. They are,

- the religious model

- the medical model

- the social model, and

- the human rights model.

The Religious Model of Disability

The religious model of disability was the earliest attempt by humans to understand and define disability. This model was underpinned by the belief that disability occurs as a result of punishment for sins, or as a test of faith, and that disability is something that people suffer from.

Rooted in outdated ideals, the religious model viewed people with disability as legatees of charity, unable to do things for themselves and heavily reliant on the good will and charity of others. This way of viewing disability undermines any sense of pride or identity experienced by a person with disability, disempowering them while congratulating non-disabled people for their 'Saint-like' charitable support.

Today, support for people with disability ideally remains focused on ensuring the person has their own independence and autonomy over life choices and decisions, therefore empowering the individual rather than undermining them.

The Medical Model of Disability

The medical model of disability came about at the same time as the Industrial Revolution. This marked the beginning of society measuring a person's worth on the basis of their ability to undertake work and actively contribute to society. Under this model, disability was seen to be a problem with the person themselves, that could only be solved or mitigated by medical professionals. In viewing disability through this lens, the belief is that someone with disability cannot participate equally, and contribute to society, unless their disability is 'cured' or 'fixed'. Widespread, historic adoption of the medical model resulted in people with disability being routinely segregated from mainstream society.

The Social Model of Disability

The Australian rights-based disability movement was founded during the 1970s. The movement began to challenge exclusion and discrimination of people living with disability and demand that people with disability be recognised as having inherent value and worth in society. Unlike the medical model, which considers disability as a problem within a person, the social model of disability sees societal constructs as preventing people with disability from engaging equally in society.

It's easy to understand the social model of disability when you think about physical access to a building. A person using a wheelchair is unable to access a building that has stairs leading up to it. Under the medical model, it is the individual's 'medical condition' or 'problem' that means a person has disability. The social model recognises that it is the stairs that give a person disability by preventing them from entering the building like anyone else.

It is not just physical barriers that restrict access. The social model of disability recognises societal barriers can also be cultural, informational, and attitudinal. For example, someone with an intellectual disability can understand the same written information as someone without an intellectual disability when the information is in Easy Read format.

Ultimately, the social model of disability says that disadvantage experienced by people with disability is a social construct. It advocates that society must be more flexible and embrace adaptations that accommodate and render people with disability as equal members of society, rather than people faced with inequitable barriers.

The Human Rights Model of Disability

While today many people subscribe to the social model of disability, increasingly there is a movement towards what has become known as the Human Rights Model of Disability.

Whilst the social model of disability reminds us to remove ableist and other societal constructed barriers, the human rights model informs us that some people with disability may require more than just removal of barriers to be able to fully enjoy all that life has to offer on an equal basis with others. For example, removal of physical barriers at a movie theatre might provide the space needed for a person using a wheelchair to comfortably access and enjoy watching a movie, however a person who is hearing impaired might need closed captions, infrared, or hearing aid loops; whilst a person who is sight impaired might require audio description to be able to enjoy a movie.

The human rights model tells us that that it is every human's inalienable right to be equally valued as an intrinsic and natural part of human diversity, with individual rights and choices respected and upheld. People with disability are as inherently deserving of human rights as are non-disabled people. The human rights model advocates that people's impairments must not be used as an excuse to deny or restrict rights; and by recognising disability as a natural part of human diversity, it fosters a sense of pride and identity that has been overlooked under former models.

Summary

Both the religious and medical models are rooted in historical, outdated ideals, whereas the principles underpinning both the social and human rights models are progressive and inclusive. Yet while certain models have been more popularly subscribed to at different stages in history, none are perfect constructs. Rather, these models support us in understanding and explaining complex ideas, and in advocating for positive change.

Ultimately, people with disability are not 'objects' of charity, medical treatment and social protection but 'subjects' with rights, capable of claiming those rights, able to make

decisions for their own lives based on their free and informed consent and be active members of society.

Reflection:

- Adopting the social model of disability, what barriers might prevent someone with disability from participating equally in your place of work? Consider information dissemination, attitudes, rules or regulations and the physical environment.

Further Resources:

Watch - The Human Rights Model of Disability

Watch - The Social Model of Disability

Contact People with Disability Australia

This document was compiled by **People With Disability Australia (PWDA)** for the Centre for Volunteering in April 2023. Contact PWDA for more information by emailing **training@pwd.org.au**

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