

Ability Privilege an underexplored concept



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Introduction

White [1–5], male [6;7] and race privilege [8;9] is discussed as a concept for some time. Peggy McIntosh stated in 1989, “to bring materials from Women’s Studies into the rest of the curriculum, I have often noticed men’s unwillingness to grant that they are over-privileged, even though they may grant that women are disadvantaged. They may say they will work to improve women’s status, in the society, the university, or the curriculum, but they can’t or won’t support the idea of lessening men’s.” [1]

Ability privilege is so far a mostly unexplored concept (see table 1); a concept useful for disability advocacy and scholarship and other discourses.

Ability expectations and Ableism

The field of disability studies and disabled people activists were the first to look at the cultural dynamics of ability preferences, coining the term ableism [10] as a cultural concept in the process. The term ableism allowed for highlighting the negative treatment [11] disabled people experience because their body linked abilities do not fit the cultural preference for species-typical normative ability functioning [12-14].

However, ableism is a much broader phenomenon.

Every individual, household, community, group, sector, region, and country cherishes and promotes numerous abilities and often these ability expectations morph into forms of ableism where one not only desires or expects certain abilities but one perceives a given ability as essential [15].

What abilities one favours and what ableisms one exhibits impacts how one perceives oneself, how one is perceived by others, how one relates to other species, and it also impacts human-nature relationships [16].

Ability Privilege

Given the description of white privilege and male privilege we submit that there is also an ability privilege present in society and that ability privilege mirrors white and other privileges. Ability privilege is in essence based on the reality that one has certain advantages if one exhibits certain abilities and that one is unwilling to give up this advantage. The processes of disablism could be conceptualized within a framework of ability privilege where people are not willing to give up their ability privileges. Policies and procedures can then be examined in terms of what ability is being privileged, and what criteria are used to justify the decision.

Table 1 Frequency count for white privilege, race privilege, male privilege and ability privilege using Google and Google scholar, the New York Times and the Canadian Newsstand database

	White privilege	Race privilege/	Male privilege/	Ability privilege
Google	1,370,000	93,500	969,000	7,370
Google Scholar	18,300	2,180	12,900	56
NYT 1851-today	974	19	706	0
Canadian Newsstand 1980-today	358	20	268	2

Ability privilege and disabled people

Indeed the term disablism as used in the disability studies field and the disabled people rights movement reflects the sentiment of McIntosh that men are not willing to give up privileges. In this case so called non-disabled people are not willing to give up their ability privileges linked to their normative body abilities. This lack of willingness is evident in legal terms such as ‘reasonable accommodation, undue hardship’ and others.

Transhumanized version of ability privilege

We see the appearance of a form of ableism that perceives the obtainment of body abilities beyond the species-typical as essential. According to Humanity+ (formerly the World Transhumanist Association), transhumanism is: “The intellectual and cultural movement that affirms the possibility and desirability of fundamentally improving the human condition through applied reason, especially by developing and making widely available technologies to eliminate aging and to greatly enhance human intellectual, physical, and psychological capacities” [17].

The term morphological freedom was coined by Sandberg to support an one’s right to modify oneself. [18] The ability privilege is evident by recognizing that morphological freedom is a negative right. In the future people who gain ability privileges through access to beyond species-typical ability enabling bodily assistive devices may redefine normative privilege, thus creating and necessitating policy challenges

Eco-ableism: Enabling and disabling the ecosystem [16,19]

Currently, there are two main schools of thought pertaining to the human-nature relationship. The anthropocentric school is human-centred in its interpretation of the relationship between humans and nature. Anthropocentrism teaches that nature is there for the needs and uses of humans. This behaviour could be labeled as disabling for nature. In ability privilege terms an anthropocentric view of human-nature relationship is unwilling to give up the ability privilege of using nature for one’s goals. Even if one might recognizes that there are problems one is not willing to give up the privilege. Therefore, proposed anthropocentric remedies to ecological problems do not often attempt to relinquish ability expectations. The ability privilege benchmarked by humans is preserved by modifying nature.

Conclusion

The concept of ability privilege can be used in an inter-, trans- and intra- disciplinarily way to generate policies and advance the relationship between so called disabled and non-disabled people, between humans in general and between humans and their environment. The lens of ability privilege is one essential aspect for analysing existing and future cultural dynamics of various ability expectations and it can become a seed for new discourses, perspectives and paradigms.

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