

Ability Studies: A field to Analyse Social Justice Issues and identities of Humans, Animals and Nature

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Before I start let me first thank all my amazing students (the WolbPack; logo and name was the idea of Verlyn Leopatra one of the students). I hope you visit their webpage http://www.crds.org/research/faculty/Gregor_Wolbring.shtml



CRITICAL JUNCTURE is a conference that seeks to foster a critical discourse on identity, difference and inequality. I would like to contribute the aspect of how our identity is linked to ability expectations, the impact of ability differences and reality of ability inequality and inequity and the lack of ability security.

Ability expectations are one form of identity that interacts with other identities (gender, race, class, age, nationalism.....). Conceptualizations of discrimination within society of which one is ability discrimination do not act independently but rather intersect, creating a system of oppression in which the individual is defined among others by ability difference.

I want to contribute to the intersectionality focus of the conference by exposing the conference participants to the field of Ability studies. Ability studies investigates how ability expectation (want stage) and ableism (need stage) hierarchies and preferences come to pass and the impact of such hierarchies and preferences [1]. Within it, it allows to investigate eco-ability expectations and eco-ableism that focuses on ecological dynamics of human-human; human-animal and human-environment relationships. Ability Studies allows for the study of multiple subject formations, social relationships, and lived experiences based on diverse ability expectations and the actions linked to such expectations. It encourages the study of how legal, ethical/moral[2], biological, cultural and social constructs are exhibiting ability expectations and how such ability expectations and the actions they trigger leads to an ability based and ability justified understanding of oneself, one's body and one's relationship with others of one's species, other species and one's environment [1]. Ability studies can be used in inter-, trans- and intra-

disciplinarily ways to generate policies and advance the relationship between humans, animals and their environment. I will cover in this paper the historical starting point of the term ableism, and dynamics such as ability privilege, ability discrimination (disablism), ability inequity and inequality, ability security and the eco-versions of these terms and close with the concept of ability power.

The starting point of Ableism

The field of disability studies and disabled people rights activists were the first to look at cultural dynamics and the cultural impact of ability preferences, coining the term ableism as a cultural concept in the process [3]. The term ableism evolved from the civil rights movements in the United States and Britain during the 1960s and 1970s to question and highlight the expectations towards certain body abilities and the prejudice and discrimination persons experienced whose body structure and ability functioning were labelled as ‘impaired’[3].

Linking Ability studies to disability studies language (mostly taken from[4])

If one hears the term disability or disabled person or people with a disability... often two different aspects (body image and social reality) are covered by the term disability.

If one would talk about the body in ability studies language one could use the term ability diverse (neutral language) or ability deficient (biased term). If one talks about the social disablement, the negative social reality, the social discrimination especially socially disadvantaged groups and people face one, in ability studies language one could say ability expectation oppressed people or people impacted by ability expectations. This language would apply far beyond the people we traditionally label as disabled/impaired. Indeed people experiencing many isms such as sexism/racism, ageism... could be seen as ability expectation oppressed. Ability expectation oppression does not play itself out only between individuals but can also play itself out between countries (Global North and Global South) or other social structures and not just between humans but also between humans and animals and humans and nature.

Moving beyond its origin:

However, the cultural reality of ability expectations and ableism is a much broader phenomenon. Ableism has been used historically and still is used by various social groups to justify their elevated level of rights and status in relation to other social groups, other species and to the environment they live in [1, 3, 5-6]. The favoritism of abilities is rampant today and is inherent in or contributes to other “isms” such as:

Racism – It is often stated that the favored race has superior cognitive abilities over other races [1].;

Sexism – At the end of the 19th Century women were viewed as biologically fragile (lacking the preferred ability of strength) and emotional (thereby possessing an undesirable ability), and thus incapable of bearing the responsibility of voting, owning property, and retaining custody of their own children[1].;

Caste-ism – As Gail Omvedt (2001) said in the *Hindu*, a daily newspaper in India: “For caste, like race, is based on the notion that socially defined groups of people have inherent, natural qualities or ‘essences’ that assign them to social positions, make them fit for specific duties and occupations.” I submit that the natural inherent qualities are ‘abilities’ which make them fit for specific duties and occupations [1].

Ageism – Missing the abilities one has as a youth[1].;

Speciesism – The elevated status of the species *homo sapiens* is often justified by stating that the homo sapiens has superior cognitive abilities[1].;

Anti-Environmentalism – The disregard for nature reflects another form of ableism: Anthropocentric and bio/ecocentric views of human-nature relationship are based on fundamentally different ability expectations[1].

The cultural phenomenon of ableism also goes beyond body linked abilities. Societal entity, from an individual to a country, cherishes and promotes numerous abilities. Some people cherish the ability to buy a car, some the ability to climb mountains, some the ability to perform academic work, and others manual work [7]. Some societies are structured around ‘GDPism’ (the ability to produce a GDP), efficiency, productivity, competitiveness and consumerism (the ability to consume) [1, 6]. Others may be organized around equity, empathy, or any other set of abilities [8].

Ability expectations and ableism are the basis of and permeates many of the preferences that have shaped society in the past and will likely shape the future. Exhibiting ability expectations and ableism comes with other ability related dynamics.

Ability Privilege:

Ability privilege describes the advantages enjoyed by those who exhibit certain abilities and the unwillingness of these individuals to relinquish the advantage linked to the abilities especially with the reason that these are earned or birth given (natural) abilities. To link it back to disabled people as the originator of the term ableism. The concept of ableism was developed to question the ability privileges (i.e. ability to work, to gain education, to be part of society, to have an identity, to be seen as citizen) that come with a species-typical body (although they did not use the term ability privilege) [9]. Disablism conceptualized within this meaning of ability privilege suggests that people with expected, normative body abilities are not willing to give up their

ability privileges[9]. The cultural phenomenon of Ability privileges, however, can be employed beyond the social group of disabled people and their encounter with the ‘ability normative’ body. Ability privileges can play themselves out between traditionally defined social groups (e.g. race, gender, class). However at the same time social groups are also formed based on ability privileges whereby the social group is defined by whether its members have or don’t have a given ability (the ability-have and the ability-non-have social groups) [9]. Ability privilege also influences how one relates to nature and to animals and shapes one identity [9].

Which ability privilege is classified as earned or unearned constantly changes and is not only culturally constructed, but exhibition and acceptance or rejection of different ability privileges also are one aspect that shapes a culture. These ability expectations lead to the exhibition of various forms of ability privileges [3, 10] leading to various forms of disablement.

Ability inequity and inequality (taken from[8])

For both, ability inequity and ability inequality two subgroups exist. One group is linked to intrinsic bodily abilities and the other group is linked to external abilities, abilities generated by human interventions that impact humans. These two subgroups of internal and external ability inequities and inequality are quite distinct in their effects and discourse dynamics, involved stakeholders and goals.

Definition: *Ability inequality* is a descriptive term denoting any uneven distribution of access to and protection from abilities generated through human interventions, right or wrong

Example: Lack of access to education employment.... Situations that meet this definition of ability inequality are plentiful. For example the majority of blind people do not have access to the content of webpages as most webpages are not designed with their access in mind. If specific jobs and education require such increased expectations on abilities, disabled people who do not have access to them will very likely lose out. When the telephone was developed by those who privileged hearing (i.e. those who can hear), it led to uneven distribution of access. The deaf were not able to use the new technology, and when it became increasingly essential for work and basic socialization to communicate quickly over distances, their ability to be productive and active members of society was lessened.

Ability inequalities also are experienced by so called body normative people. Eating certain food leads to better abilities, but not everyone has access to this food. Clean water leads to better abilities, but not everyone has access to it.

Definition: *Ability inequality* is a descriptive term denoting any uneven judgment of abilities intrinsic to biological structures such as the human body, right or wrong

Example: Negative judgments of people who ‘lack’ certain ‘normative’ intrinsic set of body related abilities as defective (e.g. not hearing as impairment person versus ability diverse person), at the same time people do not define themselves as defective because they cannot fly; or less payment for the same amount of work for women versus men....

Definition: *Ability inequity* is a normative term denoting an unjust or unfair distribution of access to and protection from abilities generated through human interventions

Example: One could say that one of the purposes of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (United Nations 2007) was to highlight which ability inequities are unjust and to prescribe some remedies for them.

Definition: *Ability inequity* is a normative term denoting an unjust or unfair judgment of abilities intrinsic to biological structures such as the human body

Negative judgment linked to the abilities or perceived lack thereof of disabled people or women are judged unfairly with their abilities in work payments.

Ability Security and Self Identity Security (taken from[8])

Ability security means that one is able to live a decent life with whatever set of abilities one has, and that one will not be forced to have a prescribed set of abilities to live a secure life (e.g. even if one doesn't have the ability to walk, he or she should be able to secure employment).

Example: According to the US bureau of labor statistics January 2014 the employment to population ratio for disabled people age 16-64 years is 25.5% for men with disabilities and 22.8% for women with disabilities These numbers included people who look for work but cannot find work and people who do not look for work. The equivalent numbers for so called non-impaired people are 75.3% for men with disabilities and 65.7% for women

<http://www.bls.gov/news.release/empsit.t06.htm>

Self-identity security could be seen as a subset of personal security and means that one is accepted with one's set of abilities and that one should not be forced (physically or by circumstance) to accept a perception of oneself one does not agree with (e.g. one is not expected to have the ability to walk or is seen as a "deficient product" if one cannot walk).

The basic idea of self-identity security can also be seen in numerous other actions and writings such as the slogan "the right to be different," the different disability pride events, the concept of Deaf culture.

Although ability and self-identity security are topics of concern for disabled people they are also of concern to many other people as well, at least in some point of their lives. For instance, ability security is very important to the elderly who sometimes feel they are hindered in having a decent life due to lacking certain abilities of the youth. Self-identity security is of importance, for instance, to women and ethnic and cultural oppressed groups who are punished simply for who they are. Women, simply for being women, are treated badly in many corners of the world. Indigenous people were and are still in many places hindered in their attempt to live out their

traditional knowledge and their way of seeing the world. Their knowledge is ignored and seen as inferior to other knowledge.

Eco-ability expectation, eco-ableism and eco- ability privilege and human-nature/human-animal relationship (taken a lot from[9, 11])

Ecology is about the interrelationship of organisms and their environment. The abilities one favours and the ableist frameworks one subscribes to contour not only how people approach and define human-human, human-animal and human-nature relationships but also inform how people define ecological problems and imagine solutions to these problems. Players involved in the shaping of ecological discourses exhibit ability expectations (ecoability expectations) and forms of ableism (eco-ableism) that influence how they define ecological problems and solutions to the problem and, therefore, whom they invite to the table as stakeholders and knowledge producers. Currently, two main schools of thought pertaining to the human-nature relationship exist, both with vastly different ability expectations. The anthropocentric school is human-centered in its interpretation of the relationship between humans and nature [12-13]. This behavior could be labeled as disabling for nature [14] and as exhibiting anthropocentric privileges [15]. Within an anthropocentric view of human-nature relationship humans are unwilling to give up the ability privilege of using nature for their goals. Therefore, proposed anthropocentric remedies to ecological problems do not often attempt to give up ability expectations and the ability privilege set out by humans who caused the problem in the first place but to find ways to maintain human ability privilege through modifying nature. The eco- or biocentric school is eco- or biosphere-centered, and humans are seen to have to live in harmony with the needs of the biosphere [14]. This view allows for giving up anthropocentric ability privileges and moving away from a negative rights framework putting the onus on humans for decreasing their privilege. Some believe that there are signs that the structural and governmentally perpetuated privilege is diminishing in some areas. Verhagen states: "evidence of an emerging biocracy in the modern Western world is legislation about endangered species and the representation of other life forms during political assemblies when persons or organizations become spokespersons and keepers of rivers, forests etc"[13]. Ecuador could be construed as the first country to become a legal biocracy and ecocracy as their constitution gives a new set of rights to nature. However how biocentric is the Ecuadorian approaches? Articles 71-74 of its new constitution describe the relationship of humans to nature. Article 71 can be interpreted as giving rights to the 'entity' nature. Article 72 talks about nature's right to an integral restoration and Article 73 talks about what actions against nature are prohibited. However article 74 retains anthropocentric reasoning: "Persons, people, communities and nationalities will have the right to benefit from the environment and form natural wealth that will allow wellbeing"[14]. As Bordessa states, "the removal of arguments for human privilege and the granting of moral status to nature do require the construction of a moral system that takes nature's claims for respectful treatment seriously" [16]. Bordessa also perceives the Brundland report and the sustainable development agenda as an anthropocentric one [16].

As to human-animal relationships arguments are evident that defend an anthropocentric or biocentric view of human-animal relationships [17-37]. Furthermore various arguments humans

use in regards to animals generate ability privileges (e.g. based on level of cognition; ability to experience pain or be self-aware) for some animals over other animals and in some cases for some animals over some humans (e.g. as severely cognitive impaired labeled people). I submit that the utility and limitation of ability based privilege within the framework of animal rights and human-animal relationships could be investigated further. Beyond ability privileges other forms of privileges are seen to influence the discussion around human-animal relationships[38]. Katrina Fox outlines the interplay of various forms of privilege [39] and thematizes how to build bridges something which is solely needed and which demands that one has to be careful about which ability privilege one exhibits and perpetuates in ones arguments for a given group given its impact on another entity. In the next section

I submit that the ability studies lens is a useful addition to analyze ecological dynamics. It allows us to anticipate whether various ecological movements are at odds or synergetic with each other (indeed different ecological movements have different ability expectations). Ecological discourses within different cultures or societies vary due to difference in ability expectations within these cultures or societies. Employing the ability expectation lens allows one to ascertain whether different parties in a dispute can come to an ecological agreement. It also allows us to ascertain how different ecological movements relate to each other and where there might be synergies and where they might be none; e.g. the shallow ecology movement is described as wanting to increase the ability to increase the health and affluence of people in developed countries [12]; the deep ecology movement is described wanting to increase the ability to promote “biospheric egalitarianism, the view that all living things are alike in having value in their own right, independent of their usefulness to others” [12]..

Conclusion

To conclude, the question is who has the “Ability Power” meaning what abilities give one the power over other and who has the power to decide which abilities count.

Within the conversation (as part of a computer game Deus Ex Invisible War) might lay the way forward as to how to deal with ability expectations and ableism.

Conversation between Alex D and Paul Denton

Paul Denton: If you want to even out the social order, you have to change the nature of power itself. Right? And what creates power? Wealth, physical strength, legislation — maybe — but none of those is the root principle of power.

Alex D: I’m listening.

Paul Denton: Ability is the ideal that drives the modern state. It's a synonym for one's worth, one's social reach, one's "election," in the Biblical sense, and it's the ideal that needs to be changed if people are to begin living as equals.

Alex D: And you think you can equalise humanity with biomodification?

Paul Denton: The commodification of ability — tuition, of course, but, increasingly, genetic treatments, cybernetic protocols, now biomods — has had the side effect of creating a self-perpetuating aristocracy in all advanced societies. When ability becomes a public resource, what

will distinguish people will be what they do with it. Intention. Dedication. Integrity. The qualities we would choose as the bedrock of the social order. (*Deus Ex: Invisible War*)[5]

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