

Thinking Differently: A Look at Disability Prejudice in Past and Present

Take a moment to consider the aspects of your life you may take for granted: choosing your friends, freedom regarding your love life, being actively involved in your medical decisions, the opportunity to pursue an education and career. For many individuals with physical or mental disabilities, the way others perceive them can limit these choices. These roadblocks are incredibly frustrating for people with disabilities. The Americans with Disabilities Act defines a person with a disability as “a person who has a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activity. This includes people who have a record of such an impairment, even if they do not currently have a disability. It also includes individuals who do not have a disability but are regarded as having a disability.” Though often not as commonly discussed as racial, gender, or religious prejudices, disability prejudice can be tracked throughout history. Disability prejudice is a negative attitude either consciously or subconsciously toward persons with disabilities. These negative attitudes lead to prejudice and discrimination. This essay will seek to shed light on the history of disability prejudice as exhibited by the forced sterilization and “mercy” euthanasia practices of Hitler’s Germany, the institutionalization of the disabled in a developing America, and the current barriers to acceptance. Finally, the essay will highlight progress through the Disability Rights Movement, the concept of ableism, and the global organizations currently promoting acceptance and inclusion of people with disabilities.

Among the many unspeakable atrocities committed during the German Nazi regime were the crimes enacted against those born with physical or mental disabilities. In pursuit of the Aryan “master race,” Hitler’s regime sought to purify the gene pool of all attributes he deemed to be “inadequate.” This fearful perception of persons with disabilities led to the creation of the “Law

for the Prevention of Progeny with Hereditary Diseases” in July 1933, just months after Hitler rose to power as German Chancellor. One of the first pieces of legislation instituted to contribute to the “master race,” this law encouraged anti-disability propaganda and initiated the forced sterilization of all individuals specified as “genetically unfit” for reproduction. The Nazi definition of physical and mental disabilities encompassed a range of conditions including physical deformities, cerebral palsy, blindness, or muscular dystrophy, to autism, alcoholism, and anxiety disorders, among others. Propaganda labeled those with disabilities as burdens to society, using terms such as “lives unfit for living,” “freaks,” or “useless eaters” (U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum) to encourage German citizens to cease their support for programs benefiting disabled people. One publicized notion was that people with disabilities generally produced more children than those without, causing an increase in risk for conditions to be passed on genetically. Supporters of Nazi ideals cited untrue reproduction trends as one factor contributing to Germany’s economic instability. These reproduction trends were used to justify the forced sterilization, via vasectomy or tubal ligation, of hundreds of thousands of individuals. The Nazi regime maintained a facade of lawfulness through the institution of Hereditary Health Courts in which doctors and a judge presided over “genetic fitness” cases. In court, doctors publicized patient information and plaintiffs were asked to reveal a complete family history of disability. With no formal criteria, doctors and judges were able to dictate any ruling they saw appropriate. The courts heard appeals but seldom honored them. From the time the sterilizations began until the end of the war in 1945, nearly 360,000 people lost fertility from being subjected to the procedure (Evans). Many people wrongly lost their right to have children based on their appearances or diagnoses. In reality, the children of adults with disabilities frequently grow up

with increased independent functioning and creative thinking skills (Leary). Devastatingly, Hitler's persecution of those with disabilities did not stop at forced sterilization.

People with disabilities faced a deadly threat when Hitler issued a decree in 1939 endorsing the "mercy killing" of the disabled or ill. The decree, issued under the codename "Operation T4," gave physicians permission to euthanize patients which they deemed terminally ill or incurable based on their "best judgment." Hitler justified the euthanization of people with disabilities as an economic boost for Germany, touting the money that would be saved by not having to provide them with food or care. He also argued that euthanizing terminally ill patients would make more hospital beds available during wartime. Mainly targeting those in psychiatric institutions and nursing homes, the order was carried out in secret to avoid a public uproar. Originally, the Nazi method of choice was the lethal injection, but the large number of executions became costly to fund. The first experimental use of gas chambers, such as those later used in Jewish concentration camps, was for the killing of the ill and disabled in 1940. Hitler's staff also honed cremation procedures while they covered their tracks by sending fake death certificates and ashes to the unwitting families of their victims. Hitler suspended Operation T4 in 1941 after church-run-institutions and other churches opposed the unnecessary deaths; however, it was secretly restarted later that year with doctors ordered to utilize whatever means of killing they considered necessary. During this stage, people of all ages (infant through elderly) were subjected to "mercy killings" in the form of a drug overdose, starvation, or injection. The Nazi regime initiated the killing of approximately 275,000 people with disabilities (Cook). It is impossible to describe the shocking magnitude of the secret killings and first experimental mass killings initiated by the Nazi party. Patients and their families had no say in most of the euthanizations. There is no telling how they would have been able to spend their remaining years

had the decision to end their lives not been made. Though the treatment of the disabled by the Nazi party is horrifying, Germany is not the only country to have exhibited disability prejudice.

The history of the United States is littered with examples of the mistreatment of people with disabilities. Years before Hitler's sterilization law, Indiana instituted its own eugenics sterilization law in 1907 for "confirmed idiots, imbeciles, and rapists." Variations of the law became legal in more than 30 other states. The eugenic sterilization laws allowed for the compulsory sterilization of individuals with traits that defied the norms of society. Similar to and preceding the sterilization practices in Germany, the eugenics sterilization laws were based on the fear that children would inherit all of the negative traits of their parents. Dr. Stern of the University of Michigan states that the initial focus was on the sterilization of the mentally disabled, as well as those with traits such as "criminality, feeble-mindedness, and sexual deviance." Many immigrants, the poor, and unwed mothers were often subjected to pressure to receive sterilization as well. Hitler even cited the United States' sterilization practices as an example of another country making "weak beginnings toward a better conception [of citizenship]." Compulsory sterilization was ruled constitutional by the United States Supreme Court hearing of *Buck vs. Bell* in 1927. Unethical sterilizations occurred in the U.S. for decades as individuals were subjected to lies and coercion to influence whether they received sterilization. As was the case with forced sterilizations in Germany, the compulsory sterilization of disabled Americans or Americans possessing "undesirable traits" is unfounded. The actions come from a place of fear and lack of understanding that represent a terrible piece of American history not well known by the public. In addition to the unethical forced sterilizations, people with disabilities faced many other challenges before any progress was made to combat disability prejudice.

Americans with disabilities faced society's preconceived notions about them, poor living conditions, and minimal civil rights before making any significant gains in the late 1900s. In the 17th century, people with disabilities were pitied and seen as feeble individuals who could not contribute to society. Because the majority of society adopted this viewpoint, people with disabilities usually lived separately from the rest of the world in large institutions. Though the building of the first psychiatric hospitals in the 1850s in America was a breakthrough in psychological science and care, the overcrowded conditions and controversial treatment of patients in institutions was a violation of rights. People with a wide range of conditions were institutionalized. Besides genetic conditions, patients had a number of other afflictions such as epilepsy, alcoholism, blindness, neurogenic syphilis, deafness, dementia, or Alzheimer's. Lack of understanding of psychological conditions in the early to mid-1900s meant that many methods of treatment were experimental. Many experiments, such as lobotomies, electrical and insulin shock therapies, and Dr. Cotton's removal of various "infected" body parts, could be significantly harmful to patients and were commonly performed without the patient's consent. Lack of funding for psychiatric facilities during the Great Depression caused increasingly dirty facilities and more extreme bouts of sickness. With the end of World War II, the United States realized the impending increase in the need for quality care for those with disabilities.

The return of soldiers humanized physical and mental disabilities for the majority of Americans and put pressure on the American government to produce advancement in disability rights. Beginning in the 1960s, disability rights activists campaigned for change alongside other minorities during the Civil Rights movement. Sadly, civil rights for individuals with disabilities were slow to be included in the American discourse. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 completely bypassed disability rights, only prohibiting "discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex, or

national origin.” Through persistent lobbying and promotion of disability rights, the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (Section 504), providing “equal opportunity for employment within the federal government and in federally funded programs, prohibiting discrimination on the basis of either physical or mental disability,” was signed into law. A slew of legislation protecting the rights of physically or mentally disabled people followed including the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (later renamed the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act “IDEA”) which guaranteed “equal access to public education for children with disabilities.” After campaigning for more broad civil rights protections, The Americans with Disabilities Act protecting the “equal treatment and equal access of people with disabilities to employment opportunities and to public accommodations” was signed into law in 1990 by president George H.W. Bush. This legislature was key to cementing the civil rights of those with physical or mental disabilities. Though disability prejudice still exists, many actions are being taken to educate the public.

A growing number of people are pushing to break the social stigma surrounding people with disabilities. Movements for advocacy, inclusion, and self-determination are allowing giving disabled people a voice. A growing number of people with disabilities and their friends and family are advocating for, or publicly supporting their cause. Organizations such as Best Buddies International, a group that pairs up students with peers who have disabilities for the formation of friendships, offer advocacy training to for anyone interested in learning to be effective speakers and leaders to advocate for community change. Forming connections and providing education to the public is how organizations such as Best Buddies hope to decrease disability prejudice and increase inclusion. The Northern Michigan University chapter of Best Buddies is attempting to do just that in the local Marquette community. In addition to advocacy, Best Buddies also

promotes inclusion. Ferris State University defines inclusion as “involvement and empowerment, where the inherent worth and dignity of all people are recognized.” Groups such as Disability: IN, work with businesses to promote the inclusion of disabled people in the workforce. Their vision is to create “an inclusive global economy where people with disabilities participate fully and meaningfully.” Many people may be biased about whether or not those with disabilities can be functional in society. Often, people with different life experience can offer different ways of thinking when performing a task or problem-solving. By promoting inclusion, it becomes apparent that diversity can foster success. Finally, self-determination is the idea that people with disabilities have the same right to, and responsibilities that accompany, the ability to control their lives like everyone else. Programs such as Special Olympics, a sports training and competition program for those with disabilities, encourage participants to learn decision-making skills and increase confidence. In addition to large organizations, individual people can be large forces for the encouragement of self-determination. Alex Kimmel, a.k.a. “The Self-Determinator,” is an advocate for inclusion and acceptance who spoke on Northern Michigan University’s campus in March of 2019. Kimmel teaches that people should get to know him beyond their first impression of his disability, before making any assumptions about him as a person. He teaches the importance of talking to disabled people to using the same vocal tone that one might use when talking to a non-disabled person, not “like a baby.” Kimmel says that people should not act differently when meeting someone with a disability, respect their preferences. He suggests the best thing to do is to “SLOOOOW DOOOOWN.” Kimmel also impresses upon his audiences of parents, general community members, and other self-advocates the value of self-determination and the value of being able to make decisions: “My life. My way.” Advocates like Alex Kimmel will continue to bridge the knowledge gap that creates the fear surrounding disability prejudice.

Today, as people with disabilities continue to face challenges with people who make assumptions about their ability or attempt to shelter them and seclude them from society, advocates like Alex Kimmel and groups like Best Buddies, Disability: IN, and Special Olympics can be positive forces for global change. The social, ethical, and physical crimes committed against people with disabilities as exhibited during Nazi Germany and the developing United States are inexcusable. Though the memories are painful and not often discussed, they must be remembered and learned from, so the future can be safer for all people.

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