

Defining Disability

There are and have been a lot of ways to define disability. Typically, disability has been defined through the [medical model](#), [charity model](#), [rights model](#), [social model](#) and [radical model](#). And these perspectives sometimes overlap or even compliment each other (for example, many people who work under the rights model are also proponents of the social model and the charity model and medical model often work to reinforce each other).

Medicalization and the Medical Model

Medicalization, is defined by [Cathrine Reissman](#) as:

The term medicalization refers to two interrelated processes. First, certain behaviours or conditions are given medical meaning - that is, defined in terms of health and illness. Second, medical practice becomes a vehicle for eliminating or controlling problematic experiences that are defined as deviant, for the purpose of securing adherence to social norms. Medicalization can occur on various levels: conceptually, when a medical vocabulary is used to define a problem; institutionally, when physicians legitimate a programme or a problem; or on the level of doctor-patient interaction, when actual diagnosis of a problem occurs.

Not Searching for a Cure

Contrary to what many people believe, most disabled people do not want a cure.

In fact, many disabled people actively resist funding going to cure their disabilities. If you are not disabled, this may be really difficult to understand. If you aren't disabled, imagine for a moment that you live in poverty, that you cannot get a job even though you are qualified and you want one because no one will hire you, that most public spaces and almost all private homes are inaccessible to you and that every year millions of dollars are raised and spent so that you can be cured while you get little or no support to live your life and to combat ableism.

The Charity Model

The Charity approach to disability viewed as being in the '*best interests*' of disabled people but it does not consider disabled people's experiences and knowledge as necessarily valuable or essential. This approach is about well meaning 'do-gooders' acting on our behalf without us. Because we aren't in control of the process little good, or even harm, is often the result.

In the past decades, people who follow the charity model have not so much tried to define disability as they have tried to redefine it. These attempts to redefine or rebrand disability have largely failed because they have been made by people, while well meaning, who are largely not disabled and who have a negative and paternalistic view of disability.

The entire charity approach is designed to ensure that no real change ever occurs. It is about people doing good for others, it is not about change, it is not about liberation, it is about the agents of charity - the do-gooders feeling better about themselves and the world they live in.

Rights Model

The rights model is primarily a fight for access to the privileges people would otherwise have had if they were not disabled. A focus on rights is not a struggle for fundamental social change; rather, it strives to make changes within the existing system.

The idea behind disability rights is that:

A human rights approach to disability acknowledges that people with disabilities are rights holders and that social structures and policies restricting or ignoring the rights of people with disabilities often lead to discrimination and exclusion. A human rights perspective requires society, particularly governments, to actively promote the necessary conditions for all individuals to fully realize their rights.

This is the definition of [DRPI \(Disability Rights Promotion International\)](#). According to this group and many other rights groups, "As full citizens with equal rights, people with disabilities are entitled to: access to education, equal rights to parenthood, rights to property ownership, access to courts-of-law, political rights such as the right to vote, equal access to employment"

However, the rights approach does not address fundamental flaws within the system that disabled people are seeking inclusion in. For example, the rights model recognizes the right of disabled people to own private property but does not question fundamental injustices attached to property ownership. Further, it does not necessarily address colonialism which has resulted in much of the property ownership in many parts of the world to be a direct result of racism and theft.

It is important to acknowledge that much of the access and privileges that disabled people have today is a direct result of the people who struggled and continue to struggle for disability rights. Many people have fought very hard for disabled people's inclusion in society and these struggles need to be recognized and celebrated. However, we need to do more than fight for rights within society as it is structured now, we need to fight for social justice for everyone and that means restructuring society.

Social Model

The *Union of Physically Impaired Against Segregation* (UPIAS) separated the idea of disability from the idea of impairment in 1976. They said:

Disability is something imposed on top of our impairments by the way we are unnecessarily isolated and excluded from full participation in society.

By this definition requiring a wheelchair is the impairment where the inability to enter certain buildings is the disability. This definition sent shock waves through the disability rights community.

This definition set impairment as the physical or mental "limitations" apart from the social barriers that are disabling.

[Michael Oliver](#), a disabled British academic and author of [Understanding Disability: from Theory to Practice](#), expanded on this idea, saying:

It is not individual limitations, of whatever kind, which are the cause of the problem but society's failure to provide appropriate services and adequately ensure the needs of disabled people are taken in to account in its social organization.

The Radical Model - The Way Forward

This approach to disability looks at disability entirely as a social construct and does not separate impairment from disability like the [social model](#).

Radical disability activists acknowledge that we do not control the definition of disability - that it is defined by those with power to their benefit.

Women, queer people, trans people, racialized people, poor people and other marginalized people were all considered disabled at one point in history, largely under the umbrella of feeble-minded and/or degenerate.

Radical disability activists are very critical of certain groups' attempts to get more privilege by defining themselves as other than disabled. Members of the Deaf and psychiatrized communities have attempted to distance themselves from other disabled people by saying essentially "*there is nothing **wrong** with us. We are a linguistic minority or we think and experience the world differently but we are not disabled. There is nothing wrong with us.*"

The radical disability model says there is nothing wrong with *any* of us.

We argue that disability is simply defined as **those who are externally identified as disabled and those who self-identify as disabled.**

To us, disability is not a point of individual or social tragedy but a natural and necessary part of human diversity. The tragedy of disability is not our minds and bodies but oppression, exclusion and marginalization. We do not need to be [cured](#). We do not need [charity](#). We need respect, equality and access.