Disabilities in Higher Education: Beyond ‘Accommodation’

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Abstract

Institutions of higher learning have seen considerable improvements in opportunities for students with disabilities to participate and learn. Despite these improvements, challenges remain within this movement. Students with disabilities continue to face disadvantages as a result of ‘attitudinal barriers’ or discriminatory perceptions. This paper offers a diagnosis of such attitudinal barriers and proposes a correction in the form of what disability scholars christen the ‘social model’ of disability. This research ends with several implications that will be relevant to university administrators, staff and teaching faculty in their attempt to promote greater inclusion.

Keywords

disabilities in higher education – stigma – attitudinal barriers – human variation model of disability – inclusiveness

1 Introduction

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) is a piece of federal law in the United States that governs how public institutions ought to design their policies or processes in a manner that offer intervention to persons with disabilities between the ages of 3–21. An excerpt from an early statement of the IDEA reads as follows:
Once the student’s disability is documented, the post-secondary institution ‘must reasonably accommodate’ the student. *Universities, however, are not required to provide accommodations that are unduly burdensome* IDEA 2004 quoted in Eckes and Ochoa 2005, emphasis mine.

Further, according to the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), examples of ‘reasonable accommodations’ are ramps for wheelchair access, modified cubicles or lavatories, printed texts in different fonts, sign-language interpreters, flexible work schedules or locations, etc.—more importantly, a failure to provide for such reasonable accommodation to persons with disabilities may amount to discrimination (ADA 1990).1 Despite the very conservative statement from the IDEA of 2004, an increasing number of universities in the Anglo-sphere, at this present day, would have some form of an institutionally-backed system—a disabilities office, say—whose task is to formulate and implement solutions that accommodate the needs of students with disabilities (Yssel et. al. 2016). This is a far cry from the state of affairs before the 1970s where it was reported that a significant number of students were denied entry to universities simply on the basis of their disabilities (Angel 1969; Fonosch (1980; Paul 2000). Indeed, the move to promote the inclusion and learning of students with disabilities gained pace in tandem with a recognition that even students without disabilities may also require support from student counselling centres (Levine and Cureton 1998; Amada 1992; Stone and Archer 1990; O’Malley et. al. 1990; Megivern et. al. 2003).

Institutions of higher learning have seen considerable improvements in opportunities for students with disabilities to participate and learn. Despite these improvements, challenges remain within this movement. First, it continues to remain an open question what ‘reasonable accommodation’ amounts to; indeed, this contested notion has figured prominently in numerous lawsuits filed in the US, amongst other countries with non-discrimination laws (Eckes and Ochoa 2005). Second, the notion of reasonable accommodation tends to be narrowly associated with matters of physical access or technical support; but, there are instances where students with disabilities need pedagogical support, e.g. a different teaching method2 or flexibility with

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1 An analogous provision is that of the idea of ‘reasonable adjustments’ as found in the UK Equality Act (2010).

2 For instance, it has been found that students with learning disabilities, in contrast to non-disabled students, may prefer the teaching to be done orally and with the use of visual aids over the written form (Heiman and Precel 2003).
respect to student workload and methods of evaluation (Hanafin et al. 2006). Relatedly, some colleges or universities are unprepared or unwilling to go beyond their basic understanding of what is legally required by the mandate of reasonable accommodation or similar laws (Hong 2015). Third, the notion of reasonable accommodation in particular or, indeed, anti-discrimination laws and inclusive social policies in general, tend to remain neutral towards or fall silent on the ‘attitudinal barriers’ reportedly held by some college faculty that can undermine the participation and effective learning of students with disabilities (Konur 2002; Ryan and Struhs 2004; Hanafin et al. 2006; Rao 2004). It was reported, for instance, that professors of students with disabilities found it perplexing that such students are pursuing higher education; in other instances, a learning disability (LD), such as dyslexia, is viewed as a means of gaming the system, a calculated strategy by students with LD to enjoy unfair advantage (Hanafin et al. 2006, Denhart 2008); relatedly, students with LD who face a higher level of stress and anxiety over their studies are, at times, perceived by college faculty to be either ‘over-sensitive’ or have intentionally exaggerated their condition (Hanafin et al. 2006; Hoy et al. 1997; Heiman and Precel 2003).

The notion of reasonable accommodation, doubtless, has important ramifications for the reallocation of resources (broadly understood to include the costs that go towards, for instance, wheelchair access and the running of student disability offices). But this notion, while important in correcting certain unjust outcomes for students with disabilities, has its limitation especially when it comes to the so-called attitudinal barriers alluded to in the previous paragraph. In section 2 of this paper, I offer more details on the disadvantages faced by students with disabilities as a result of the phenomenon of attitudinal barriers. In section 3 I offer a diagnosis of such discriminatory perceptions; I argue that these may be rooted in an outmoded or indefensible conception of what a disability is (e.g. the ‘individual model’); such a diagnosis allows me, in section 4, to propose an alternative conception of disability in the form of what has been called the ‘human variation’ model, which I argue offers both a reason for appreciating the potential value that students with disabilities can bring to a relationship as well as constitute a means by which prejudicial physical and socio-cultural arrangements can be modified to better match the traits of such students. In section 5, I forward a set of implications that university

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3 Indeed, it was found by Hanafin et al. (2006) that students possessing more than one disability are especially vulnerable since they may require more complex forms of intervention the urgency of which are not often recognized by universities or campus staff.
or college administrators and faculty staff alike can adopt in addressing the disadvantages faced by students with disabilities.

Although this paper takes US higher education and disability policy as its starting points, it has international relevance. As it will become clear later in the paper, there are similarities between the challenges faced by students with disabilities across different countries. Also, the proposed solution to these challenges finds its roots in what is known as the ‘British model’ of disability. This paper brings together data and findings from educational research, disability studies, sociology and philosophical discourse on disability; and, it does so with an end to suggesting that current legally or institutionally mandated policies of accommodation may not sufficiently address problems that arise from uninformed or prejudicial beliefs—a countermand to which is a call to supplement the requirement of reasonable accommodation with that of ‘mutual recognition’.

2 Attitudinal Barriers and ‘Epistemic Injustice’

It has been reported that faculty attitudes towards students with disabilities constitute an important factor that affect the success of students enrolled in colleges or universities (Paul 2000; Rao 2004). One example of such an attitude is that which was raised in the introductory remarks, namely the perception by some US and European college faculty that students with a learning disability, who file for some form of assistive support, are trying to enjoy unfair advantage or are simply being ‘overly-sensitive’ (Hanafin et. al. 2006; Hoy et. al. 1997; Heiman and Precel 2003). In a different study of the perceptions by US students of their faculty, it was found that while most faculty were willing to make basic changes to their manner of instruction, classroom interactions were perceived by such students to be ‘chilly’ or disengaged, with some students reporting that they felt their academic integrity being doubted (Beilke and Yssel 1999). US students with disabilities often claim to be either wrongfully disbelieved or misunderstood (Denhart 2008). Another study by Hong (2015, p. 215) reported how students in the US felt that they needed to muster the courage to present an accommodation request to their tutor, but came away feeling ‘looked down upon and judged’; one student confessed

4 To be sure, not all such attitudes are obviously detrimental to student success. Arguably, perceptions of the comparative severity of disability types are not obviously detrimental to student success; for instance, Rao (2004) found that faculty perceived disability associated with moderate hearing and vision lost to be least debilitating, while quadriplegia and schizophrenia most debilitating.
that ‘[a]ll I wanted was the teachers’ understanding and that I’m not a lazy or disinterested student’. Most students perceived a great degree of distrust and cynicism between themselves and their tutors or professors. It is somewhat disturbing to note that there are parallels between the foregoing attitudinal barriers—associated with excessive doubt on the claims of students with disabilities—and the observation by numerous feminist scholars that women report to enjoying less credence when they testify to their experiences (as in the case of victims of sexual assault, say). Feminist scholars have coined the term ‘epistemic injustice’ to refer to the wrong being done to women in virtue of an inability to communicate their understanding of their experiences to others often as a result of prejudice or bias (Fricker 2007; Barnes, 2016). And, in relation to the notion of ‘reasonable accommodation’, whether a request is considered reasonable (or unreasonably disruptive) depends on whether the hearer attaches normative significance to that request; because of epistemic injustice, such requests from disabled students are drained of their urgency or significance: these requests are perceived as ‘unreasonable’ or ‘disruptive’, thereby falling on deaf ears.

An unwelcome consequence of disabled students not being able to communicate their needs or experiences is a culture of avoidance where such students would rather avoid making use of the assistive provisions than to risk being misunderstood or ‘standing out’. For instance, studies have found that students with learning disabilities tend to avoid using or requesting for assistive provisions legally open to them for fear of being stigmatized or misunderstood as desiring to cheat (Denhart 2008). In a different study that analyses the reflective journals kept by sixteen college students with disabilities, it was found that many students avoided having to request for any kind of academic adjustment or accommodation for fear of being perceived by their tutors as being inferior to their classmates or being less capable to complete a module (Hong 2015). An excerpt from the reflective journal of one of the sixteen US students bears reproducing here:

**Understanding is not something you can demand of someone with a piece of paper or even an explanation. The school may mandate to allow the students to be in their class and cater to their needs, but it is up to the individual teacher how it is interpreted. You can’t force someone to be okay with giving accommodations. They’ll still give them, but they may be snippy about it, look down on the student. This is the last thing I want. I’d rather deal with the repercussions of being a ‘lazy’ pupil than if the other option is being resentfully given help.**

*Hong 2015, p. 216*
Although the student in question was allowed to sit for her test in a separate venue (as a means of reducing her anxiety), the author of the study noted that the student ‘preferred to “hold in my tics and take the test with normal students” rather than “feel ashamed” to have to go to another room’ (Hong 2015, p. 217). A different study about the challenges faced by students with disabilities in Cyprus reported the following:

At an individual level, the identification and provision for students with disabilities were hindered by students’ lack of confidence in disclosing/discussing disability issues. There were several reasons to explain this. Students may not know that they were entitled to additional support; they may not perceive themselves as having ‘special needs’ or disabilities; or they may choose not to disclose disabilities because they believed they will be disadvantaged and stigmatized. Regarding the last reason, some students with disability felt a sense of stigma and shame, resorting in ‘hiding’ their needs to alleviate social pressure and the implications of being different.

HADJKAKOU AND HARTAS 2007, p. 115

The culture of avoidance in which forms of accommodation are not taken up bears a striking parallel to the following observation by Putnam et. al. related to a context outside of universities:

[P]eople in wheelchairs are sometimes provided restaurant access only through the service entrance. The restaurant owners often claim that such access is quite reasonable, since the service entrances already have ramps—a distributive consideration. Disability advocates claim that however convenient it may be for the owners, such access treats wheelchair users as second-class customers—a claim of misrecognition.

2019, Section 3

To be sure, colleges or universities have made significant improvements since the late 1980s to go beyond legally or institutionally mandated policies of reasonable accommodation as a means of tackling the problem of ‘attitudinal barriers’ from staff and faculty. For instance, college admission committees, disability and other student support offices are increasingly adopting more fine-grained assessment metrics to better understand the needs of students with disabilities as well as to pair students with more suitable academic advisors (Hong 2015); also, there have been calls for career and counselling offices in campuses to be made more aware of the needs of students with disabilities.
(Hadjikakou and Hartas 2007); on the other hand, students with disabilities are increasingly made aware of the assistive provisions they can rely on. But, the observation that such improvements occur in piecemeal steps with little being done to alter staff or faculty perceptions of students with disabilities have continued to sustain the attitudinal barriers and culture of avoidance I described in the foregoing paragraphs (Shevlin et. al. 2004; Hong 2015).

What this suggests is that legally or institutionally mandated policies of accommodation do not sufficiently address problems that arise from uninformed or prejudicial beliefs held by university administrators or faculty. What appears to be required is the securing of a kind of recognition—which differs from reasonable accommodation—in which persons with disabilities can be perceived as equals in the sense of being capable of significant contributions to others and society at large (Asch 1989). In the following section, I wish to offer a diagnosis of the phenomenon I described above, namely that of the epistemic injustice of being unreasonably disbelieved. It will be argued that a cause of the phenomenon of epistemic injustice may be an uncritical assuming of, on the part of non-disabled individuals, an outmoded or indefensible conception of what a disability is. I then propose an alternative to this outmoded conception of disability, and I explain how this alternative model tackles the stigma faced by students with disabilities such that the problem related to the culture of avoidance can be made less severe.

3 The Stigma of ‘Attitudinal Barriers’

Stigma is a mark of social ostracization and, at times, social disgrace that affects one’s self-identity or self-worth; stigma allows a society to systematically regard someone or class of persons as abnormal, deviant or repellent (as in the case of persons with HIV; see, Wolitski et. al. 2009). Relatedly, stigma also has negative practical consequences: a drug conviction has legal ramifications—it is a barrier to housing loans, insurance, employment (not to mention how some drug centres place people under surveillance, forced labour and abuse). What is not often noticed in the literature on educational research or the scholarship of teaching and learning (‘SoTL’) is an unfortunate parallel between the stigma faced by persons with disabilities and other stigmatised non-disabled groups. For instance, the label ‘homeless’ can be stigmatising in that it reinforces existing assumptions about homeless individuals—e.g. that they have a history of crime, that they are unemployed, that they are free-riders of society, that they are untrustworthy or, worse, dangerous (Phelan et. al. 1997; O’Toole et. al. 2015). The theme of being unjustifiably disbelieved or untrustworthy
is echoed in our findings above where students who declare their disability may, similarly, be perceived as wanting ‘to game the system’, as being ‘lazy’, as being ‘needy’, ‘overly-dependent’, and so forth. It is, therefore, not implausible to think that a study of the socio-psychology of the idea of stigma may offer a means of better understanding the circumstances of students with disabilities.

In his highly influential study of stigma, sociologist Erving Goffman makes a distinction between being ‘discredited’ and being ‘discreditable’ ([1963] 1986, chapter 2). Individuals who are stigmatized are discredited in the sense that their difference, which is ostracizing, is well-known (perhaps as a result of its being easily perceptible). Additionally, individuals may also be stigmatized in being discreditable in the sense that they have internalised their ‘difference’ (which may or may not be well-known as in the case of mental illnesses) because of a need to manage highly personal information; according to Goffman, the internalising of stigma, often by means of self-suppression, may lead to shame and associated behaviours of hiding or social avoidance.

What Goffman had not sufficiently noticed, however, is how the stereotypes or ‘scripts’ associated with a stigmatised group (i.e. being discredited) negatively reinforces the internalisation of stigma (i.e. being discreditable). This phenomenon was hinted at by the leading founder of critical pedagogy, Paulo Freire, who, in his monograph *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, writes:

> Self-depreciation is another characteristic of the oppressed, which derives from their internalization of the opinion the oppressors hold of them. So often do they hear that they are good for nothing, know nothing and are incapable of learning anything—that they are sick, lazy, and unproductive—that in the end they become convinced of their own unfitness.


Students with disabilities may avoid requesting their tutors for accommodation partly because doing so involves a personal disclosure which is tantamount to putting oneself in a vulnerable position. Perhaps, most university staff and faculty are used to seeing differences in knowledge, dispositions, talents and interests between themselves and the general student population; but, staff and faculty may not be as used to tutor-student relationships marked by the disclosure of private or highly personal information. The attitudinal barriers described in the earlier sections may be of a piece with the perception that a relation of asymmetric dependence is the de facto starting point when interacting with students with disabilities, where students with disabilities are misperceived to be unduly burdensome and, as a result, tutors having to provide
disproportionately more.\textsuperscript{5} It could very well be that part of what accounts for the stigma faced by disabled students is that popular understanding of the experiences of students with disabilities is likely to be shaped from the perspective of a non-disabled individual. What results from this, then, is that popular and academic discourse (at least outside of specialised disability journals or forums) may tend to focus on the ways in which a non-disabled majority is negatively affected by persons with disabilities or the assumption that ‘it is in the interest of people with disabilities to aspire to relationships with nondisabled people, even if it is not in the interest of the latter’ (Chappell 1994 cited in Wasserman et. al. section 3.2, my emphasis). What is, therefore, needed, as I intend to show in the following section, is a reconceptualizing of the idea of a ‘disability’ in a way that encourages a kind of interpersonal acknowledgement or what I call ‘mutual recognition’ in which disabled and non-disabled persons are able to appreciate more commonality between themselves in a way that primes one towards meaningful engagement.

So, the task ahead in the next section is to find a principled means of rejecting the negative disabling ‘scripts’ that non-disabled individuals may have cleaved to, perhaps unintentionally. The aim is to move beyond reasonable accommodation for the reasons noted above and also because, as it has been argued, an emphasis on mere resource allocation does little to stem the problem of stigmatisation and, at worse, reinforces the ‘deficiencies’ associated with stigmatised groups (Fraser 1995, 1997). The goal, then, is to justify the claim that one’s differences may mark one as distinct but, in some deeper sense, constitute principled grounds for what this paper calls ‘mutual recognition’, which is a basis that will motivate changes in socio-cultural perceptions or beliefs.

4 A Proposal: Disability as a Social Category

The Americans with Disabilities Act (1990) defines a ‘disability’ as follows:

An individual with a disability is defined by the ADA as a person who has a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities, a person who has a history or record of such an impairment, or a person who is perceived by others as having such an impairment.

\textsuperscript{5} The situation here appears to parallel the relation of asymmetric dependence between parents and children with disabilities in that the cost and duration of parental care are often increased (Botkin 1995; Kittay 1999).
The ADA’s definition of a ‘disability’, which emphasizes a physical or mental trait has strong echoes of a statement from UPIAS, but this time as a definition, not of ‘disability’, but of ‘impairment’, namely as the lack of all or part of a limb, or having a defective limb, organ or mechanism of the body.

Fundamental Principles of Disability, 1976

Indeed, other influential definitions of disability, such as the ones offered by the UK’s Disability Discrimination Act (1995) and the World Health Organization (1980, 2001), also lay similar emphasis on physical or mental characteristics that are or perceived to be impairments. This biological understanding of disability—which, as we shall see below, UPIAS sought to distance itself from—has not been explicitly defended by disability scholars, ethicists and philosophers of disability—it is, at best, unreflectively assumed by lay-persons and industry practitioners. The problem with such definitions of disability is that these definitions feed the assumption that biological impairments are the primary or sole causes of limitation or disadvantage or, as Oliver famously theorizes, are grist for the mill of what he calls the ‘individual model’ of disability:

There are two fundamental points that need to be made about the individual model of disability. Firstly, it locates the ‘problem’ of disability within the individual and secondly it sees the causes of this problem as stemming from the functional limitations or psychological losses which are assumed to arise from disability. These two points are underpinned by what might be called ‘the personal tragedy theory of disability’ which suggests that disability is some terrible chance event which occurs at random to unfortunate individuals. Of course, nothing could be further from the truth.

1990b, p. 3; see also OLIVER 1983

As with personal tragedies where one has limited recourse to institutional recompense, the individual model of disability casts one’s disability as little more than an instance of being dealt with a bad hand of cards, the consequences or losses of which are one’s to bear. In other words, definitions of disability such as that expressed in the ADA represent the socio-economic burdens faced by persons with disabilities as resulting mainly or solely from

6 This is now merged with other pieces of legislation under the UK’s Equality Act (2010).
an individual’s physical or mental traits (Putnam et al. 2019, Section 2). In contrast, the definition or model of disability that has increasingly found favour with disability scholars, ethicists and philosophers of disability is what is known as the ‘social model’ of disability, which, see[s] disability as a relationship between individuals and their social environments: physical and mental characteristics are limiting only or primarily in virtue of social practices that lead to the exclusion of people with those characteristics. This exclusion is manifested not only in deliberate segregation, but in built environments and social practices that restrict the participation of people regarded as having disabilities’ Putnam et al. 2019, Section 2

The social model—understood broadly to encompass a class of social models of disability—lays more emphasis on the physical and socio-cultural environment and less on the traits of persons with disability in accounting for the disadvantages faced by the latter group (Wasserman et al. 2002). Now, authors who appear to be committed to the biological or individual model of disability do not deny that the physical and socio-cultural environment bring about disadvantages (Brownlee, et al. 2009); nor, do authors who defend the social model deny that physical and mental impairments can cause discomfort and be sources of inconvenience (Shakespeare 2006; Thomas 2004). The difference between the two models is perhaps not so much a difference of kind as one of degrees: while the individual model sees the physical or mental traits of persons with disabilities as the main or sole contributing factor of their disadvantage, the social model casts the spotlight on the physical and socio-cultural environment.

Crucially, the reasons for university administrators, educational policy makers and, indeed, college faculty or instructors to favour cleaving to the social model over the individual model are various. For one, the social model offers principled grounds for recommending changes to the built environment and socio-cultural norms with an end to decreasing literal and other forms of social exclusion for students with disabilities; indeed, some have argued that such changes are also beneficial to persons without disabilities (Scotch and Schriner 1997). Second, it is arguable that the current regime of ‘reasonable accommodation’ is primarily motivated by the individual model which, as I have tried to suggest above, is a conception of disability that is, at best, but a partial account of the root causes of disadvantages faced by persons with disabilities and, at worst, a product of unreflective thinking. The individual model (and broadly biological accounts of disability) fails to account for the
fact that the external environment disables as much as the disability of an individual.

Recall again the discussion of ‘attitudinal barriers’ where we found, for instance, that requests by students with dyslexia may be perceived by faculty or administrators as attempts to benefit from unfair advantage. I argued that some such attitudinal barriers are akin to the idea of epistemic injustice as discussed in the feminist literature. Two hypotheses suggest themselves for why such attitudinal barriers arise: first, the conflation of disability with impairment—a view expressed by the ADA—casts the focus squarely on the biological traits. Second, Oliver’s individual model which lucidly describes disability as, at best, a regrettable event that befalls the unfortunate individual. Both closely related hypotheses serve the common purpose of exonerating society and the perceptions and practices it imposes. I wish to leave it open which of the two hypotheses (or perhaps both) best explain the presence of the attitudinal barriers; rather, what I wish to argue at this point is that if either or both of the hypotheses are plausible, then a remedy to the attitudinal barriers may take the form of what is known as the ‘British social model’ of disability, an influential statement of which is expressed by the Union of the Physically Impaired against Segregation (‘UPIAS’):

Disability is something imposed on top of our impairments by the way we are unnecessarily isolated and excluded from full participation in society. Disabled people are therefore an oppressed group in society. Disability [is] the disadvantage or restriction of activity caused by a contemporary social organization which takes no or little account of people who have

7 Just as unclear is how much of a disabled individual’s ‘impairment’ is the result of a biological trait or certain limitations imposed by the socio-physical environment. As Wasserman and Aas (2022, section 2.1) argue,

At one extreme are definitions that imply, or are read to imply, that biological impairments are the sole causes of limitation. The definitions in the World Health Organization’s 1980 International Classification of Impairment, Disability, and Handicap, and the Disability Discrimination Act (UK) have been interpreted this way. At the other extreme are definitions that restrict the limitations faced by disabled people (as such) solely to ‘contemporary social organization’, such as the definition given by the Union of the Physically Impaired Against Segregation (UPIAS 1976). In between are definitions which assert that individual impairment and the social environment are jointly sufficient causes of limitation. Perhaps the best-known example is the WHO’s International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health (World Health Organization 2001, referred to as ICF), which emphasizes that disability is a ‘dynamic interaction between health conditions and environmental and personal factors’.
physical impairments and thus excludes them from participation in the mainstream of social activities.

UPIAS 1976

The statement from UPIAS, which as Oliver writes, was the ‘idea behind the social [minority] model of disability’, holds that ‘we were not disabled by our impairments but by the disabling barriers we faced in society’ (2013, p. 1024). Crucially, the statement foreshadows two ways of understanding the notion of a disability. First, disability can be understood as the process in which persons with ‘impairments’ are summarily stigmatized and excluded (‘Disability is something imposed ... by the way we are unnecessarily isolated and excluded from full participation in society’). Clearly, this first sense of a disability draws kinship with the discrimination faced by racial and other minority groups. The second understanding of a disability focuses less on exclusion and more on a mismatch between the traits of persons with disabilities and the social and physical environment:

Rather than construing people with disabilities as a ‘discrete and insular minority’ created by practices of more or less deliberate exclusion, the human variation model construes people with disabilities as simply people who differ in degree from the majority of statistically normal population with respect to one or more physical or mental characteristics. The purpose of reconstruction is not so much to end specific exclusionary practices as to create a more inclusive physical and social environment.

PUTNAM ET. AL. 2019, Section 2, emphasis mine

Following the writings of Putnam et. al. (2019) and Wasserman and Aas (2022), let us call this model of disability suggested by the statement from UPIAS the ‘human variation model’. This model of disability has been hinted at by scholars who assert that disability is a ‘universal human condition’ (Zola’s 1989) and or a ‘shared human identity’ (Davis 2002). The human variation model acknowledges that not all disadvantages faced by or exclusionary practices foisted on persons with disabilities were deliberately devised by a non-disabled majority. Rather, some disadvantages result from a ‘mismatch’ between the

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8 As Wasserman and Aas (2022) write, this ‘claim is better construed as one about the nature of disability; as maintaining that all human beings have physical or mental variations that can become a source of vulnerability or disadvantage in some settings’ (section 1.1).

9 Putnam et. al. (2019) offer an example of such unintended disadvantage: ‘the failure to fully accommodate people with various differences, from extreme height to intellectual impairment, does not necessarily arise from stigma. But often, disparities in access that
physical or mental traits of persons with disabilities and the surrounding physical and socio-cultural environment (Scotch and Schriner 1997). Further, an important upshot of the human variation model is that it offers a timely reminder to non-disabled persons that their own physical and mental traits fall but within the very same continuum as those of persons with disabilities. The human variation model, in other words, offers both hitherto ‘distinct’ groups a basis upon which commonality can be espied without necessarily erasing the shared sense of identity possessed by certain disability groups.

The human variation model is sometimes contrasted with what has been called the ‘minority group model’ which construes the disadvantages faced by persons with disabilities as akin to discriminatory practices faced by historically subordinated racial or ethnic groups (Hahn 1987; Oliver 1990a). But, it should be pointed out that the two models are not incompatible in their common aim of ending discrimination. This is because there might be instances where the most effective means of removing disadvantage is by way of drawing analogies between persons with disabilities and minority groups; whilst in other circumstances it is helpful to reject the false dichotomy between disability and ‘normality’ as a means of promoting fairer treatment (Wasserman and Aas 2022, section 1.1).

How, then, does the human variation model help with the problem of ‘attitudinal barriers’ that students with disabilities face? First, by explaining

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10 Indeed, it is not inconceivable that the physical and socio-cultural environment might change in a manner that disfavour the non-disabled—a fictional foretelling of which can be found in Swift’s Gulliver’s Travels.

11 One worry, however, with the minority group model is the problem of what scholars of the humanities and social sciences have called ‘interstitiality’ or ‘in-betweeness’ that some persons with disabilities find themselves in. For instance, an upper middle-class Caucasian student with LD may be a minority with respect to her disability, but not so much with her economic status. Another worry with the minority group model is that—insofar as it stresses (symbolically if not literally) the correction of historical injustices—the model appears to assume that students conceive of their disabilities as integral to their self-identity; but, the strength of one’s identification with one’s disability varies from persons to persons. Finally, there have been authors who argue that the minority group model downplays the disadvantages that stem from physical impairments (Anastasiou and Kauffman 2013; Terzi 2004; Shakespeare 2006). But, it is not so much my wish to object to the minority group model as to make a case for the human variation model. As I said in the main text, both models are compatible.
away the disadvantages partly in terms of a ‘mismatch’ between traits and the external environment, the human variation model avoids a narrative of self-victimizing on the one hand, and a portrayal of the ‘oppressive majority’ on the other, where such narratives may reinforce a culture of mutual distrust. Second, the human variation model, unlike other models of disability, in its classification of disabilities in terms of degrees and not kinds, seeks to reduce the stigma associated with disabilities. Consider for instance the growth impairment popularly known as ‘dwarfism’ (or ‘achondroplasia’). If persons with achondroplasia are perceived as instantiating a part of a scale that describes the distribution of human height, where persons without the condition happen to fall within the mean, then it becomes hard to see how the discriminatory beliefs can be justifiably attributed to the former group but not the latter. Third, and lastly, insofar as the human variation model states that disadvantages faced by disabled individuals stem partly from a mismatch between traits and the external environment, it prompts a scrutiny of the socio-physical norms that create impairments out of physical traits. And, this is, according to Hall (2019) a fundamental tenet of what is known as critical disability studies which is to ‘analyze disability as a cultural, historical, relative, social, and political phenomenon’. The human variation model constitutes an alternative to the individual theory of disability in that it aims at the production of ‘knowledge in support of justice for people with stigmatized bodies and minds’ (Minich 2017).

Before I attempt to draw out some further implications of the human variation model of disability, I wish to raise an important caveat. The human

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12 Could it be retorted that the human variation model may not be as effective as the minority group model in tackling discrimination? Perhaps the former model describes who people with impairments are rather than of the disabling barriers; and, that the minority group model speaks more directly to the latter problem. In my defence it could be said that it is not obvious that the human variation model is ineffective against the attitudinal barriers for two reasons. First, by way of analogy, just as a definition of what counts as hate speech is a first step towards the prevention of such speech, so too a description of a person with disability is a first step towards the prevention of discrimination. Second, as explained above, it bears recalling that part of the statement from UPIAS gestures towards this model while the other towards the minority group model—so, both models share a similar intellectual genesis. To be sure, authors such as Hahn 1987 and Oliver 1990a have leveraged on the minority group model as a means of proposing civil rights protections or anti-discrimination laws; but, it is not obvious that such legal rights or protections cannot also be normatively justified by the human variation model. From the other direction, it bears noticing that the minority groups model is also implied by the Americans with Disabilities Act that makes mention of persons with disabilities as constituting a ‘discrete and insular minority’. Yet, what we notice is that the continued presence of attitudinal barriers despite the fact that the minority group model is implied by the ADA.
variation model does not deny that the notion of a disability or the idea of ‘difference’ (familiar from research into identity politics) offers persons with disabilities a powerful organizing basis for political or collective action. Nor does the model deny that the label of a ‘disability’ offers a basis for the legal reallocation of resources. The human variation model emphasises the need for respect (qua a group whose recognition has been previously denied) as much as it does commonality with regards to other degrees of human functioning.\(^{13}\)

The human variation model of disability offers one a useful theoretical basis for administrators and faculty staff for the justification of university policies or practices that aim at the removal of physical and social practices that exclude or disadvantage students with disabilities. The over-arching aim is the reduction of stigma and, conversely, a reinforcement of respectful mutual recognition. Since what counts as a ‘disability’ is simply a condition that arbitrarily falls somewhere on a range that describes a continuum of human functioning, the relationship between a disabled and a non-disabled individual is no less potentially valuable than that of two non-disabled individuals one of whom happens to have, for instance, higher cholesterol than another (see also Wasserman et. al. 2022). In other words, just as two non-disabled persons ought not to assume at the outset of their interaction that the other party possesses less resources for the creation of a potentially rewarding relationship, so too the relation between a disabled and a non-disabled individual. Further, insofar as the human variation model conceives of some disadvantages faced by persons with disabilities as the result of a mismatch between an unaccommodating physical and social environment and certain physical or mental traits, the model constitutes principled grounds for changing the external environment.

5 Concluding Remarks: the Human Variation Model of Disability—Some Implications

In what follows, I offer a set of suggestions that colleges and universities can undertake to increase the inclusion and learning of students with disabilities. These suggestions, which can be justified by the human variation model of

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\(^{13}\) In this sense the human variation model differs in emphasis (but not in kind) from the identity politics of authors such as Sonia Kruks who understands identity politics as a ‘demand for recognition on the basis of the very grounds on which recognition has previously been denied: it is qua women, qua blacks, qua lesbians that groups demand recognition. The demand is not for inclusion within the fold of “universal humankind” on the basis of shared human attributes; nor is it for respect “in spite of” one’s differences. Rather, what is demanded is respect for oneself as different’ (2001, p. 85).
disability, aim at the correction of attitudinal barriers (especially that of epistemic injustice) as well as the culture of avoidance described in section 2.

The credence of first-person narratives. Researchers who study the phenomenon of epistemic injustice have recommended several ways of rebuilding the epistemic authority that has been denied of subordinated groups. One obvious way is to include members of such groups into, broadly speaking, the discussions or inquiries that aim at formulating policy directions in particular, or others forms of knowledge in general. The overarching aim of the means of correcting epistemic injustice is that of giving pride of place to what has been called ‘situated knowledge’ or knowledge that captures the perspectives of individuals whose epistemic authority was once denied of them (Anderson 2020). To that end, more focus and credence can be ascribed to the self-reports of students with disabilities; and, what this translates to in practice is that non-disabled individuals ought to accept that students with disabilities are a good source of knowledge of their own experiences or assessments of the situation. For instance, there have been numerous studies that found that persons with disabilities report to enjoying a quality of life not significantly different from persons without disabilities (Saigal and Rosenbaum 1996; Albrecht and Devlieger 1999; Gill 2000; Goering 2008). The importance of fostering rapport between tutor and students is especially valuable in the case of students with disabilities for it is a condition of mutual trust that allows for more fruitful and transparent communication which, in turn, deepens an understanding of the needs of students.

One’s disability may or may not be central to one’s self-identity. According to well-known sociologist Anthony Giddens (2016), ‘self-identity’ can be understood as a biography that we tell of ourselves. Self-identity, in other words, is a continuous process of self-understanding, where we attempt

14 Victims of epistemic injustice report being devalued, denied of one’s selfhood, humiliated, and very frequently infantilized (Fricker 2007; Brison 2019). Their reports of knowledge are often pathologized (e.g. ‘she is hysterical,’ ‘she ought to calm down’) and, hence, discarded. Victims of epistemic injustice may not be able to articulate the wrongness of their experiences either with a lack of vocabulary or through external coercion. The sharing of lived experiences, therefore, builds emancipatory solidarity (Goodley et. al. 2018, p. 206; Meekosha and Shuttleworth 2009, p. 48) and is a helpful platform for students with disabilities.

15 One common worry made against the ‘truthfulness’ or veracity of such self-reports is that these may be the result of psychological adaptive processes in which persons with disabilities change or downsize their goals or habits in order to cope with aversive situations (Murray 1996; Menzel et. al. 2002; McClimans et. al. 2013; Barnes 2009). But, this worry may be overstated because the psychological processes of adaptation or response-shifting are also ones engaged in by non-disabled persons.
offer a narration that makes coherent our experiences, decisions, actions, etc. across time. In other words, there is some degree of control that we are able to exercise in deciding whether a certain aspect of ourselves is more important or salient than another with regards to our self-identity. The same, indeed, is true of students with disabilities, as Putnam et. al. (2019) explain:

[Even if some important aspects of one's self are not chosen—say, the fact that one has paraplegia or deafness—how central they are to one's self-conception, how much they matter to one's interests and plans, is to some extent within one's voluntary control ...] The extent to which one's identifications are voluntary depends on the constraints of the social environment. One cannot simply decide to make one's disability a less salient feature of one's biographical identity, at least, especially if one's disability is not 'hidden'. If the identity is ascribed, and emphasized, by the larger society, it may be difficult to reduce its importance in one's own practical reasoning. But one still has some choice about whether to accept or resist that emphasis.

PUTNAM ET. AL. 2019, my emphasis

Just as a non-disabled individual would hardly think that the mere fact of her being sighted is constitutive of her self-identity, so too a disabled student with transverse myelitis (that results in weakness of the limbs) may not see the neurological condition as constitutive of his self-identity (but instead identifies as a Commonwealth Games sports medallist).

Third-party professional assistance. In order to preserve the mutual recognition between students with disabilities and their peers and university staff and faculty, some assistance and means of accommodation now borne informally by peers and faculty members may be shouldered by third-party professionals (who are paid for by the school). There is research which shows that less strain is placed on intimate familial relationships when the provisions for travel, communication or the everyday preparation for work are shouldered by paid third-party professionals (Litvak et. al. 1987; Asch 1993; Ratzka 2004). Such a scheme may help relationships characterised by over-dependence and shame, and increase the autonomy of students with disabilities. Also, third-party professionals tend to be specially trained to work with one form of disability over another. When third-party professional assistance is made available as an option, students with disabilities can possess better control over their privacy or other forms of intimate personal knowledge that are—as with non-disabled students—important conditions for mutual respectful recognition. And, when certain disability-specific needs can be borne by
third-party professionals, students with disabilities interact and engage with the outside world, as it were, on more equal footing (and, indeed, face the same challenges as non-disabled students when building friendships or other forms of partnerships that require the cultivation of trust, empathy and mutual regard).16

More fine-grained knowledge of the physiology and needs of students with disabilities. Numerous publications have repeatedly shown that one important way of increasing the participation and learning of students with disabilities is to have university administrators and faculty staff be more informed about the needs of students with disabilities (Shevlin et. al. 2004; Paul 2000; Hall and Belch 2000; Burgstahler et. al. 2012). But, administrators and faculty should also be more informed in a different but no less important sense: some tutors who cleave to assumptions—for instance, that learning requires long participation in lectures or lessons with undivided attention and general sociability—may, as a result, not be as willing to make changes to their teaching methods. So, a proper appraisal of how the means of learning by students are more varied than traditionally assumed can help decrease the resistance amongst administrators and faculty in adopting alternative teaching methods or classroom practices.

There are, however, instances where certain changes to classroom teaching or general social practices may come at a cost. Thomas Orwen (2013) who studies the barriers to participation faced by individuals with autistic spectrum disorder reports that some persons with autism tend to be averse to external aural or other sensory stimuli and are unable to ‘read’ social cues. Orwen recognises, however, that society may find it too costly to give up the social practices of applause, light touching and subtleties in communication. But, this does not imply that there are no other less costly methods of accommodating autistic individuals: ‘One strategy’, Orwen writes, ‘might be to incorporate into universal design the practice of providing access to low stimulation areas in mainstream settings. Another might be to create more public acceptance of

16 It should be qualified that the value of engaging third-party professionals may be different in the relation between students with disabilities and their families. This is because it has been argued that an ingredient in lasting relationships is the learning about and caring for a family member who happens to have a disability (Wendell 1996; Kittay 2003). But, this observation does not undermine the claim that the relationship of students with disabilities and persons they meet in the university may benefit from having third-party professionals. This is because it must be remembered that the choice to avail oneself of such a provision is fully within the control of students with disabilities; if, it so turns out that a university friend is happy to offer some support and that this mutual dependence strengthens the friendship, third-party provision need not be taken up (Wasserman et. al. 2002, section 3.5).
autistic behaviors like stimming, which seem to help many autistic people reduce the impact of aversive sensory stimuli. ... (2013, p. 111). In other words, the inability or unwillingness to find a balance between meeting the needs of disabled and non-disabled students may stem not so much from a lack of resources as that of a capacity for imagination.

The suggestions summarised above are consistent with existing measures that many institutions of higher learning already have: for instance, the clarifying of admissions requirements for students with disabilities, the identification and removal of possible physical barriers, the informing of students with disabilities of the assistive provisions available to them, and the raising of awareness amongst teaching faculty, student support groups and (non-disabled) students of the value of inclusive practices (Hadjikakou and Hartas 2007). The goal of full ‘maximum inclusion’ is an ideal that university staff and faculty ought to aim for; but, as with all ideals, it will, in some instances, be impractical that no one suffers any disadvantage or inconvenience. Regardless, the human variation model of disability does offer principled grounds for increasing the fit for a wider range of individuals—both disabled and non-disabled persons alike—in a manner that bypasses the notion of physical or mental ‘deficits’ whilst aiming at a form of inclusion that finds its basis on the footings of mutual recognition.

One issue that I was not able to discuss in this paper concerns the possibly disabling nature of the political economy that surrounds the higher education industry. One worry is that the human variation model of disability, which this paper advocates, fails to cast a needed spotlight on some such political economy. I think that this is a concession that I will have to make; yet, insofar as the study of disability is richly interdisciplinary (Sleeter 2010)—relying on intellectual alliances amongst disability scholarship, types of critical discourses, queer and feminist theories, etc.—I may have to defer to researchers or colleagues from politics or economics to move the needle on this score. What I can say, however, is that the human variation model, which emphasises the interstitialily of disability (as it intersects with race, class, etc.) creates an opening in which future discussion can make precise the consequences of such overlaps. Second, since there may be a scarcity of scholarship on the topic of the political economy of higher education in relation to students with

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17 For instance, it may be to the advantage of students on wheelchairs that that public walkways or corridors have fewer sharp bends and more gradual sloping surfaces, but students who are visually impaired may require sharp bends and steps in order to read a terrain more accurately.

18 See footnote 11.
disabilities, I suggest drawing an analogy with the gendered ideology that has sustained the division of labour and, indeed, prestige surrounding the family and professional workplaces (see, for instance, Erevelles and Kafer 2010). I suspect that the heteronormativity of the institution of the family and of professional academia can throw light on how it is that the political economy of higher education may contain narratives that problematically organize and distribute work and prestige for students with disabilities. Fleshing out this analogy must, however, require a separate treatment.

In this paper I argued that the notion of reasonable accommodation as it is found in US educational policy has its limitations especially in tackling the attitudinal barriers that students with disabilities face. I then argued that such discriminatory perceptions may be rooted in an outmoded or indefensible conception of what a disability is (e.g. the ‘individual model’ of disability). Making this diagnosis allows me to propose an alternative conception of disability in the form of the ‘human variation’ model, which I argue offers both a reason for appreciating the value that students with disabilities can bring to a relationship as well as constitute a means by which disabling socio-physical arrangements can be modified. Finally, I forwarded a set of implications that university or college administrators and staff alike can adopt in addressing the disadvantages faced by students with disabilities such as offering of more credence to first-personal narratives and the argument that a student’s disability may not be central to her self-identity.

I conclude with one final piece of reflection. What, it might be asked, explains the attractions of the individual model of disability? I think we get a glimpse of an answer to this question when we reflect on how it is that the concept of race can be seen as an essentialistic understanding of class or that sexual orientation was once redefined as a psychological pathology that can be ‘treated’. The latter two phenomena arose in part as a result of a lack of alternative discourse. This explains why it is that the narratives offered by the voice of lived experiences are not only intellectually significant, they are also crucial to the ongoing process of emancipation (Goodley et. al. 2018, p. 206; Meekosha and Shuttleworth 2009, p. 48). Ontological commitments, of which the individual theory of disability is arguably an instance of, is but an indication of discourse that has been ossified by dead dogma that hides itself behind an ahistorical ‘fact’ that is conveniently sustained by the industry of science, an industry that is itself sustained by the widespread belief that it and only it constitutes a value-neutral grounds of knowledge. In sum, the concept of disability, like that of race, gender or sexual orientation cannot be helpfully analyzed without an eye to the ‘structuring institutions, social identities, cultural practices, political positions, historical communities, and the shared
human experience of embodiment’ (Garland-Thomson 2002, p. 4)—or that which make up a good part of what it is to be human.

References


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