



Centre for
Independent
Living CIC

The Social Model Explained

Introduction

More and more Disabled People are talking about the Social Model of Disability. For many, understanding it has changed their lives. SPECTRUM sees it as its guiding philosophy, but it is still widely misunderstood. This paper aims to explain the Social Model of Disability.

The paper serves as an introduction to these concepts. They are usually explored in more detail on Disability Equality training courses and Personal Development courses (available from SCIL and many other organisations run and controlled by Disabled People). These courses enable Disabled People to relate the principles of the model to their own life.

The Social Model of Disability has changed many people's outlook on life - and it could change yours. If, after reading this, you would like to talk to people whose lives have been dramatically enhanced as a result of the social model, please contact SCIL or your local organisation of Disabled People.

A different way of looking at ourselves

The Social Model of Disability enables Disabled People to look at themselves in a more positive way which increases their self-esteem and independence.

Disabled People often feel a loss, for all the things they would like to do, but cannot; a loss of goals and dreams that seem unobtainable. Disabled People often feel they are a burden on family and friends, and a problem for doctors who cannot cure them.

This traditional view of disability is called “the Medical Model of Disability”, because it sees people as a medical problem. As a result Disabled People are expected to see their impairment as their problem, something they will have to make the best of and accept that there are many things they cannot do.

The Social Model of Disability starts from a different perspective. It ignores how “bad” a person’s impairment is. Instead it establishes that everyone is equal and demonstrates that it is society which erects barriers that prevent Disabled People participating and restricts their opportunities.

How does the Social Model of Disability work?

The social model looks beyond a person’s impairment at all the relevant factors that affect their ability to be a full and equal participant in society.

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What else is relevant?

Heavy doors and inaccessible public transport are just two examples of what makes travelling such a hassle - not the fact that someone has an impairment. Every Disabled Person can make their own list of the barriers that limit their participation. When these barriers and other people's negative attitudes are considered, it is easy to see how Disabled People's opportunities are limited by a multitude of barriers.

The Social Model of Disability states that the solution is to rid society of these barriers, rather than relying on curing all the people who have impairments (in many case this is not possible or desirable).

For example, people living with reduced eyesight are given a simple piece of equipment - a pair of glasses. Without them they would be excluded from full participation in society and would therefore be disabled by it.

Similarly, the social model solution to the fact that a wheelchair user is disabled because they cannot use public transport, is simple - make all public transport accessible to everyone!

Examples of how society could change to allow Disabled People to participate equally:

Medical model problem

Painful hands, unable to open jars, doors

Difficulties in standing for long periods

Unable to climb steps into buildings

Other people won't give you a job because they think you couldn't do it

Social model solution

---> Better designed lids, automatic Doors

---> More seats in public places

---> Ramps and lifts in all buildings

---> Educate people to look at Disabled People's abilities rather than looking for problems

This social model approach to disability, that sees the problem as society's barriers, rather than the person's impairment, allows Disabled People to lift the blame from their shoulders and place it squarely onto society's. The Social Model of Disability empowers Disabled People to challenge society to remove those barriers.

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Medical model says:

- You are a sufferer
- You are the problem
- Your impairment needs curing
- You cannot make decisions about your life
- You need professionals to look after you
- You can never be equal to a non-disabled person

Social model says:

- “Disability” is not an individual problem
- Disabled People cannot compete on equal terms because there are too many barriers
- We need to recognise that society has a duty to remove these barriers
- Disabled People have the same RIGHT to full equality as all other citizens

The social model defines disability as *“the disadvantage or restriction caused by a society which takes little or no account of people who have impairments and excludes them from mainstream activity.”*

Further reading:

- Disability politics: Campbell J & Oliver M. (1996 London: Routledge)
- Pride against prejudice: Morris J (1991 London: Womans Press)

Think you know Disabled People ... Think again