

Disability

This is probably one of the least well-studied areas of sociology. Many people become disabled as they grow older, but there is not much in the books yet to help you.

Disability is not always a handicap to living a full and active life. The problem for many disabled people is society! Society makes disabled people handicapped because it is not adapted or suited to their needs.

- ◆ Disability is not necessarily a handicap. In the early days of the settlement of the Canadian Island of Newfoundland, nearly one quarter of the population was profoundly deaf due to a genetic disorder in the community. Everyone used sign language and deafness was merely seen as another dimension of normal.
- ◆ In our culture many people think that disability is a punishment. This is expressed in Biblical terms as 'the sins of the father shall be visited upon the son'. We may be ashamed and embarrassed by disability among family members. Certainly, in the past, learning disability was considered a huge disgrace, so affected children would be locked away from public sight.
- ◆ Disability and handicap are not the same thing. The inability to walk is not a problem if the person has access to a wheelchair or another aid. Public buildings that can only be accessed by stairs are the problem for people who have little use of their legs. People who experience disability are handicapped as much by society as by their own bodies.
- ◆ A dual standard of morality has operated in many societies so that the disabled are seen as not fully human and therefore not worthy of life. A less well-known aspect of the Holocaust was the Nazi drive towards purification of the race by the deliberate killing of those who experienced physical or learning disability and mental instability. Disabled children were often starved to death and it is estimated by the Holocaust Museum that over 200,000 handicapped people were murdered in the T-4 program.

The handicapped and disabled can be seen in terms of well-meaning but embarrassing stereotypes.

This can be seen in soap opera where disability is often introduced as a plot line, which offers two different ways of looking at disability:

- the disabled person is bitter and twisted by the disability
- the disabled person is more saintly and virtuous than other people.

In nearly all cases, the disability itself and responses to it run the plot rather than the character of the person who is disabled.

Find positive images of disability in the media.

Find negative images of disability in the media.

Should disabled actors always play disabled people on television and in films? Give two points of view.

Those with disability are at particular risk of being poor because they may find it difficult to get training for jobs.

- They face discrimination from employers and may have experienced a low quality education.
- Possibly their work attendance records may be affected for reasons connected to their conditions.
- There may be additional hidden costs that relate to the disability. Good quality prosthetic limbs for amputees cost many thousands of pounds, and those with defective vision may need to use unreliable public transport systems.
- The National Health Service or the Social Services provide only the most basic of aids to normal living and independence.

Should employers give discrimination in favour of disabled people? Give three reasons for and three reasons against this.

| <i>Reasons for protecting the jobs of the disabled</i> | <i>Reasons for making the disabled the same as other people.</i> |
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