

Defining Impairment within the Social Model of Disability

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The social model of disability has been with us for a while now and we are pleased that it is thriving and gaining ground. We believe that even though we may be making some progress with the acceptance of the social model of disability, whereby disabled people define disability, non-disabled professionals are controlling the definition of impairment and will continue to do so, and this threatens the development of the social model of disability.

There have been earlier debates questioning whether the social model takes account of issues relating to impairment. We believe that while the social model defines disability as a social oppression, impairment is a different issue which the social model does not ignore, but does not define either. This difference must be emphasised: disability is social oppression; impairment is a part of the individual.

We share concerns that giving impairment too much attention will move the focus away from disability as a social oppression. The problem is that at the moment non-disabled professionals in 'disability' services may accept the social model in principle, but do not understand a definition of impairment with says 'impairment is impairment', and this contributes to their confusion as to the difference.

So we are not writing about the experience of impairment or a theory of impairment within the social model. This in no way changes the definition of disability. This is important because:

- Although impairment does not cause or justify disability, it is always present when disability occurs;
- In using the social model of disability there continues to be confusion between impairment and disability which requires more clarification.

So we are suggesting a definition of impairment within the social model of disability for consideration by disabled people and welcome comments and views.

DISABILITY is the disadvantage or restriction of activity caused by a society which takes little or no account of people who have impairments and thus excludes them from mainstream activity. (Therefore disability, like racism or sexism, is discrimination and social oppression).

IMPAIRMENT is a characteristic, feature or attribute within an individual which is long term and may, or may not, be the result of disease, genetics or injury and may:

1. Affect that individual's appearance in a way which is not acceptable to society,
And / or
2. Affect the function of that individual's mind or body, either because of or regardless of society,
And / or
3. Cause pain, fatigue, affect communication and / reduce consciousness.

This covers people with learning difficulties, physical impairments, sensory impairments, facial disfigurement, speech impairment, mental illness, mental distress.

Impairment neither causes, nor justifies disability; however only people with impairments are subject disability; they may also experience other forms of oppression simultaneously.

Disabled people are those people with impairments who are disabled by society.

Long term effect is likely to last from birth or onset throughout a life time, or is likely to recur at least once beyond a period of 12 months.

Let us know what you think, does this define impairment in a way which is acceptable to disabled people?

We thank those disabled people who have already sent their comments which have been incorporated into the definition – Ian Stanton, Anne Rae, Michele Brookes, Alden Chadwick.