



How We Think About Disability Matters

By [Monica van Schaik](#)

A PARADIGM describes how we think about and understand something. Paradigms are important because they impact our actions and ATTITUDES. There are 3 main DISABILITY paradigms that people draw from today and they each influence us to think differently about disability. They each command different EMOTIONS from us about disability, ranging from pity to celebration. They each direct us to RESPOND and act differently in relation to disability. How we think about disability matters because it influences how we feel and act towards ourselves and our disabled loved ones.

Spell: ATTITUDES DISABILITY RESPOND

_____ describes how we think about and understand something. PARADIGM

Paradigms can _____ how we feel, think and act. INFLUENCE

What type of paradigms are we talking about today? DISABILITY

Name something that can be influenced by a paradigm that I mentioned. EMOTIONS; THOUGHTS; ACTIONS; RESPONSE

Name another paradigm.

How many main disability paradigms do people typically draw on today? 3 DISABILITY PARADIGMS

Name 3 emotions that are aroused in you when you hear disability paradigm.

Since the beginning of the 1900s, neurological disabilities (neurodivergences) have been conceived through a MEDICAL *disability paradigm*. In this paradigm, NEURODIVERGENCES, for example autism, dyslexia, adhd, etc., are understood as a PROBLEM. They are an INHERENTLY negative experience that are inferior to other ways of thinking, sensing and understanding the world. The problem of disability is inside our brains and bodies, it is a problem with US. In other words, the problem of disability is INDIVIDUALIZED.

Spell: DYSLEXIA INFERIOR BRAIN

Since the beginning of the 1900s neurological disabilities have been conceived through what disability model? MEDICAL

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What word did I use to describe autism, dyslexia adhd, etc.? NEURODIVERGENCES

In the medical disability paradigm, disability is what? INDIVIDUALIZED

Within the medical disability paradigm, neurodivergences are understood as what? PROBLEM;
INFERIOR WAY OF THINKING, SENSING AND UNDERSTANDING; INDIVIDUALIZED

Name a neurodivergence that I mentioned in the lesson. AUTISM; DYSLEXIA; ADHD

In your own words define individualized.

Name another neurodivergence that I didn't mention. DOWN SYNDROME; TOURETTES;
DYSGRAPHIA; ANGELMAN'S SYNDROME; DEPRESSION; BIPOLAR

Name a problem in your life.

Through the medical disability paradigm, the COMPASSIONATE response to disability, like any problem, is to try to FIX it. Throughout the past century, medical professionals have worked diligently trying to identify, DIAGNOSE and fix neurodivergence. They ask questions like: how can we identify communication disabilities? How can we TREAT autism so that it goes away and stops bothering the people it impacts? What actions can we take so that people with these problems, look to us to no longer be impacted by these awful problems. The compassionate response is to find a cure or a way to remediate the problem because problems are BAD!

Spell: TREAT COMPASSIONATE DIAGNOSE

Through the medical disability paradigm, the compassionate response to disability is to try to what? FIX

Who has been trying to identify, diagnose and fix neurodivergence? MEDICAL PROFESSIONALS

What is a question that a professional who uses the medical disability paradigm to understand disability might ask? HOW CAN WE IDENTIFY COMMUNICATION DISABILITIES? HOW CAN WE TREAT AUTISM? HOW CAN WE MAKE PEOPLE LOOK LIKE THESE PROBLEMS ARE NO LONGER BOTHERING THEM?

Name something that medical professionals have been working diligently to do. IDENTIFY;
DIAGNOSE; FIX

What is a synonym for fix? REMEDIATE; REPAIR

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In the 1960s disability ADVOCATES, many who were mainly physically disabled, began QUESTIONING the individualized understanding of disability. They conceived of the SOCIAL *disability paradigm*, often known as the social model. They asserted that the problem is in SOCIETY not within individual bodies or brains. They noticed that disabled people were seen as *only* their disability rather than as people. This gave rise to PERSON FIRST LANGUAGE. They advocated for the PERSONHOOD of someone to be acknowledged first and then their disability. For example, “Amber is a *person* with autism” or “Hawa is a *person* with dyslexia.”

Spell: QUESTIONING PHYSICALLY DISABLED

Who created a new disability paradigm in the 1960s? DISABILITY ADVOCATES

This new paradigm was the _____ disability paradigm. SOCIAL

Through the understanding of this paradigm, where was the problem? SOCIETY

Advocates for the social model of disability wanted people to acknowledge what first when they spoke about people with disabilities? PERSONHOOD

Give me an example of person first language in a sentence. [NAME] WITH [DISABILITY]

What is one of the ways we refer to this paradigm? SOCIAL DISABILITY PARADIGM; SOCIAL MODEL

What does it mean to question something?

How long has it been since disability advocates have argued for the social disability paradigm to be adopted? 2021- 1960= 61 YEARS

What is a common belief that you question?

Advocates for the social paradigm of disability demanded SOCIETAL changes so that people with disabilities could PARTICIPATE in society just like anyone else. They asserted that if every building had a RAMP and elevator, people who use WHEELCHAIRS would not be disabled. Similarly, they advocated that supports and ACCOMMODATIONS are required by neurodivergent people so that they can also participate in society, education and community just like any one else.

Spell: ACCOMMODATIONS RAMP WHEELCHAIR

Advocates demanded _____ change. SOCIETAL

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Advocates believed that with these changes, people with disabilities could _____ like anyone else. PARTICIPATE

To make a building accessible for a wheelchair user, the owner could install a ramp or _____. ELEVATOR

What is one way to make a wheelchair user not disabled? RAMP; ELEVATOR; CURB CUT

Under the social disability paradigm what would be provided to a Deaf person? ASL;

What is one thing society can provide to make neurodivergent people able to participant like anyone else under social disability paradigm (that I mentioned)? SUPPORTS; ACCOMMODATIONS; EXTRA TIME ON TESTS; SEPARATE WORK SPACES; NOTE TAKER; TEXT-TO-SPEECH

What is another way that the social disability paradigm has argued to change society in order to support people with disabilities?

Can you think of an activist who fought for the social disability paradigm?

What is something you enjoy participating in?

What is something you would like the opportunity to participate in?

Advocates for the social paradigm of disability have made incredible gains for disability communities. They helped establish rights and LAWS that are in place today to ensure that EVERYONE, regardless of disability, has a RIGHT to participant in society. Rather it is society's RESPONSIBILITY to ensure we have what we need to participate. We see these gains in new BUILDING CODES, in individualized EDUCATION plans and accessible learning centres.

Spell: EDUCATION BUILDING CODE RESPONSIBILITY

The social paradigm has made incredible gains for who? DISABILITY COMMUNITIES

Advocates have established rights and laws to ensure that _____ has a _____ to participant in society. EVERYONE; RIGHT

Name one of the gains that I mentioned in the lesson. BUILDING CODES; INDIVIDUAL EDUCATION PLANS; ACCESSIBLE LEARNING CENTRES

Social model advocates have established what? RIGHTS; LAWS

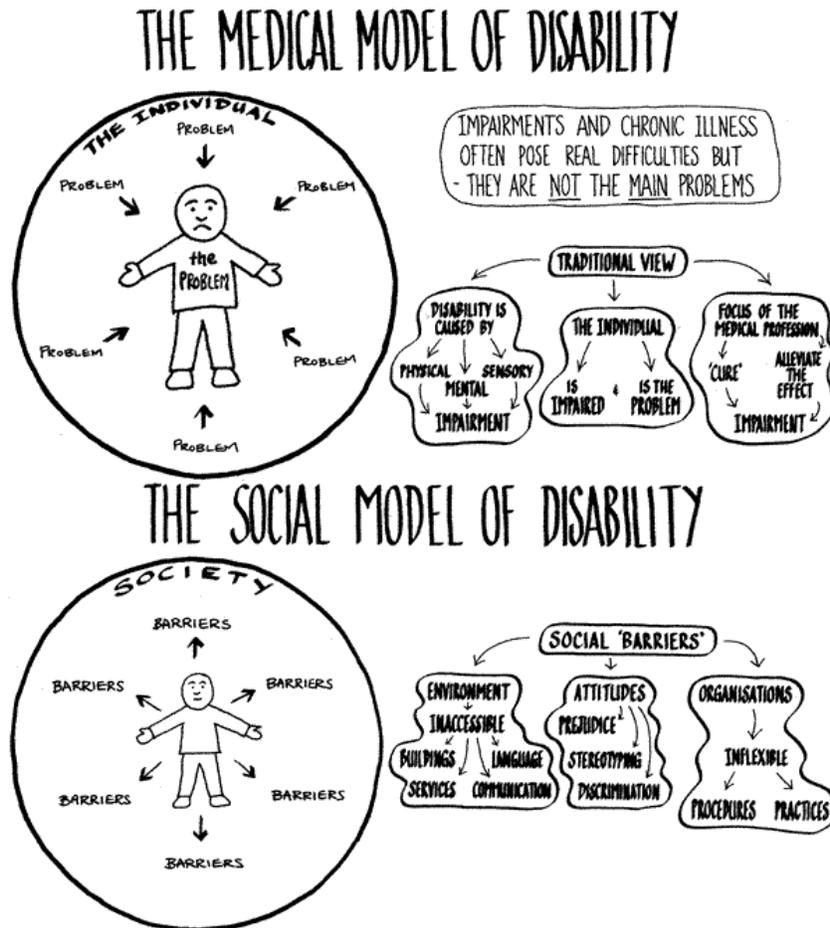
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Look at the infographic below. Poke the image representing the medical paradigm. Poke the image representing the social paradigm.

Watch this short video about the social model of disability to learn more:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=24KE__OCKMw



Within the past two decades, AUTISTIC activists and writers have begun advocating for a NEURODIVERSITY PARADIGM of disability. The neurodiversity paradigm argues that the BINARY between disabled and neurologically normal is CREATED and maintained by our cultures and societal structures and practices. It works to dismantle this binary and believes that NEURODIVERSITY, the diverse range of sensory, emotional and cognitive PROCESSING STYLES present in human beings is itself the NORM.

Spell: PROCESSING SENSORY DIVERSITY

Who started advocating for the neurodiversity paradigm? AUTISTIC ACTIVISTS

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_____ is the diverse range of sensory, emotional and cognitive processing styles present in human beings. NEURODIVERSITY

The neurodiversity paradigm argues that the _____ between disabled and neurologically _____ is created and maintained by our cultures and societal structures. BINARY; NORM

Neurodiversity is the diverse range of what? SENSORY, EMOTIONAL, COGNITIVE, PROCESSING STYLES

What maintains the binary between disabled and neurologically normal in the view of neurodiversity paradigm advocates? CULTURE; SOCIETAL STRUCTURES AND PRACTICES

In your own words define norm.

Around what year did autistic activists and writers start advocating for a neurodiversity paradigm? ~ 2000

Advocates for the neurodiversity paradigm do not believe that neurodivergence is INHERENTLY pathological, negative, TRAGIC or UNHEALTHY. Rather, the neurodiversity paradigm takes an AFFIRMATIVE approach to neurodivergence, believing that it can be valuable, lead to CREATIVE potential and perhaps support the survival of human beings. For this reason, neurodiversity advocates encourage neurodivergent people to take up their disabled identity as a political action to show that there is NOTHING wrong with their disabled identity, this is called IDENTITY-FIRST LANGUAGE. For example, "Hawa is autistic" or "I'm dyslexic."

Spell: NOTHING INHERENTLY VALUABLE

The neurodiversity paradigm takes what sort of approach to neurodivergence? AFFIRMATIVE

The neurodiversity paradigm advocates to use what time of language? IDENTITY-FIRST LANGUAGE

The neurodiversity paradigm believes that neurodivergence can lead to _____ potential. CREATIVE

According to the neurodiversity paradigm, neurodivergence is not inherently what? (name one or two examples). NEGATIVE; TRAGIC; UNHEALTHY; PATHOLOGICAL

What are some of the positive aspects of neurodivergence that I mentioned? VALUABLE; CREATIVE POTENTIAL; IMPORTANT TO THE SURVIVAL OF HUMAN SPECIES

Question Type Key



Give me an example of identity-first language. _____ IS DISABLED; I'M _____

What supports the survival of other animal and plant species? BIODIVERSITY

What does affirmative mean?

The neurodiversity paradigm argues that NEURONORMATIVE STANDARDS and stigma about neurodivergent people are what causes the most harm. It does not believe in STANDARDS but rather seeks to find ways to ensure everyone has WELLBEING in our communities. The neurodiversity paradigm believes we need to LISTEN to neurodivergent people to understand what wellbeing looks like for them. From there we can determine what societal ADJUSTMENTS and changes along with services, accommodations, TREATMENTS, medications, etc. are DESIRED by each neurodivergent individual. More than anything, the neurodiversity paradigm seeks to center NEUROMINORITY people and discover innovative ways to support their wellbeing defined by them, not standards or norms.

Spell: STANDARD NEUROMINORITY TREATMENT

The neurodiversity paradigm believes we need to listen to who? NEURODIVERGENT PEOPLE

_____ of each individual neurodivergent person is important to the neurodiversity paradigm. WELLBEING

_____ standards, norms and stigma cause the most harm according to the neurodiversity paradigm. NEURONORMATIVE

What causes the most harm according to a neurodiversity paradigm? STANDARDS; STIGMA

In a sentence describe what the neurodiversity paradigm seeks to establish. SEEKS TO ENSURE THE WELLBEING OF NEURODIVERGENT PEOPLE AS DEFINED BY THEM

What is an example of a neuronormative standard?

Neurodiversity encompasses everyone—NEUROTYPICAL and neurodivergent. Some people mistakenly refer to disabled people as NEURODIVERSE. *EVERYONE* fits into the category of neurodiverse though, so this doesn't make sense to say. This can lead to REPRODUCING the harmful binary that the neurodiversity paradigm questions and seeks to dismantle. If we want to talk about someone who has a neurological processing style that is viewed as different from the majority or is seen as disabled in our society, use the word *NEURODIVERGENT*.

Spell: REPRODUCING EVERYONE NEUROTYPICAL



What terms did I say doesn't make sense to use? NEURODIVERSE

When we create a _____ between neurotypical and neurodivergent people we may _____ harmful patterns that the neurodiversity paradigm seeks to end. BINARY; REPRODUCE

What term can be used to refer to people who have a processing style that differs from the majority? NEURODIVERGENT

Neurodiversity encompasses who? NEUROTYPICAL; NEURODIVERGENT

Define neurotypical in your own words. PEOPLE WHOSE PROCESSING STYLE FALLS IN THE MAJORITY; THE EXPECTED SENSORY, EMOTIONAL AND COGNITIVE PROCESSING STYLE

What is another potentially harmful binary in our society?

Watch this short video about neurodiversity <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j4stO8fTujE>

Point to the infographic that summarizes what we've learned today:

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How we think about disability matters

Disability is a problem We need to fix it! Identify Diagnose Eliminate	Society is the problem NOT people with disabilities We need to support and accommodate	Neurodiversity IS the Norm Affirm neurodivergent people Let's support wellness defined by them!
Medical Paradigm	Social Paradigm	Neurodiversity Paradigm

So, HOW we think about disability matters. The paradigm we use to understand disability impacts WHO we listen to, the ACTIONS we take and the GOALS we work towards—all of these choices have significant impacts on many members of our society, families and maybe even ourselves. What one does your work, school or community use to guide their choices? What one fits for you? No one can tell you which is the RIGHT or wrong one to believe in. EACH neurodivergent person should be able to choose the one that fits best for them and have that choice RESPECTED by their families and professionals.

Spell: ACTIONS RESPECTED

The _____ we use to understand disability has significant impacts on our _____.
 PARADIGM; CHOICES

Families and professionals who work with neurodivergent people should _____ their preferences. RESPECT

Depending on the disability paradigm we believe in, the _____ we are working towards may change. GOALS

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What is something that can be impacted by the disability paradigm we believe in? WHO WE LISTEN TO; THE ACTIONS WE TAKE; GOALS WE WORK TOWARDS

What is another way of saying that individual choice needs to be respected? SELF-DETERMINATION; AGENCY

What disability paradigm aligns most with your thinking about disability and why?

CW— Imagine you were teaching a class about disability. What paradigm would you use and how would you frame your lesson?

CW— As mentioned in the lesson, many advocates have wanted to use different language to describe themselves. How do you like to be described when it comes to disability? Now, obviously you are much more than your disability. How would you like to be described generally? What identifiers are important to you? To get you thinking here are some ideas: woman, man, queer, Black, person of color, runner, basketball player, dancer, activist, writer, artist, sister,



Monica is a dyslexic, queer, community organizer, activist, S2C Practitioner, MSW student, RDI® Consultant, home renovator, canoer, and gardener.

Sources:

Disability Politics & Theory by AJ Withers

Neurodiversity Studies, A New Critical Paradigm Edited by Hanna Bertilsdotter Rosqvist, Nick Chown, Anna Stenning

<https://neurocosmopolitanism.com/neurodiversity-some-basic-terms-definitions/>

<https://www.nccj.org/ableism>

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