

## Ableism: Expanded Definition

### High Context Audience: Oregon State University faculty and administration

Ableism is a type of bias that discriminates against, devalues, and dehumanizes people based on their perceived or actual disability status.

#### ETYMOLOGY

Ableism comes from -able and -ism. Able means to have the resources to do something [1] and is the root for related words, such as ability or disabled. Able is from the Middle English word able or abill. It originates in the Latin *habilis* which means something that is easily adaptable or handled, from the root *habēre*, meaning to have or to hold [1]. The noun suffix -ism is from the Middle English, -isme. The Middle English derives from the Greek noun suffixes of -isma and -ismos [2]. Today, -ism denotes a prejudice that is based on an attribute indicated by the first half of the word, such as racism [2].

The term ableism's first known usage was in ...*all things possible* by Yvonne Duffy, which was published in 1981 [3]. The sole mention of the term was in a quote attributed to a woman only known as Ruth, who was interviewed by Duffy [3]. The term experienced slow usage growth between 1981 and 1996. In 2001, ableism as a term began to grow in popularity again [3]. Yet, the term still remains largely unknown outside of the disability community.

#### USAGE

Ableism is considered an American word [4] with a common international spelling of *abilism* [5]. There is a related word as well, *disablism* or *disableism* [5], that originated in the United Kingdom [6]. The meaning of *disablism* varies. For some, *disablism* is a synonym for *ableism*. For others, *disablism* is related to but different from *ableism* depending upon who is centered. In this perspective, *ableism* centers able-bodied people and is discrimination that favors able-bodied people over disabled people. Conversely, *disablism* centers disabled people and is discrimination against disabled people [6]. This divide can also be seen in academic research and theories in disability studies [7].

#### LEVELS OF ABLEISM

Like other forms of prejudice, ableism can be seen in four different levels. Internalized ableism is when a disabled person believes the harmful messages in society regarding disability and discriminates against themselves and other people they perceive to be disabled. For example, a disabled student who believes that their class accommodations are special treatment rather than a right [8]. Interpersonal ableism is discrimination that occurs between people in everyday interactions, such as microaggressions. An example of interpersonal ableism is when a faculty member tells a student that they do not believe in the student's condition and attributes symptoms and accommodation requests to laziness [8]. Institutional ableism is the discrimination

found in the regulations, policies, norms, and practices of institutions, such as universities or healthcare. For example, a university's disability services office telling disabled students that the office is not a part of student services but is instead a compliance office to ensure federal funding by providing minimal accommodations to disabled students [8]. Structural or systemic ableism is discrimination found in the laws, policies, regulations and practices of a society that restrict disabled people from being able to fully participate in society. For example, certain buildings not being wheelchair accessible [9]. Major themes and ableist quotes reported at Oregon State University that correlate to these four different levels are presented in Table I, II, and III.

**TABLE I**

**ABLEIST ATTITUDES IN STUDENTS AT OREGON STATE UNIVERSITY**

Major Themes	Bias Level	Quotes
Unfairness/Envy	Interpersonal	"I wish I could have extended time on tests for nothing."
	Interpersonal	"You only do so well because you get special treatment!"
Annoyance	Internalized	"Why do we have to do captions for this class? It's such a pain!"
Disbelief	Interpersonal	"You don't really need this cane! I just want to play with it for a bit! If you need something, get up and get it!"

Bias levels and ableist themes in students' attitudes at Oregon State University. [8], [9]

**TABLE II**

**ABLEIST ATTITUDES IN FACULTY AT OREGON STATE UNIVERSITY**

Major Themes	Bias Level	Quotes
Disbelief	Interpersonal, Institutional	"No such condition exists, you're just lazy."
	Interpersonal, Institutional	"You're just faking because you are lazy and want attention."
	Interpersonal	"I know someone with that and they do fine. What treatment are you doing? Are you even following your treatment? There is no reason why you should be this sick."
Accommodation refusal	Institutional	"You should just drop my class; I don't do accommodations."
	Institutional	"The emergency extension doesn't apply to disabled students, you're always sick."
	Institutional, Interpersonal	"You have to tell DAS they have to schedule your test for the same time as everyone else's. It's too much of a burden for me to have the test questions finished 24 hours before class time just for you. You can't take the test after class either – you'll just use that time to get a classmate to tell you the answers!"

Punitive	Institutional, Interpersonal	“It doesn’t matter what you turn in, I’m not going to let you pass.”
	Structural, Interpersonal	“You should have known that there were no elevators in that building and made other arrangements. You were five minutes late so I am failing you for the test and the class. Leave.”
Hostile	Interpersonal	“Disabled students are always so excited to learn what I study. I’m not disabled like you and I won’t let you manipulate me into doing you favors.”
	Interpersonal	“Having students like you in my class is really an inconvenience for me.”

Bias levels and ableist themes in faculty’s attitudes at Oregon State University. [8], [9]

**TABLE III**

**ABLEIST ATTITUDES IN ADMINISTRATION AT OREGON STATE UNIVERSITY**

Major Themes	Bias Level	Quotes
Obstructive	Institutional	“If we give you that accommodation, it would be unfair to other students.”
	Institutional	“It isn’t our job at DAS to mitigate your disability. You’ll have to figure it out yourself.”
	Institutional, Structural	“DAS is not a part of student services; it is a compliance department to ensure federal funding.”
	Institutional, Structural	“We don’t enforce accommodations; we just provide instructors with what accommodations have been approved for you.”
	Structural	“Only the tests on the documentation information form will be accepted and they must be recent. If you had any other tests or they were not recent enough, you will have to pay to be re-tested. Yes, even if it is considered a lifelong disability.”
Disbelief	Interpersonal	“Do you really need that accommodation? Really? Where did you even hear about that being offered? TikTok?”

Bias levels and ableist themes in administration’s attitudes at Oregon State University. [8], [9]

**CATEGORIES OF ABLEISM**

Ableism can also be broken down into categories based on the type of disability discriminated against in an interaction. Common categories of ableism are physical ableism (against people with physical disabilities), sanism (against people with psychiatric disabilities, also called mental health ableism), and audism (against people who are Deaf or hard of hearing) [10]. Examples of these three common categories of ableism are presented in Table IV.

**TABLE IV**  
**CATEGORIES OF ABLEISM**

Category	Example
Physical Ableism	Services, classrooms, testing rooms, and professor offices located in buildings without elevators and/or accessible entrances or doorways.
Sanism/Mental Health Ableism	Believing that students with depression, ADHD, autism, dyslexia, et cetera, are faking or lazy or would be fine if they just tried harder.
Audism	Refusing to add captions on videos or refusing to wear a FM transmitter in lectures.

Examples of three of the common categories of ableism as seen in higher education. [10]

## **IMPLICATIONS**

Ableism has far-reaching consequences. In higher education, disabled students continue to be underrepresented in student populations [11] and are more likely to leave college without their degree [12], [13], [14], [15]. But the implications of ableism in higher education go beyond academia. By shutting disabled students out of universities, the disabled students are unable to obtain jobs and financial independence at equal rates to their able-bodied peers [14], [15], [16]. Able-bodied students also lose the opportunity to challenge their biases and instead carry them into their careers. Ableism in healthcare leads to limited treatment options and worse outcomes for disabled patients [17]. Ableism in society led to the institutionalization [18], [19] and sterilization of America's disabled community [19], [20] and to the genocide of disabled children and adults in Nazi Germany [19], [21]. Ableism in present-day America has led to the current policy that allows COVID-19 [22], [23], [24] to spread without adequate mitigations in place [25] even at the personal level, such as face masks [26], [27], [28]. Disabled and immunocompromised people remain at home in order to remain safe [29] from COVID-19 but unable to access basic needs, such as healthcare and groceries [30], [31], [32]. Disabled students are further missing out on valuable experiences necessary for future opportunities, such as office hours, research, in-person internships, conferences, and other ways to connect to potential mentors and recommendation letter writers.

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## Ableism: Expanded Definition

### Low Context Audience: High school seniors and undecided university students

Ableism is a type of bias that discriminates against, devalues, and dehumanizes people based on their perceived or actual disability status.

### WORD ORIGINS

Ableism comes from -able and -ism, which have their origins in Greek and Latin. Able means to have the resources to do something [1] and is the root for related words such as ability or disabled. The noun ending -ism is used to signify a prejudice that is based on an attribute represented by the first half of the word, such as in racism [2].

The word ableism's first known use was in *...all things possible* by Yvonne Duffy, which was published in 1981. Ruth, a woman interviewed by Duffy, is quoted as using the word. Yet, the term ableism did not gain recognition until around 2001 [3]. Today, the word still remains largely unknown outside of the disability community.

### USAGE

Ableism is considered an American word [4] with a counterpart of disablism [5] in the United Kingdom [6]. The meaning of disablism varies. For some, disablism and ableism have the same meaning. For others, ableism is discrimination that favors able-bodied people over disabled people while disablism is discrimination against disabled people [6].

### LEVELS OF ABLEISM

Like other forms of prejudice, ableism can be seen in four different levels as seen in Figure 1. Internalized ableism is when a disabled person believes the harmful messages in society regarding disability and discriminate against themselves and other people they believe to be disabled. For example, a disabled student who believes that their class accommodations are special treatment rather than a right [7]. Interpersonal ableism is discrimination that occurs between people in everyday interactions, such as a classmate calling another student lazy because of their attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (commonly called ADHD) [7]. Institutional ableism is the discrimination found in the rules and culture of organizations, such as universities. For example, a school district not allowing disabled students in the classroom with their able-bodied classmates [7]. Structural or systemic ableism is discrimination found in the laws and culture of a society that stop disabled people from being able to fully participate in society. For example, certain buildings not being wheelchair accessible [8].

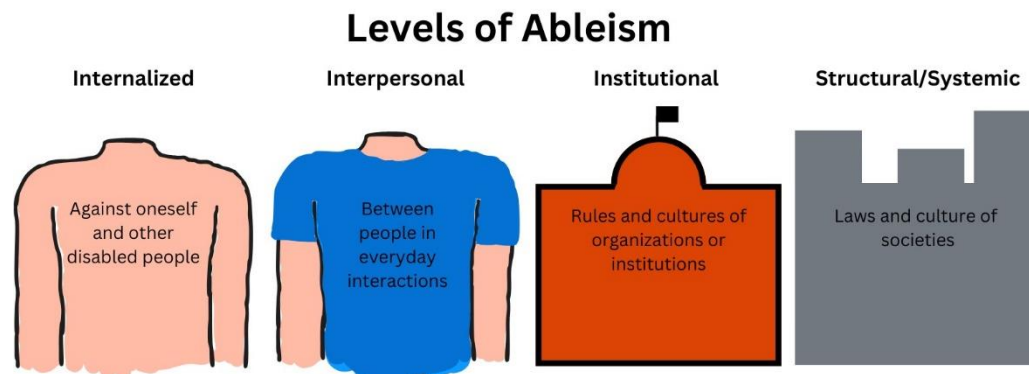


Fig. 1. The four levels of ableism – internalized, interpersonal, institutional, and structural. [7], [8], [9] Adapted from [10]

## CATEGORIES OF ABLEISM

Ableism can also be broken down into categories based on the type of disability discriminated against in an interaction, as seen in Figure 2. Common categories of ableism are physical ableism, sanism, and audism. Physical ableism discriminates against people with physical disabilities, such as leaving physically disabled students in classrooms or stairwells during emergency evacuations. Sanism, also called mental health ableism, discriminates against people with psychiatric, developmental, and intellectual disabilities, such as by believing that everyone with ADHD is just lazy. Audism discriminates against people who are Deaf or hard of hearing, for example by not providing captioning on class videos [11].

### Select Common Categories of Ableism

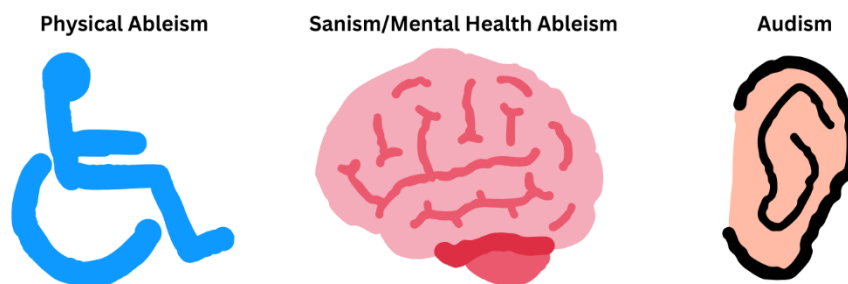


Fig. 2. Three common categories of ableism – physical ableism, sanism, and audism. [11] Adapted from [12], [13], [14]

## IMPLICATIONS

Ableism has serious consequences. Disabled students are less likely to attend [15] or finish college [16]. Disabled adults have higher rates of unemployment, lower pay, and are less likely to be home owners than their able-bodied peers [16], [17], [18]. Ableism in healthcare leads to limited treatment options and worse outcomes for disabled patients [19]. Ableism in society led to the institutionalization [20] and sterilization of America's disabled community [21] and the genocide of disabled children and adults in Nazi Germany [22]. Ableism in present-day America has led to the current policy that allows COVID-19 [23] to spread without proper safety guidelines in place [24], [25], [26].

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