

Disability in the Workplace

HDFS 4330

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There are many different issues in society that affect many people's personal lives as well as professional lives. Our group decided on our topic disability in the workplace because it affects many lives of Americans every day. It is an issue that is not talked about enough but it is more prevalent than it has ever been. People with disabilities used to be thought of as unable to perform normal tasks or have normal jobs, but now as society has come to see disabilities as more of a normality it is more susceptible to discrimination.

The Bureau of Labor Statistics reports that the national unemployment rate for disabled workers is 14.5 percent, compared with only 9 percent for non-disabled ones (Cummings, 2017). 1 in 3 employers say that they do not hire people with disabilities because they cannot perform required job tasks. Also, the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission states that the law forbids discrimination when it comes to any aspect of employment, including hiring, firing, pay, job assignments, promotions, layoff, training, fringe benefits, and any other term or condition of employment (Feldblum, 2015). Even though employees do not have to explain their disabilities in job interviews, it may be beneficial for them to explain their abilities and different skills and talents that can surpass their visible disability because even though there is a law forbidding the discrimination of disabilities it still happens on a daily basis.

The Ecological Systems Theory is a theory that describes how the context of socialization in a child's world can affect how that child socializes throughout their lifetime. Bronfenbrenner's theory is composed of five layers that all affect how a child's social contexts can be formed throughout their life. In the handout, *Understanding Children in Context: The Ecological Model of Human Development*, they described the theory as, "the child is studied in the context of developmental theory, which comes in the context of family, which lies in the context of

community. All of these contexts can be thought of environments or settings that hold people, which influence each other and are influenced by culture” (“Understanding Children in Context”, n.d.). When looking at the theory as a whole, it is relevant for what we do in HDFS because it connects how a child’s social context affects how they develop cognitively and physically over their lifetime. For this system you put the child in the middle of the concentric circles and put the outer layers around it, and as the child grows the outer layers of the circle will continuously change through the context the child encounters as they get older.

When looking at the five layers of this system, they are in order of what social contexts relates closest to a child and the farther you go out of the circle, the more the social contexts are being influenced by other outside environments. The first layer of the system is the microsystem. This system is described as, “the smallest of the contexts in which the child is embedded, is made up of the environment where the child lives and moves” (“Understanding Children in Context”, n.d.). In this system, whatever the child interacts with, either socially or in their everyday environments are what make up the microsystem. Examples of interactions children would have in this system would be with their immediate family members, peers, teachers, school or neighborhood friends. With all of these personal interactions for the child it leads to the mesosystem. This system is based on the way people in the microsystem interact with each other. For this system it is not as closely related to the child as it is for how each person in the child’s microsystem interact with the child. For example, the way a parent interacts with a teacher is a part of the mesosystem. The parent and the teacher are both apart of the child’s microsystem because they are apart of their daily interactions but when the two adults are interacting that is classified in the mesosystem because their interactions can affect the child.

In the exosystem, this system is based more solely off of, “a wider context as it relates to the broader community in which the child lives” (“Understanding Children in Context”, n.d.). For this system, the child can be affected by a parent's workplace, the media, extended family or government workplaces. An example of the exosystem affecting a child can be if a child’s parent goes to work and gets laid off. Even though this does not affect the child personally, it affects how the child develops and socializes with other people around them. The parent getting laid off indirectly affects the child because there is less income coming into the house now so the child cannot get as many things that they want. Because the parent cannot afford to do as much as they could before, the child may be sheltered from socialization in the environment because they cannot afford to go as many places.

The second outermost layer of the ecological system is called the macrosystem. This is the system where the child, “contains the attitudes and ideologies, values, laws and customs of a particular culture or subculture” (“Understanding Children in Context”, n.d.). This layer is seen more as the culture the child lives in and how the culture affects the child’s development and social contexts. An example of this system is if a child is raised in the third-world country, like Guatemala, rather than being raised in a first-world country, like the United States, the child will have very different cultural and economical views on the world. With a child being raised in a third-world country the child has to work even harder to find work, money, food, etc. If they were raised in a first-world country they may not have as hard of a time finding a job or food to eat. As for the chronosystem, this system is based more off of transitions or shifts in the child’s life. A major example of this is when a child’s parents get divorced, it can cause a major shift in the couple’s relationship but also affects the child’s relationship with a parent. “According to a

majority of research, children are negatively affected on the first year after the divorce. The next years after it would reveal that the interaction within the family becomes more stable and agreeable” (Sincero, 2012). This is part of the chronosystem because as time goes on the child makes changes in their life to accommodate the way things have changed. At first the child’s behavior changed due to the drastic change in their life, but as time goes on the child gets used to the changes and finds ways to continue on with their life.

Within the first layer of the ecological system is the microsystem, in which family, friends, school, and work influence adults with disabilities, particularly in the workplace. Disability discrimination is a major epidemic that the United States faces in today’s workplace. In the workplace, companies are hesitant to hire employees with disabilities because they think hiring them will cost the company more than hiring non-disability employees. However, the United States Chamber of Commerce recently reported that hiring people with disabilities is good for the bottom line and positively impacts the workplace. Due to disability discrimination, many people with disabilities cannot find a job and that not only impacts the individual but creates added stress for the family. We must look at how disability discrimination in the workplace impacts families for example, a mother to a son with a physical disability was fed up with the discrimination and decided to start her own company in hopes for her son to live as virtually independent as she does. Subsequently she started the company, Opportunity Works, which is a staffing service company that provides support and jobs for adults with disabilities who are actively searching for a job. The owner was tired of the little effect that the Americans with Disabilities Act in 1990 had on these individuals and decided to help solve the problem of high unemployment rates among people with physical disabilities (Owen, 2012). Companies like

3M, PepsiCo, Merck and AT&T all reported the benefits and importance of hiring individuals with disabilities. These companies also described their employees with disabilities as loyal, reliable, and hardworking and the diversity led to an overall positive work environment (Owen, 2012). The owner's efforts to help other adults with physical disabilities like her son find jobs is beneficial for the individual to feel independent and creates more diversity in the workplace. Recently, there was a lawsuit regarding individuals with physical disabilities who were employed at Lowe's but then were mysteriously fired were encouraged to submit a claim against the company. The home improvement and appliance store fired thousands of workers with disabilities by failing to provide them with accommodations when their medical leaves of absence lasted longer than Lowes' 180 day maximum leave policy (Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, 2016). Communities are coming together to end this issue of disability discrimination in the workplace by taking action against companies like Lowe's who fired individuals with disabilities only because they suffered from a disability. The Equal Employment Opportunity Commission fined Lowe's \$8.6 million for firing individuals who were disabled, had a record of disability, or were related to someone with a disability (Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, 2016). Through these examples we can effectively see how families and communities are impacted by disability discrimination in the workplace and how these families and communities come together to end this social problem.

Within the second layer of the ecological system is the mesosystem, in which interactions between the microsystems impact development in individuals or families. There have been many movements throughout history that people come to know and are familiar with, but the disability rights movement is most likely not one of them. It was when Peggy Klaus was invited to give a

lecture for the Disabled Students' Program at the University of California that she became aware of this and needed something to turn around (Klaus, 2012). For years and years, most people have just pegged disabilities as something that is unfortunate and a constant burden on the individuals as well as the people around them. Paul Hippolitus, the director of the Disabled Students' Program that Klaus attended explained to her, "In this culture, nearly everyone is uncomfortable with disability" (Klaus 2012). This also goes for the people with disabilities. Even though disabilities are becoming more of a societal norm, that doesn't mean that the people with those disabilities see it the same way, especially when it comes to getting jobs. Many students at the University of California, Klaus finds out, explain that many of them with disabilities opt to go to graduate school, thereby delaying the task of entering the work force and that they are often discouraged when it comes to having career goals and fulfilling them (Klaus, 2012). Since the Americans With Disabilities Act became a law, more than 20 years later, there has still not been progress made with employment for the disabled population. This is predicted to be the case because many employers think that accommodating those with disabilities will require extra resources as well as time and money, whereas in reality these accommodations run at little or no extra cost to employers.

Many students in college with disabilities are starting to be taught how to bring about change for themselves when it comes to employment in the workforce, instead of waiting on employers to change their outlook and policies nationwide. Employers are not allowed to ask job applicants about their disabilities, but it can be an advantage for the applicant with a disability to bring it up themselves and instead of explaining their restrictions, they should opt to explain their

skills required to manage that certain disability, such as strategic planning and time management (Klaus, 2012).

Contrary to popular belief, disabilities can be assets to jobs instead of burdens. Klaus explains that if more of us can see disability as both a challenge and an asset, the nation will be well on the way to fully using the job skills of all its citizens (Klaus, 2012). Individuals with disabilities, especially physical, may not be capable of doing certain tasks, but they have more potential and skills to them that the employers may not know unless they give them a chance past the cover. Through these examples we can see how the interactions between microsystems can impact individuals and their development, especially when it comes to disabilities.

The exosystem is affected by indirect events for individuals, and this is caused by events like a parent getting laid off from work and indirectly affecting how many toys or activities a child can have. For adults with disabilities, this system is more directed for them as the fact that some companies will not hire people with certain disabilities or give them a lower pay wage because they are disabled so they are not able to afford all the necessary things to live.

When looking at the cost for people who are abled compared to disabled, many companies will often have a trend of paying the abled employees a higher range than employees who are disabled. One article talked about the supply and demand of abled employees versus disabled in their labor supply of behavior and the demand of their labor in the overall market. Most companies look at the supply as the, “disability may restrict the range of tasks the person can carry out, increase the costs of working, and affect the incentives faced” (Gannon & Munley, 2009) and look at the demand as, “employers may be reluctant to employ individuals with a disability, either because of concerns about their productivity or because of additional costs

associated with accommodating certain types of disability” (Gannon & Munley, 2009). If you have someone who is abled and you can give them many tasks to do in a certain amount of time and you will rely on that person more than you would for a person who would not be able to do all of the tasks in a small amount of time. Companies believe that you should get paid based more off of your accomplishments and getting tasks done and if you are disabled you are not able to get as many things done on time. On top of abled people getting more tasks and being paid for the greater amount of work they are assigned, research has found that, “with job demands and interactions included, approximately 10% of the observed wage differential for men, and 20% for women, is potentially attributed to discrimination” (Baldwin & Choe, 2014). For some companies, this wage decline in disabled people leads to them not being able to maneuver around halls as well if they are in a wheelchair, have crutches and can’t carry many things at once, etc.

With lower pay wages and less opportunities to get a job, disabled people are heavily involved in the exosystem because of the indirect interactions that affect how they can live their lives. Since disabled people are not able to gain the same opportunities as abled people, they are not afforded the same disposable income and have to figure out different ways to pay for all their necessities in life.

In an article entitled, “*Treatment of Disabled People Throughout History*,” we learn that some families in the past would often abandon their loved ones, viewing them as “unhealthy and defective”; other families would kill their family members with disabilities, or check them into institutions against their will because they were viewed as burdens. Due to this narrow-minded way of thinking, it has taken decades to break the negative stigma associated with disabilities, and while there are laws that were created to protect disabled people from being discriminated

against, some members of society still treat them as if they are beneath those of us who are considered “abled body.” In order for us to understand the lives of people living with disabilities, we must take a closer look into the macrosystem of the Ecological Theory model, which consists of: how living with a disability affects the lives of disabled people, how society has adapted to the disability culture, and how the prejudices people with disabilities are faced with affect their well-being.

A physical disability can be defined as a limitation on a person’s physical functioning, mobility, dexterity, or stamina. An Australian disability awareness group website, imvc.com, list some examples of physical disabilities as: amputations, arthritis, cerebral palsy, spinal bifida, and a number of other disabilities. These physical disabilities affect the lives of the person living with it because they limit how much daily activity a person can have, and limit the number of things a person can do versus what they may want to do. These disabilities can also have a negative effect on the safety of the individual, causing them to be more prone to bullying, having more injuries from falling, or having a greater chance at being abused, according to a *Center for Disease Control* (CDC) article entitled “*Disability and Health.*” While people with physical disabilities are limited to what they can do, I think it is important to note that having a disability does not make them incapable of being active members of society, having hobbies, having a career, or just enjoying their lives.

After we understand what a physical disability is, and the effect it has on a person’s life, we must then consider how society supports the disabled population. Beginning in the 1960s attitudes towards disabilities began to change, due to legislation that was being passed to help these people and their families. The establishment of Medicaid and Medicare in 1965 was a piece

of legislation that helped disabled people get access to affordable healthcare, which in turn helped people with disabilities get the treatments they needed. According to “*Society’s Attitude Towards People with Disabilities*” (SATPD) which is an article posted on paul-bartner.dental.ufl.edu, all of the legislation acts that had a positive effect on disabled people were important, however, the American with Disabilities Act was one of the most important pieces of legislation, because it “attempted to guarantee the rights of full inclusion into the mainstream of American life for all persons with disabilities.” The importance of this act was that it now allowed people to live “normal” lives by having classrooms that consisted of abled and disabled bodied students, and making accommodations that allowed physically disabled people to have easier access in public (by making ramps, elevators, handicap bathroom stalls and handicap parking spots) a priority. These acts helped society to realize that it’s not okay to outcast members of society because they have disabilities, which led to the de-stigmatization of disabilities.

Lastly, it is important to know that disabled people face prejudices everyday, and we as members of society must do something to change this. An article entitled “6 Instances of Discrimination People with Disabilities Face Every day” posted on huffingtonpost.com, did a study where they asked physically disabled people what kind of prejudices they were faced with daily. Some of the results they found were: store employees thinking they were ill-equipped to shop for themselves, wheelchair quotas, strangers overlooking them or pretending like they don’t exist and, people parking in handicapped spots and they’re not handicapped, As members of society, we can change these prejudices by not thinking that every physically disabled person we see is incapable of taking care of themselves. We could also stop thinking that just because a

person has a physical disability, they also have mental disabilities. The overall objective of focusing in on these prejudices that disabled people face is so that society is aware of the negative view we still have on people with disabilities. Once we realize the prejudices we have as a society the more we can do to change them, to allow for us to have a more inclusive society.

Having seen how the macrosystem, and culture, has had an impact on ableism, the next system revolves around the passage of time. The chronosystem is the outermost layer of the ecological system and refers to the life events and environmental impact that shapes the individual. As such, with our topic revolving around disability in the workplace, it is important to note a few important changes that have occurred in the United States. That is, businesses, schools, and even outside facilities were not always friendly towards disabilities. Essentially, it was not until 1990, when the American with Disability Act that rules and regulations were put in place to allow for an increased mobility for physically disabled individuals. Despite this change requiring business and schools to meet ramp specifications, discrimination against disabled individuals was still high both in the workplace and outside. As a result, another notable act that was passed in 1995 was the Disability Discrimination Act, which “is the product of a curious concoction of political forces and events” (Brain, 1997, 1). Despite all these efforts, the policies revolving around disabilities was still not complete and quite frankly, was lacking many aspects. For instance, with the rapid growth of technology, in 2008, the American with Disabilities Amendments Act was passed to tackle issues of employment, public accommodation, and even telecommunications. This was one important political and social change that took place due to the fact that prior to this, disability was defined as “a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more of the major life activities of such individual, ... a record of such

an impairment, or ... being regarded as having such impairment” (Mitchell, 2017, 39). However, as a result of this act, the definition of disability both expanded and became more inclusive in the sense that different disabilities were now included in the act.

Another law that had an important impact socially, is Rosa’s Law, in 2010, which “removed the hurtful terms ‘mentally retarded’ and ‘mental retardation’ from federal laws and policies” (McNeese, 2014, 96). While this was just the tip of the iceberg, additional social movements have helped both increase awareness and support for this issue. For instance, there was a large amount of social awareness as the result of a physically-disabled individual hand-cycling the entire East Coast. (Laverman, 2017). With media also publishing similar uplifting stories about individual doing great feats despite being physically disabled, social awareness about ableism has also allowed for this to be taught in schools. Essentially, special education programs also started as the result of the government mandating public schooling, however “has grown into a comprehensive department which stands side by side with ... general education programs” (Levison, 1999). Through this, we see a social movement that is pushing towards not only understanding and accepting differences through eliminating implicit biases, but at the same time it is a program that is promoting unity and team building from young ages. Similarly, looking back at employment, we see that these social and political factors have impacted employment by creating additional measures that employers need to keep in place.

Finally, the last aspect of the chronosystem that one needs to look at is the impact of technology and the change in technology in relation to ableism. With physical disability being commonly associated with wheelchairs, one problem that still occurs is mobility and getting around due to the fact that “the capability of patients to push their own wheelchair successfully is

affected by ... patient characteristics, patient dimensions, [and] wheelchair properties” (Mabrouk, 2017, 3651). As a result, technology has integrated mechanical and electric components to create a low-cost wheelchair that massively increased mobility. Likewise, we see that technological advancements have also helped increase employment rates due to the fact that it is easier for individual to work remotely, or from home, through computers. In other words, with more options to help manage physically disabled individuals, it is safe to say that technological advancements have helped reduce ableism in the sense that there is both an increased awareness and an attempt to make the quality of life better for disabled individuals both socially and in a work environment.

Through the utilization of the ecological systems model, one can see that disability in the workplace is an issue that affects each system. While in the past it was difficult for individuals with disabilities to obtain employment, not to mention the discrimination faced in society, today there has been a lot of effort to see disabilities as a normative part of our culture and society. Likewise, with the fact that equal employment acts and disability discrimination acts are in place, as well as the developments in technology, there is a positive outlook in the future in both curative options as well as options that will help disabled individuals both obtain and retain employment. Overall, we were able to learn that even disabled individuals have abilities and different skills to offer in the workforce and as such, it is important to both raise awareness and increase education in regard to ableism. Despite great improvements and efforts to reduce biases against disability, it is still a topic that is not fully taught and discussed about socially.

As a group, we have come to the realization that disabilities may not always be physical in nature and as such, keeping an open mind is crucial in order to erase implicit biases. For

example, special bathrooms that are there to accommodate the needs of disabled individuals should not be limited to individuals that are physically disabled. Rather, it is important for society to understand that mental disabilities may not be physically expressed but none the less, it is a disability. Thus, it is safe to say that this assignment, in addition to the other assignments our group had, has definitely broadened our understanding of both disability and the challenges associated with it. In other words, each member, in our group, has become more aware not only in regard to the historical aspect of disability and employment, but also the social aspect in the sense that we learned about what society is doing to essentially normalize disabilities as well as the numerous programs and organizations that are out there to provide a helping hand.

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