

# THE SINGLE-DIMENSIONAL DEVIANT: THE SOCIALIZATION WE RECEIVE CONCERNING DISABLED BODIES

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"Socialization is the process through which people are taught to be proficient members of a society. It describes the ways that people come to understand societal norms and expectations, to accept society's beliefs, and to be aware of societal values"  
- Conerly et al., 2021

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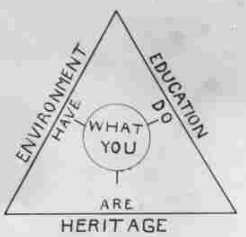
## THE EUGENICS MOVEMENT'S ROLE IN SHAPING NEGATIVE PERCEPTIONS OF DISABILITY

"Idiots, imbeciles, and degenerate criminals are prolific and their defects are transmissible. Each person is a unit of the nation, and the nation is strong and pure, and sane, or weak and corrupt and insane, in the proportion that the mentally and physically healthy exceed the diseased" - Laughlin, 1914



UNFIT HUMAN TRAITS SUCH AS FEEBLEMINDEDNESS, EPILEPSY, CRIMINALITY, INSANITY, ALCOHOLISM, PAUPERISM AND MANY OTHERS, RUN IN FAMILIES AND ARE INHERITED IN EXACTLY THE SAME WAY AS COLOR IN GUINEA-PIGS. IF ALL MARRIAGES WERE EUGENIC WE COULD BREED OUT MOST OF THIS UNFITNESS IN THREE GENERATIONS.

### THE TRIANGLE OF LIFE

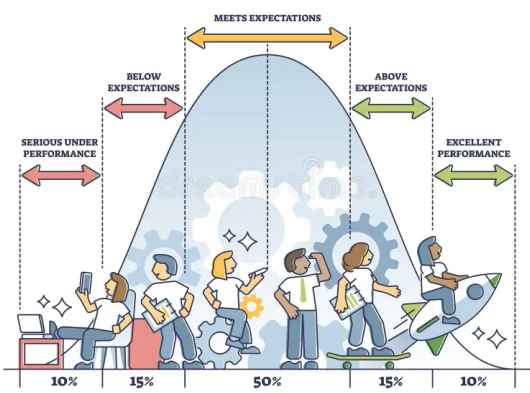


YOU CAN IMPROVE YOUR EDUCATION, AND EVEN CHANGE YOUR ENVIRONMENT; BUT WHAT YOU REALLY ARE WAS ALL SETTLED WHEN YOUR PARENTS WERE BORN. SELECTED PARENTS WILL HAVE BETTER CHILDREN THIS IS THE GREAT AIM OF EUGENICS

The Eugenics movement is responsible for shaping the societally perpetuated devaluation of disabled bodies. This construction of normalcy and deviancy was born from the eugenicist desire to create a "perfect" society through biological intervention (Snyder & Mitchell, 2006). Thus, individuals with cognitive or physical disabilities became a threat to this vision of a perfect society, as they were perceived to be weak and inferior (Snyder & Mitchell, 2006).

The Eugenics movement set the precedence for the continuation of negative perceptions toward disabled bodies. To visualize the construction of normalcy or deviancy, a bell curve of the normal distribution is consistently used. With every bell curve, there are extremes. Historically, those with disabilities have been villainized and placed outside the parameters of a normal distribution thus labeling them as deviant (Davis, 2013). It may seem as though the foundational ideas of the Eugenics movement are a relic of the past. Contrarily, these fundamental tenets of Eugenics live on.

### BELL CURVE



Currently, the disabled community is marginalized in part by pervasive harmful stereotypes (Balter, 1999). These disadvantageous stereotypes are mobilized in the media we consume. Media is one of the quintessential forms of socialization in the United States (Balter, 1999). Unfortunately, we see disabled individuals consistently being portrayed as single-dimensional characters.

## Pervasive Stereotypes: The Ableist Focus of Popular Films and Media

"...Six major stereotypes in film and television. The disabled person as a victim, as a hero, as a threat, as unable to adjust, as one to be cared for, and as one who should not have survived" - Jack Nelson, 1999

The pervasive nature of stereotypes concerning disabled bodies creates an erroneous image of disability for non-disabled individuals. The societal focus on physical ability creates an environment where differences in the form of the body are perceived as less favorable (Elcessor & Kirkpatrick, 2017). The adherence to normality as a non-disabled physical form is highlighted through the media we consume. The disabled individuals viewed by audiences of film and media are responsible for shaping their thoughts and opinions concerning disabled bodies (Psalia, 2016).

### CHARACTERS WITH DISABILITY FACE A DEFICIT ON SCREEN IN FILM

**1.6%**

of all speaking characters were depicted with a disability

**55.1%** PHYSICAL

**30.4%** COGNITIVE

**27.5%** COMMUNICATIVE

72.5%

MALES WITH DISABILITY

27.5%

FEMALES WITH DISABILITY

\*Based on U.S. Census domains

In the film "Me Before You," William Traynor, a paraplegic man, is played by non-disabled actor Sam Claflin. Throughout the film, William's character is a long-suffering victim who is unable to come to terms with his disability. This single-dimensional look at disability is damaging as it depicts the lives of disabled individuals as not worth living. The audience is primed through William's suffering throughout the film to perceive his death as merciful versus tragic. The audience does not mourn for the loss of William's life. Conversely, they mourn the loss of his physical prowess (Snyder & Mitchell, 2010).

"... I need it to end here, no more pain and exhaustion and waking up every morning already wishing it was over. It's not going to get better than this" -William Traynor



In the film, "The Green Mile," the main character, John Coffey, is valued solely based on his supernatural abilities and childlike demeanor. The film centers on Coffey using his extraordinary gifts to serve white interests. Coffey's eventual death is only justified after he cures Melinda Moores' ailments, thus serving his purpose. This "super-crip" stereotype devalues the disabled person to the point where their only function is to aid the non-disabled characters.





# Annotated Bibliography

Appelbaum, L. (2019, September 10). Movie industry increases prejudice against people with disabilities. RespectAbility. <https://www.respectability.org/2019/09/movie-industry-increases-prejudice-against-people-with-disabilities/>

- This article had some helpful statistics about the prevalence of disabled individuals in film. Often, disabled individuals are not present in film or they are played by non-disabled actors. This resource helped highlight the lack of disabled characters depicted in films and visual media.

Balter, R. (1999). From stigmatization to patronization: The media's distorted portrayal of physical disability.

- This article speaks to the pervasive negative stereotypes present in films and media that are part of the socialization we receive concerning disabled bodies. Balter critically analyzes the multifaceted nature of disability tropes and explains the non-disabled fear of bodily loss. This work is insightful and will help solidify my argument on how the media is integral in shaping our perceptions of and behavior toward disabled individuals on a societal basis

Conerly, T. R., Holmes, K., & Tamang, A. L. (2021). Introduction to sociology 3e.

- This resource was helpful as a salient reminder of the contents of the socialization process. As my project critically analyzes the socialization we receive concerning disabled bodies, a holistic description of socialization was indispensable to strengthening the general understanding of the topic.

Davis, L. J. (2013). Introduction: Normality, power, and culture. *The disability studies reader*, 4, 1-14.

- David Lennard does an excellent job of creating a consumable image of the societal understanding of normalcy versus deviancy. He does this by using the bell curve as an example. This resource will be useful when I determine the root causes of our rigid boundaries between normal and abnormal or normalcy and deviancy concerning disabled and non-disabled bodies.

Darabont, F. (1999). *The Green Mile*. Warner Bros.

- The film "The Green Mile" has a storyline that is attributed to the stereotypes about disability. Critically analyzing this film helped solidify my argument concerning how prevalent ableist depictions of disability are in popular film and media.

Ellcessor, E., & Kirkpatrick, B. (Eds.). (2017). *Disability media studies*. NYU Press.

- Ellcessor and Kirkpatrick explore the way that the field of disability studies looks to challenge the societally upheld view of disability as something that needs to be fixed or doctored. Furthermore, they investigate the inextricable link between the perception of disability as in need of fixing and the genocidal war against disabled bodies. Their work provides me with more information concerning this societal notion that to be accepted, the disabled community must look for a way to be "normal."

Laughlin, H. H. (1914). BULLETIN No. 10B: Report of the Committee to Study and to Report on the Best Practical Means of Cutting Off the Defective Germ-Plasm in the American Population. II. THE LEGAL, LEGISLATIVE AND ADMINISTRATIVE ASPECTS OF STERILIZATION.

- In this report, it becomes intelligible that the negative perceptions held regarding disabled bodies, historically, justify unmitigated abuse. The eugenics movement looked to create a perfect society by eradicating groups that were considered imperfect or unfit. The information present in this resource provides me with a transparent view of how damaging viewing disability as a social ill has and can be.

McCain, H. (2017). Medical model of disability versus social model of disability. *Living with Disability and Chronic Pain*.

- In this article Heather McCain does an excellent job explaining the Medical Model and Social Model of disability, and these two models are quintessential when researching the effect of stereotypes on the lived experience of disabled people. She identifies the use of medical interventions as an avenue to "fix" disabled bodies as integral to the Medical Model. Further, she speaks on how the Social Model pushes the narrative that society needs to be more accessible for disabled individuals instead of seeking to cure disability.

# Annotated Bibliography

Nelson, J. A. (1994). Broken images: Portrayals of those with disabilities in American media. *The disabled, the media, and the information age*, 1-17.

- This article deconstructed the popular stereotypes about disabled bodies in the media. This helped build my analysis surrounding the ableist films I chose.

Psaila, E. (2016). Culture, Disability & Television. *Considering Disability Journal*, 1(1), 831.

- Psaila looks at the multidimensional nature of the stereotypes held about those who are disabled. This resource helped me gain a deeper understanding of the content of these stereotypes and will allow me to identify and explain some ableist depictions of disability in film and media.

Sharrock, T. (2016). *Me Before You*. Warner Bros.

- This film is an ableist depiction of disability. William Traynor is a single-dimensional character who finds it impossible to overcome his disability. In the end, his death is justified as it serves the non-disabled characters' interests. The analysis of this film centers my argument surrounding the pervasive negative stereotypes of disability portrayed in films and media.

Snyder, S. L., & Mitchell, D. T. (2010). "Body genres. *The Problem Body: Projecting Disability on Film*, 179.

- Snyder and Mitchell give some meaningful insight into the concept of body genres. These body genres evoke feelings in those who are viewing the film. This article is helpful in the way that it highlights how integral emotions are to the treatment of disabled individuals.

Snyder, S. L., & Mitchell, D. T. (2006). *Cultural locations of disability*. University of Chicago Press.

- In this article, Snyder and Mitchell do an excellent job digging into the roots of Eugenics and allow the reader to understand how Eugenicist thought still shapes the perceptions of disability presently. In my work, I am focusing on the roots that ableism has in eugenics so this article was useful.