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The Politics of Ableism

GREGOR WOLBRING

ABSTRACT *Gregor Wolbring at the invitation of the Editor to continue the ideas of an earlier article published in volume 49 number 4 shares with Development readers his understanding of the concept of ableism. He argues that the term ability should not be used just in relation to disabled people but understood in a broader cultural perspective. He highlights different forms of ableism, the role of new and emerging technologies, the consequences of different forms of ableism and the importance of dealing with the concept of ableism on the policy level, and proposes the need for a field of ability studies that examine ableism.*

KEYWORDS *sexism; racism; transhumanism; choice; policy; ability studies; ableism*

Introduction

Ableism is a concept that is not well understood. It is most often used to describe the negative treatment of disabled people (Answers.com, 2007; Merriam-Webster, 2007). Its use in this case parallels the terms sexism, racism, ageism and other isms (Miller *et al.*, 2004). However, I find the current use of ableism and disableism limited both in content and scope. Every ism has two components. Something we value and something we do not. The subject of the isms can be negative or positive. For example, ageism reflects the negative labelling and treatment of the elderly. We could equally call ageism youthism, which values the abilities of youth. Racism carries a double meaning: a value of one race over another and the discrimination against another race. Sexism describes (usually) the valuing of the male sex and the discrimination (usually) against the female sex. Ableism values certain abilities, which leads to disableism the discrimination against the 'less able'. Ableism often confuses the valuing or obsession with ability with the term disableism. However besides confusing ableism with disableism speaking about ableism only in connection with the so-called 'disabled people' is also a problem. I use the terms ableism (Wolbring, 2006a, 2007a, b, c, d, e) and as a consequence disableism/disablism in a much broader sense than the current definitions.

What is ableism?

Ableism is a set of beliefs, processes and practices that produce – based on abilities one exhibits or values – a particular understanding of oneself, one's body and one's relationship

with others of humanity, other species and the environment, and includes how one is judged by others (Wolbring, 2006a, 2007a, b, c, d). Ableism reflects the sentiment of certain social groups and social structures that value and promote certain abilities, for example, productivity and competitiveness, over others, such as empathy, compassion and kindness. This preference for certain abilities over others leads to a labelling of real or perceived deviations from or lack of 'essential' abilities as a diminished state of being, leading or contributing to justifying various other isms (Wolbring, 2006a, 2007a, b, c, d).

Ableism is an umbrella ism for other isms such as racism, sexism, casteism, ageism, speciesism, anti-environmentalism, gross domestic product (GDP)-ism and consumerism. One can identify many different forms of ableism such as biological structure-based ableism (B), cognition-based ableism (C), social structure-based ableism (S) and ableism inherent to a given economic system (E). ABECS could be used as the ableism equivalent to the NBICS S&T convergence (Wolbring, 2007e).

Ableism and preference of certain abilities has been rampant throughout history. Ableism shaped and continues to shape areas such as human security (Wolbring, 2006c), social cohesion (Wolbring, 2007f), social policies, relationships among social groups, individuals and countries, humans and non-humans, and humans and their environment (Wolbring, 2007a, b, c). Ableism is one of the most societally entrenched and accepted isms.

Historically, ableism has been used by various social groups to justify their elevated level of rights and status in relation to other groups (i.e. women were viewed as biologically fragile and emotional, and thus incapable of bearing the responsibility of voting, owning property and retaining custody of their own children (ableism leading to sexism; Silvers *et al.*, 1998; Wolbring, 2003).

Different forms of ableism

Ableism against disabled people (Wolbring, 2007a, b, c) reflects a preference for species-typical normative abilities leading to the discrimi-

nation against them as 'less able' and/or as 'impaired' disabled people (Wolbring, 2004, 2005). This type of ableism is supported by the medical, deficiency, impairment categorization of disabled people (medical model) (Wolbring, 2004, 2005). It rejects the 'variation of being', biodiversity notion and categorization of disabled people (social model). It leads to the focus on 'fixing' the person or preventing more of such people being born and ignores the acceptance and accommodation of such people in their variation of being (Wolbring, 2005). Ableism has also long been used to justify hierarchies of rights and discrimination between other social groups, and to exclude people not classified as 'disabled people'.

Sexism is partly driven by a form of ableism that favours certain abilities, and the labelling of women as not having those certain necessary abilities is used to justify sexism and the dominance of males over females. Similarly, racism and ethnicism are partly driven by forms of ableism, which have two components. One favours one race or ethnic group and discriminates against another. The book *The Bell Curve* (Herrnstein and Murray, 1994) judged human beings on their 'cognitive abilities' (their IQ). It promoted racism by claiming that certain ethnic groups are less cognitively able than others. The ableist judgement related to cognitive abilities continues justifying racist arguments. Casteism, like racism, is based on the notion that socially defined groups of people have inherent, natural qualities or 'essences' that assign them to social positions, make them fit for specific duties and occupations (Omvedt, 2001). The natural inherent qualities are 'abilities' that make them fit for specific duties and occupations.

Science and technology and changes in ableism

The direction and governance of science and technology and ableism are becoming increasingly interrelated. Technologies such as nanotechnology, biotechnology, information technology, cognitive science and synthetic biology (NBICS) have an impact on the usage and content of ableism and favour certain abilities, and how we judge and deal with abilities influences the direction

and governance of NBICS processes, products and research and development (Wolbring, 2006b).

The increased ability of science and technology to modify the appearance and functioning of the human body and the bodies of other species beyond existing norms and species-typical boundaries leads to a changed understanding of ourselves, our bodies and our relationships with humanity, other species and our environment. New forms of ableism (transhumanized forms of ableism and disableism) are appearing.

Transhumanizations of ableism and disableism related to humans (Wolbring, 2005, 2007a, b, c)

Up to this point in history a non-impaired person is someone whose body functioning is seen as performing within acceptable species-typical parameters. This, however, is changing. The ability of NBICS products to modify the appearance of the human body and its functioning beyond existing norms and species-typical boundaries allows for a redefinition of what it means to be non-impaired (Wolbring, 2005).

One transhumanized form of ableism is the network of beliefs, processes and practices that perceives improving the human body and functioning beyond species-typical boundaries as essential. The transhumanized version of ableism sees all bodies as limited, defective and in need of constant improvement beyond species-typical boundaries.

This transhumanized version of ableism gives preference to going beyond human species-typical abilities and sees humans as in a diminished state of being if they are not enhanced beyond human species-typical abilities.

The emerging field of enhancement medicine pushes the boundaries of what is the human norm through genetic manipulation (genomic freedom) and biological bodies (morphological freedom) through surgery, pharmaceuticals, implants and other means (Sandberg, 2001; Wolbring, 2005).

Such scientific endeavours fit well with the existing medicalization of the human body where more and more variations of human body structure and functioning are labelled as deviations or

diseases. This means that more and more 'healthy' people feel 'unhealthy, feel bad about their bodily structure and functioning' (Wolbring, 2005). The transhumanized version of ableism elevates the medicalization dynamic to its ultimate endpoint, namely, to see the enhancement beyond species-typical body structures and functioning as a therapeutic intervention (transhumanization of medicalization) (Wolbring, 2005).

As more powerful, less invasive and more sophisticated enhancements become available, the market share and acceptance of enhancement products will grow. For any given enhancement product there will not be a bell curve distribution, but rather a distribution jump from the 'have nots' to the 'haves', which will lead directly to an ability divide. What will change – depending on the social reality such as GDP of the economy, income levels and other parameters – is how many people end up as 'haves' or 'non-haves' (intrinsic and external techno-poor disabled). The ability divide will be complex between high- and low-income countries and between the poor and rich within every country. Not everyone can afford enhancing one's body, and no society can afford to enhance everyone's body if everyone so wishes. Those deemed able by most people today, but who cannot afford or do not want the technological enhancements tomorrow will become the new class of 'techno-poor disabled'. Billions of people, who today are seen as able, will become disabled not because their bodies have changed, but precisely because they have not changed their bodies in accordance with the transhumanist norm.

Such a future will lead to a transhumanized version of disableism where those who do not have or do not want certain enhancements (the intrinsically techno-poor disabled) will be discriminated against, given negative labels and suffer oppressive and abusive behaviour and other consequences.

Ableism and transhumanism related to animals (Wolbring, 2007a, b, c)

Speciesism assigns different values and rights to beings based on their abilities. Humans are seen as superior over other species because of their

exhibition of 'superior cognitive abilities'. Another transhumanized version of ableism is the set of beliefs, processes and practices that champions the cognitive enhancement of animal species beyond species-typical boundaries, leading to cognitively or otherwise 'enabled species'. This is seen as a way to alter the relationship between humans and other species, and to change how non-human species are judged and treated (Wolbring, 2007g).

This version of ableism favours cognitive abilities, which might play itself out in other areas in the future. If cognitive abilities can be generated in non-human life (artificial life, synbio life, non-human biological life), human rights may very well become seen as an obsolete concept. Entities that follow this form of ableism will not be based anymore on one being human but on one having certain cognitive abilities (sentience rights).

The disregard for nature reflects another form of ableism: humans are here to use nature as they see fit, as they are superior to nature because of their abilities. Humans would treat nature with more respect if they understood the ensuing negative consequences for themselves. We might see a climate change-driven appeal for a transhuman version of ableism, where transhumanization of humans is seen as a solution for coping with climate change. This could become especially popular if we reach a 'point of no return', where severe climate change consequences can no longer be prevented.

Other isms supported by different forms of ableism

The preference for productivity as a main growth measure of a society supports GDP-ism (Wolbring, 2007a, b, c). The NBIC report goal of human performance enhancement is linked to increased productivity and GDP-ism. Consumerism (Wolbring, 2007a, b, c) is based on the desire to be able to consume. This is often linked to the right to choose, and legally it is linked to a negative rights framework. This form of ableism has an influence on many other isms.

Beside racism and speciesism, the preference and value given to cognitive abilities plays itself out within the development stages of humans

whereby humans in the prebirth and early childhood stages of development are seen as not having full human rights due to lack of abilities. Lack of certain cognitive abilities is also used as an argument to deny certain rights to 'cognitively impaired humans'. Such ableism plays itself also out towards artificial intelligence, which might gain equal status to humans moving human rights towards sentient rights.

NBICS, policy studies and ableism

The concept of ableism is everywhere and yet it is invisible within the context of science and technology policy and governance discourse.

Upon searching the public domain search engine Google, Google scholar and three academic clusters of databases (Ovid Cluster of Databases, Academic Search Premier and Cambridge Scientific Databases) to ascertain the visibility of ableism within the science and technology policy academic discourse, one finds (Tables 1 and 2):

- 'Ableism' results in very few hits if combined with the terms 'science and technology studies', 'policy studies', 'nanotechnology', 'biotechnology', inequality and inequity.
- 'Ableism' receives a few hits if combined with the terms 'science and technology studies', 'policy studies', 'nanotechnology', 'biotechnology', synthetic biology, inequality and inequity than if racism or sexism are combined with these terms.
- Ableism is invisible within the policy studies, the science and technology studies, and the nanotechnology and biotechnology discourse.

How to address ableism and its consequences

Ableism is one of the most socially entrenched and accepted isms and one of the biggest enabler for other isms (e.g. nationalism plays itself out through sports, speciesism, sexism, racism, anti-environmentalism...). Ableism related to productivity and economic competitiveness is the foundation of many societies and their relationship with other societies, and is often seen as a prerequisite for progress.

Table 1. *Keyword search on ableism*

Keyword	Ovid (1)	Cambridge (2) scientific databases including IBSS	Academic premier search(3)	Google scholar	Google	International bibliography of the social sciences IBSS(4)
Ableism +/nano/bio/inequality/ inequity/ science and technology studies/policy studies	50/ 0/0/2/ 2/1/1	84/ 0/0/15/2/1/ 1	255/ 0/4/ 68/36/2/2	690/ 3/17/228/ 91/2/54	88,900/ +160/1,140/ 11,900/ 539/13/1,880	3 0
Sexism +/nano/bio/inequality/ inequity/ science and technology studies/policy studies	5,201/0/ 8,281/88/ 3/8	13,510/ 2/30/ 2,126/ 215 34/117	16,174/ 16/110/29 32/ 1027/ 17/204	57,500 83/575/ 12,800, 2,240 224/1,220	9,670,000 24,300/70,000/ 476,000/ 76,700 623/54,900	603 0
Racism +/nano/bio/inequality/ inequity/ science and technology studies/policy studies	13,772/0 /29/790/ 185/4/5 1	37,023/ 6/119/ 4,738/ 452 57/544	71,704/ 42/384/94 56/ 2,988 41/942	272,000 290/2,2102 9,500/ 5,450/ 441/5,150	71,900,000 305,000/536,000 / 2,850,000 278,000/16,300/ 315,000	5919 26

Table 2. Keyword search on *differentism*

Keyword	Ovid	Cambridge scientific databases	Academic premier search	Google scholar	Google
Sexism/racism, ageism, ableism	5,204/13,774/ 3,737/50	13,510/37,023/ 2,140/84	16,176,71,751/ 2,408/260	54,500/257,000/ 6,720/690	
Nanotechnology+sexism/ racism/ageism/ableism	15,183/ 0/0/0/0	14,580+ 2/6/0/0	16/42/2/0	82,700+ 82/280/13/3	107,000,000/ 24,000/564,000/ 1,460/160
Biotechnology+sexism/ racism/ageism/ableism	190473 8/29/0/0	366,575+ 30/119/1/0	110/384/ 22/4	791,000+ 553/2,090/ 104/17	218,000,000/ 132,000/653,000/ 17,000/1,140
Science and Technology Studies+Sexism/racism/ ageism/ableism	251 3/4/0/0	1,804+ 34/57/3/0/	17/41/2/1	5,830+ 215/420/6/2	562,000 519/14,400/151/19
Synthetic Biology+sexism/racism/ ageism/ableism	209/ 0/0/0/0	111/ 0/0/0/0	0/2/0/0	593+ 1/3/0/0/	312,000+ 73/773/12/2

Judgement based on abilities is so ingrained in society that its use for exclusionary purposes is hardly ever questioned or even realized. To the contrary, groups who are marginalized due to some form of ableism and disableism often use the sentiment to demand a change in status (we are as able as you are; we can be as able as you are with accommodations).

Ableism and disableism will become even more prevalent with the anticipated ability of NBICS:

- to generate human bodily enhancements in all shapes and forms with the accompanying ability divide and the appearance of the external and internal techno-poor disabled;
- to generate and modify ability and to enhance non-human life forms;
- to separate cognitive functioning from the human body;
- to modify humans to deal with the aftermath of anti-environmentalism and with the appearance of molecular manufacturing and its impact on productivity and trade.

There is a need to address the nearly unconscious acceptance of ableism and the new emerging forms of ableism and disableism. There is a need to look in a coherent fashion at ableism and disableism. It is regrettable that the Convention for Biological Diversity (Secretariat of the Convention on Biological Diversity, 2006) covers only non-human diversities, missing the boat on an imminent threat related to NBICS and human diversity (ability and otherwise) (Wolbring, 2007h, i).

We need to recognize that acceptance and support for ‘ability diversity’ is as important as other diversities and that ableism is as limiting as and often the foundation for other prejudice-isms. We have to look at the politics of ableism and disableism in a much more coherent open way. It is time to see ability not just within the context of disabled people but to look at it from a broader cultural perspective. I propose the new field of ability studies (Wolbring, 2005), which would cover among others:

- ‘traditional disabled people’;
- ‘techno-poor disabled’;

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- people who gain enhancements;
- other non-human targets for ability modifications;
- new life forms;
- other ableism-supported prejudices;
- ableism differences between cultures.

Notes

1. <http://www.ovid.com/site/index.jsp>
2. <http://www.csa.com/>
3. <http://epnet.com/>
4. <http://www.lse.ac.uk/collections/IBSS/>

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