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A Disabling Public Sphere

People with disabilities are arguably one of the largest and most diverse minority groups in the world, intersecting with various races, ethnicities, genders, religions, and socio-economic backgrounds. Disability can be fluid and touches a considerable part of the population, whether it is something temporary like aging or depression or permanent like physical and intellectual disabilities. An underestimated 13% of the United States' population is considered to have a disability, yet persons with disabilities remain the least represented in arguably every aspect of life (World Health Organization). In an era when diversity and inclusion are considered societal priorities, this ongoing lack of representation requires a deeper exploration into why disabled individuals remain excluded from the public sphere.

Through an analysis of key models and elements of public sphere theory—including Nancy Fraser's "Rethinking the Public Sphere" and concepts like public access, public reason, and public freedom—I will examine how disability, particularly intellectual disability, has been positioned historically and in contemporary society. This analysis reveals an evident ableist bias and a clear disconnect between individuals with intellectual disabilities and their inclusion in the public sphere. As the public sphere is closely intertwined with democratic citizenship, in examining Fraser's framework, criticisms, and limitations, this paper aims to highlight the marginalization of this community and encourage future recognition, inclusion, and change within public life at large. While Fraser does not explicitly address disability, her critiques of Habermas's bourgeois public sphere and her insights into structural inequalities, counterpublics,

and the public-private divide provide critical tools into how systems of exclusion operate and how they can be challenged.

To fully grasp and apply Fraser's critiques and insights, it is essential to first outline Jurgen Habermas's public sphere fundamentals. Habermas theorized that the public sphere emerged in the 18th century from bourgeois culture, facilitated by institutions such as coffee houses and newspapers, which granted the public both a physical space and the tools to discuss and deliberate on matters of shared public concern. He identified several defining characteristics of the public sphere: accessibility to all citizens (Public Access), rational-critical debate driven by reason (Public Reason), freedoms of expression and assembly (Public Freedom), a focus on issues of general concern, and its role as a mediator between society and the state.

Utilizing Habermas's key characteristics and Nancy Fraser's applied critiques and insights, this discussion will examine how intellectual disability fits within public sphere theory, both historically and in modern day. This exploration will shed light on how individuals with intellectual disabilities have been excluded from the public sphere and emphasize the need for greater inclusion in public conversations and spaces.

Public Access and Disability

Habermas considered universal access to the public sphere as one of the fundamental principles. He asserts that "access is guaranteed to all citizens" (Habermas 49), regardless of an individual's social status. In an ideal world, this would be the case but as Nancy Fraser notably argued, stated inclusion alone is insufficient for achieving "participatory parity" (Fraser 63). In her analysis, Fraser demonstrates how the public sphere, despite its claims of universal access, was built and maintained through different systemic exclusions such as gender, race, and

class-based criteria. Similarly, individuals with intellectual disabilities have been denied full access and participation. However, while other marginalized groups have made significant strides toward inclusion, individuals with intellectual disabilities (IIDs) represent an intersectionality of identity that has faced and continues to face significant barriers restricting their full inclusion.

While public access implies several connotations, the first understanding of access is in its literal sense: physical access. Much of public sphere theory refers to the public sphere as a physical space where discursive dialogue may form or exist. Public spaces/institutions such as public schools, parks, libraries, and many others provide a space where public engagement can be learned or exercised. When considering either Habermas's bourgeois public sphere or Fraser's inclusivity revisions, a discussion around physical access, although relevant, is not mentioned.

For much of history, individuals with intellectual disabilities were intentionally and unapologetically prohibited from the public sphere. Many of them were deliberately hidden by their families or confined to institutions or jails, effectively erasing them from public view and discourse. The concept of "feble-mindedness" was used to justify their segregation, sterilization, and institutionalization, with the assumption that they were undesirable in society (Taylor 58). This was exacerbated by the eugenics movements in the United States, which aimed to eradicate any sort of atypical person or being. While there have been efforts and successes in enhancing accessibility and treatment for this demographic, people with intellectual disabilities continue to face significant challenges. Laws such as the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) prohibit outward discrimination and require physical accessibility accommodations for public spaces but do little to address the systemic and attitudinal barriers that impede IID's physical inclusion in the public sphere. Moreover, the accommodations mandated by the ADA more so apply to

“able-minded” individuals. Thus, IIDs remain largely inhibited from accessing these public spaces independently. Although there are justifiable reasons for some limitations, primarily in the spirit of equality and equity, the resulting exclusions remain drastic, as reflected in various domains of public life. Studies suggest that 1 in 3 IIDs spend less than 1 hour outside their home on a typical Saturday (Mencap) and that over half of all disabled people report feeling lonely and having very few friends (Sense). Many “typical” citizens lack any interaction at all with this demographic despite them accounting for 1-3% of the global population (Special Olympics). This trend of exclusion results from various factors, including societal stereotypes and prejudices, as well as systemic barriers in accessing public services, all of which are tailored towards the “able-bodied” and especially “able-minded” experience. One of the most notable and possibly most detrimental exclusions is their segregation in the education system. Through programs such as “Special Education,” individuals with intellectual disabilities are effectively separated from their peers at a very young age and often remain isolated with other ID students throughout their educational experience. While this program undoubtedly has benefits, such as more individualized support, its method of separating IIDs from the majority perpetuates a sense of “otherness” and potentially feeds into existing stigmas. Moreover, the lack of curricular adaptations, restricted access to school programs/extracurricular activities, and the generally low expectations for what this demographic can achieve all reinforce the notion that individuals with intellectual disabilities are incapable. These barriers prevent them from acquiring the skills and resources necessary to participate in and access the public sphere. Like education, the majority of public services and spaces are built for “able-minded” individuals. In using a modern form of the public sphere, which is technologically driven, for example, dominant forms of communication may further inhibit ID access due to the lack of sign-language interpreters, audio descriptions,

and accessible websites. Moreover, the high cost of assistive technologies perpetuates existing structural barriers, preventing people with disabilities from fully participating and accessing information required for assumed citizenship. Thus, despite growing societal efforts that foster inclusivity, the ID community remains unproportionally excluded from public settings, preventing any potential relationships, dialogue, or discourse that could occur.

Agreeing with Fraser's critique of Habermas's "neutral public sphere," it is unrealistic to assume that a single, standardized approach to the public sphere's means and methods can adequately address the diverse needs of all individuals. The ability to access the public sphere requires specific abilities and positionalities. Adopting a social model of disability framework, the innate structure of the public sphere disables individuals who are not conformed to the dominant customs of public life. One's introduction and familiarity with the public sphere is gradually learned through gained interactions in public life. When considering both historical and modern forms of exclusion of the intellectual disability community, it is evident that their access to the public sphere is substantially limited. The ability to access the public sphere is the first step toward meaningful participation within it. Societal conditions and individual statuses are constantly shifting, and for the public sphere to truly function as an accessible space, it must adapt and reflect this dynamic reality.

Public Reason and Disability

Another fundamental feature of Habermas's public sphere theory and many other leading public sphere theories is the emphasis on public reason and discourse. This feature highlights the importance of open, rational dialogue for individuals to engage with one another, share perspectives, and deliberate on matters of public concern. In doing so, citizen-driven change and

reforms can be realized. Habermas's model suggests that all individuals should confer and deliberate as equals within the public sphere regardless of social status. This idea is especially relevant regarding democracies where civic participation is a fundamental expectation of citizenship and being. While Fraser acknowledges the importance of discourse and discussion, she also critiques how not all opinions, experiences, and voices are equally heard and valued within these spaces. This imbalance denies certain individuals, particularly those from marginalized groups, the full capability of participating and benefitting from public reason and discourse. Fraser's critiques of Habermas's idealized model, social bracketing, and her emphasis on counterpublics are highly relevant to marginalized communities, including the ID community. Beyond often lacking access to the public sphere, the contributions of individuals with intellectual disabilities are frequently devalued or ignored due to pervasive societal biases.

Social inequalities are deeply ingrained and widespread, influencing countless facets of everyday life. As history demonstrates, systemic discrimination is not always material but manifests in culture, customs, behaviors, and unconscious thought. Taking the Habermasian public sphere under a microscope, Fraser determines that "discursive interaction within the bourgeois public sphere was governed by protocols of style and decorum that were themselves correlates and markers of status inequality. These functioned informally to marginalize women and members of the plebeian classes and to prevent them from participating as peers" (Fraser 63). Thus, the very nature of how discourse is actioned in the public sphere promotes dominant groups and suppresses others. In the case that every member could exercise their voice, due to certain cultural codes and protocols, all voices would not be received equally. While Fraser gives examples of this with women and other minorities, this sentiment is especially true with the intellectual disability community.

As discussed in relation to public access, individuals with intellectual disabilities (IIDs) face deeply rooted societal prejudices and discrimination. Much of this stems from the medical model of disability, which frames disability as an individual deficit, problem, or threat that needs to be eradicated. This model fueled the historic eugenics movement and has ingrained prejudices about IIDs' competence, rationality, and independence into modern societal practices. The abortion rate for Down syndrome (DS) exemplifies the impact of this model, with selective abortion rates estimated to be around 90% (Jones). While various factors influence decisions around abortion, research indicates that selective abortion for Down syndrome often stems from a lack of informed consent and outdated, overly negative information provided by medical professionals about the realities of raising a child with intellectual disabilities (Dixon). Furthermore, studies suggest that misinformation and prejudice play a significant role in these decisions, with many individuals basing their choices on stereotypes rather than firsthand knowledge or experience (Lawson and Walls-Ingram). The medical model promotes the perception that IIDs are inherently flawed and that their "incompetencies" will lead to a diminished quality of life for both them and their families. Thus, although DS and other IIDs are increasingly accepted publicly, stigmas and prejudices still dominate personal views and private decisions. Moreover, this model's premise of intellectual disabilities is that they prohibit the development of critical thought and independence, thus deeming an IID incapable of fulfilling the roles and responsibilities of citizenship. While an intellectual disability diagnosis ensures difficulties in learning and reasoning, disabilities exist on a spectrum, and for many individuals, with the appropriate support, language, and patience, the ability to self-advocate is certainly attainable (Gjertsen). But, as Fraser acknowledged,

Even the language people use as they reason together usually favors one way of seeing things and discourages others. Subordinate groups sometimes cannot find the right voice or words to express their thoughts, and when they do, they discover they are not heard. [They] are silenced, encouraged to keep their wants inchoate, and heard to say 'yes' when what they have said is 'no.' (Fraser 64).

Possessing a voice is not equivalent to being heard, and the ID community is especially susceptible to this reality, given the unique conditions their participation in public discourse would require. The deeply rooted societal stigmas that devalue their unique ways of being and communicating ostracize them from any productive conversation or discussion, consequently prohibiting them from engaging in public discourse or reason. Within the dominant public sphere, "The democratic and civic potential of individuals nevertheless bumps up against dominant notions of civic participation that are able-bodied or able-minded" (Taylor 63). Thus, agreeing with Fraser, while discourse is important, the public sphere does not curate an environment for all voices to be projected and received equally, but instead, seemingly neutral ideas such as rationality work to privilege the voices of dominant groups. In this understanding, public discourse and reason also assume an arguably unattainable societal ideal.

Building off of Fraser's critique of this ideal, Habermas's conception that one's engagement in public discourse is essential for public sphere citizenship is inherently ableist and narrow. While problematic on some levels, the medical model of disability rightly acknowledges that some individuals with intellectual disabilities may not develop the capability to engage in traditional forms of discourse. Under a Habermasian framework, this inability effectively disqualifies them from being recognized as legitimate members of the public sphere. If the

purpose of the public sphere is to have a space or entity in which matters of general concern are voiced, shared, and addressed, every member of the society should be an inherent member regardless of their ability to engage in discourse. Hence, Fraser's emphasis on the importance of counterpublics can not be undervalued for this demographic. While still ableist in some sense, disability-focused organizations, online communities, and activist networks provide the vital spaces needed for people with disabilities to communicate within their own codes, languages, and customs. These disability counterpublics have proven essential in advancing the disability rights movement and challenging institutionalized stigma. This significance is encapsulated in the slogan "Nothing About Us, Without Us," coined by disability activist James Charlton, which underscores the demand for control over their own narratives and input in disability dialogue, representation, and policy-making. While the ability to engage in discourse is necessary for counterpublics to function and evoke change, their niche adoption of their own cultural codes, understandings, and communication need be recognized. Verbal discussion, although necessary to challenge the dominant discourse, may not be a requirement for membership. While an IID may be incapable of engaging in verbal discourse, their presence and affiliation within a public holds power and influence. Thus, in challenging Habermas, Fraser, and other public sphere theorists, verbal engagement in public reason and discourse is a faulty criterion for public sphere or counterpublic citizenship. Moreover, this criteria is ableist and completely dependent on dominant forms of communication, undermining the plethora of other ways individuals learn about and interact with each other.

Public Freedom and Disability

The right to public freedom is considered a fundamental human right within the United States. For the most part, in the absence of committing a crime, one is generally free to live and

act as they choose, provided their actions do not infringe on the rights of others. However, the boundaries of what constitutes personal freedom are constantly debated, with examples like free speech and the right to bear arms illustrating this ongoing discourse. While the conception of freedom may fluctuate, one constant remains: access to and participation in the public sphere are intrinsically tied to realizing freedom. Consequently, freedoms are often inhibited or granted in accordance with public discourse. Referencing Fraser's conception of a "post-bourgeois" model of the public sphere and the complexities introduced by welfare-state mass democracy, intellectual disability occupies a unique position, shaped by societal perceptions of disability and the ongoing debate over what is considered a public matter impacting their overall experience of freedom.

Freedom refers to many things, including the right to participate in civic life, make informed decisions, access support when needed, and have one's voice heard and respected. Consequently, as individuals with intellectual disabilities do not have access to or a respected voice within the public sphere, their overall freedom is inhibited. As discussed previously, how society is organized and structured inherently excludes them, depriving them of the same opportunities to participate fully in public life. Through the successes of disability counterpublics, government programs and services have been enacted to mend the gaps in freedoms and access. Due to this, the public sphere currently embodies, as Nancy Fraser would call it, a welfare state mass democracy. Although needed to address societal inequalities, this version of the public sphere offers new complexities. While the welfare state exists to support populations like those with intellectual disabilities, it responds to the needs of stronger publics thus, can often fail to address the deeper, systemic inequities individuals face. These inequities tie into the distinction between private and public concerns. Disability is often framed as a

personal issue, not a societal one, excluding it from public debate and discourse. With this assumption, the struggles of the intellectual disability population are ignored because even the loudest counterpublics cannot overcome the barriers of a dominant public sphere that refuses to listen. Moreover, as Fraser notes, dominant groups often use the rhetoric of “private” matters to exclude certain issues from public debate, effectively resulting in the invisibility of the needs and perspectives of certain demographics. The social model of disability highlights this dynamic by arguing that it is not the disability itself but society’s structures and conditions that inhibit individuals with intellectual disabilities. The lack of accessible spaces, equitable policies, and inclusive attitudes perpetuates their marginalization and denies them public freedom. Moreover, due to their lack of access to public spaces and pervasive societal prejudices, the dominant public remains unaware that individuals with intellectual disabilities are denied many of the freedoms that the average citizen naturally holds. These include the ability to live independently, relocate freely, benefit from social protections, access justice, consent to or refuse medical treatment, purchase property, and much more. It is evident that public freedom hinges on both access to information/resources as well as engagement in self-advocacy and discourse. Thus, the public sphere and public freedom are closely intertwined.

Conclusion

By applying Nancy Fraser’s ideas in *Rethinking the Public Sphere* and examining key elements of public sphere theory, it becomes evident that ableism is deeply rooted within the theory and broader societal practices and perceptions of public life and public freedom. While Fraser’s critiques of Habermas’s public sphere and her insights into counterpublics offer valuable frameworks for addressing the marginalization of the intellectual disability population, it is clear

that the public sphere requires further reimagining. Specifically, while public access, reason, and freedom are foundational elements of the public sphere, there must be a greater emphasis on the element of public affiliation. Societal change has historically depended on the collective efforts of multiple counterpublics working to challenge and shift dominant discourse. What helps create a public sphere is the interaction and affiliation between various groups, counterpublics, and individuals. Therefore, public affiliation proves to be an essential aspect of public sphere theory and essential in addressing intellectual disability discrimination. Public affiliation is needed to increase accessibility, encourage patience, reason, and discourse, and ensure that every individual, regardless of ability, has equal freedoms within the public sphere.

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