

A TARGETED UNIVERSALISM APPROACH TO UNIVERSAL ACCESSIBILITY

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Introduction

Disability, being one of the prohibited grounds of discrimination in the Canadian Human Rights Act (1977), is an important topic to consider in the context of human rights. Article 2 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) says, “Everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration, without distinction of any kind” (United Nations General Assembly, 1948, article 2). Article 2 also requires that everyone has access to the goods and services that enable individuals to enact their rights and freedoms under the UDHR. The Canadian Human Rights Act says:

All individuals should have an opportunity equal with other individuals to make for themselves the lives that they are able and wish to have and to have their needs accommodated ... without being hindered in or prevented from doing so by discriminatory practices based on ... disability (purpose).

For all individuals to have equal opportunities, regardless of ability, there must be universal accessibility. Thus, I propose that targeted universalism (TU), where the goal is universal accessibility, should be used as an approach to improve accessibility because anyone can become impacted by disability, disabilities impact people in various ways, acting proactively can

prevent the disproportionate harm of individuals with disabilities, and improving accessibility is not a zero-sum game.

Definitions

Disability

Two common ways to understand disability are the social model, which says disabilities are biological differences that are made limitations by society’s structures, and the medical model, which defines disabilities as differences that are inherently impairing (Barry, 2010). Many definitions and conceptions of disability lie somewhere between these models. The Accessible Canada Act (ACA) (2019) defines disability as:

Any impairment, including a physical, mental, intellectual, cognitive, learning, communication or sensory impairment—or a functional limitation—whether permanent, temporary or episodic in nature, or evident or not, that, in interaction with a barrier, hinders a person’s full and equal participation in society (Definitions).

This definition considers disability as being an impairment itself (in line with the medical model) and becoming a hinderance when interacting with a barrier (aligned with the social model). One challenge in defining disability is identifying the degree of hindrance that

qualifies something as a disability. For instance, at what point does weak vision become a visual disability (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017, p. 84)? According to the social model, there is no inherent distinction between disabled and able-bodied people (Barry, 2010). Under the medical model, however, disabilities are to be cured through medical practice or mitigated by special assistance, which requires the ability to distinguish individuals with disabilities from those without (Barry, 2010). Ultimately, there is no absolute definition of disability; instead, understandings of disability fall on a spectrum between the social and medical models.

Accessibility

Accessibility Services Canada (n.d.) defines accessibility as “The design of products, devices, services, or environments for people who experience disabilities” (definitions). This definition recognizes that people with disabilities may have different needs than able-bodied people. Accessibility can also be understood as the quality of being easily used, acquired, understood, and entered (Oxford University Press, n.d.). For all individuals to have equal opportunities, as outlined by the Canadian Human Rights Act, society should strive to be universally accessible.

Targeted Universalism (TU)

Targeted universalism (TU) is a framework for making change that involves having a universal goal and a targeted strategy (Powell et al., 2019). However, Powell et al. (2019) describe TU as more than a hybrid between universal and targeted policies. Universal policies aim to serve everyone, regardless of group membership. For instance, minimum wage policies apply to everyone in the same way. One

benefit of universal policies is an increased likelihood of gaining political support because they serve everyone equally rather than favouring one group (Powell et al. 2019). Political support ultimately enables implementation and thus increased accessibility. However, universal policies may be seen as inefficient or wasteful of resources, especially when they provide a benefit to individuals who do not need the aid (Powell et al. 2019). For instance, universal policies involving higher pay provide more pay to everyone, including those who do not need it; therefore, they may be uneconomical (Powell et al. 2019). Furthermore, universal policies can heighten disparities between groups (Powell et al. 2019). By inaccurately assuming that everyone is equally positioned, universal designs serve people who fit an assumed universal norm while neglecting those who are situated differently (Powell et al. 2019).

In contrast to universal policies, targeted policies depend on group membership. Targeted policies benefit members of a target group regardless of other groups’ needs, which creates an ingroup/outgroup binary (Powell et al. 2019). Consequently, a weakness of targeted policies is their lack of political support, especially if members of the target group are perceived as undeserving by other people (Powell et al. 2019). This occurs when people attribute a person’s situation to individual choices and fail to recognize the systemic barriers faced by members of marginalized groups (Powell et al. 2019). Another weakness of this approach is the difficulty in identifying and applying effective policies (Charles and Fuentes-Rohwer, 2021).

In a TU approach, the universal goal is

critical as it reinforces social collective aspiration and counters intergroup conflict (Powell et al. 2019). TU is outcome-oriented: its targeted strategies are directed towards its universal goal (Powell et al. 2019). However, TU does not serve everyone in the same manner; instead, TU recognizes that people are situated differently and must be treated specially to achieve universal goals (Powell et al. 2019). Acknowledging the varying needs of different groups, TU implements a range of targeted strategies. Importantly, TU recognizes that individuals are subject to structures of society that are not neutral (Powell et al. 2019). Group positions and intergroup gaps are measured relative to the universal goal rather than to the dominant group (Powell et al. 2019). Powell et al (2019) emphasize that closing intergroup gaps, which targeted policies alone aim to do, is an incomplete goal because it fails to move all groups towards a shared universal goal.

Powell et al. (2019) outline the five steps of a TU approach: first, create a widely significant universal goal that addresses a persistent problem, demands policy action, and reflects collective aspiration. Second, assess the entire population in relation to that goal. Third, gauge the positions of distinct subgroups. Fourth, examine groups' interactions with the structures that are relevant to the goal; here, Powell et al. emphasize the importance of recognizing structures' dynamic nature and lack of neutrality. This step informs the targeted strategies of TU, which go beyond achieving neutrality. Fifth, develop a range of targeted strategies that serve every group. In this step, Powell et al. underline the importance of involving group members as leaders.

Powell et al. (2009) argue that TU recognizes that problems faced by marginalized groups can also be felt higher in the social hierarchy, and TU is proactive due to its universal goal. Powell et al. uses the example of curb cuts to illustrate the benefits of TU. While curb cuts are targeted for wheelchair users, they also aid people riding bikes, pushing strollers, and using walkers. Curb cuts can benefit anyone, including dominant group members, rather than merely bringing others up to the dominant group's level. Curb cuts are a targeted strategy for the universal goal of improving movement in cities (Mate, 2021). Yet, Basas (2021) insists accessibility does not equal disability justice: accessibility is a lack of barriers, but it is not a lack of ableist behaviour, language, and prejudice. I agree. However, I argue accessibility is a necessary step towards disability justice.

Disability Justice

Disability justice is a movement that recognizes all bodies as unique and essential (Berne, 2015). Intersectionality is a primary principle of disability justice, which highlights the diversity and complexity of individuals' experiences as a result of overlapping systems of oppression (Sins Invalid & Berne, P., 2015). Engelman et al. (2022) explain that people with disabilities have a wide range of experiences with their impairments, identities, and cultures. Therefore, Engelman et al. argue policy makers should use a disability justice approach that recognizes the heterogeneous conditions of disabilities and their intersections with other factors. Furthermore, Engelman et al. carefully distinguish equality and equity regarding disability justice and accessibility: access for all does not necessarily entail equitable access

because gaining access may come at a greater cost to individuals with disabilities than those without disabilities. The other core principles of disability justice include leadership by people with disabilities, recognizing the inherent worth of every individual, aligning with other social justice movements, moving sustainably, and ensuring collective liberation.

TU agrees with disability justice in the rejection of both universal and targeted policies. The notion of intersectionality emphasized by disability justice demonstrates the insufficiency of targeted policies that aim to benefit a particular target group regardless of other groups' needs. The diverse needs of individuals with disabilities, which are underlined by the disability justice movement, highlight the inadequacy of universal policies that do not account for individuals' different positioning in society. Disability agrees with TU about developing a range of targeted strategies based on groups' dynamic needs and listening to individuals with disabilities as leaders in this approach. The collaboration of disability justice with other social justice movements also supports the importance of having a broadly significant universal goal.

Discussion

As Powell et al. (2019) explain, the first step of TU is creating a universal goal. Given the importance of accessibility to equal opportunities and human rights for all individuals, I propose universal accessibility is a significant goal and TU is a suitable approach for the following four reasons:

Anyone can become impacted by disability

Any individual can become impaired by an accident or chronic condition, or experience impairment secondhand through the impairment of a friend or relative. Moreover, at some point in their lives, most people will sustain a temporary injury or illness and therefore benefit from better accessibility. Even further, Barry (2010) notes that under the social model of disability, there is no inherent distinction between disabled and able; thus, anyone has the potential to be subject to discrimination based on disability. The World Health Organization (WHO) (2020) states “[d]isability is a part of being human. Almost everyone will temporarily or permanently experience disability at some point in their life” (para. 1). While the WHO claims about 16% of the global population currently lives with significant disability, they assert this number is growing because the population is aging and the prevalence of chronic disease is increasing. Morris et al. (2018) note in 2017, 22% of Canadians (aged 15 years and older) had one or more disabilities and that proportion increased with age. With advancements in medical technology, people are living longer, which provides more opportunity for people to develop disabilities (World Health Organization, 2021). Given that anyone can become permanently or temporarily impacted by disability, universal accessibility is a widely significant goal suitable for TU. Since disability can be developed over time and experienced temporarily, targeted policies that create a binary between people with and without disability may neglect some individuals. A range of dynamic targeted strategies guided by a universal goal, as per TU, may better account for the scope of individuals' experiences with disability.

Furthermore, Morris et al. (2018) note findings from the 2017 Canadian Survey on Disability (CSD) cannot be compared to results from the 2012 CSD. This is because the 2017 CSD employed filter questions that captured a broader range of disabilities, especially less visible disabilities, such as those associated with memory, pain, mental health, and learning (Morris et al., 2018). The change in filter questions from 2012 to 2017 indicates an evolution in society's understanding of disability. Therefore, people who were considered able-bodied in the past may be identified as disabled without undergoing a biological change. In this case, people may begin to be impacted by social stigma associated with disability. Powell et al. (2019) assert that TU rejects the notion of essentialism in defining groups and recognizes identity as dynamic rather than static. The evolution of the definition and scope of disability suggests TU is a more suitable approach to improving accessibility because it avoids statically defining groups in its development of strategies (Powell et al., 2019).

Disabilities impact people in various ways

The lack of distinction between disabled and able-bodied people under the social model of disability suggests that the impact of a person's biological difference depends on social and structural factors. Some individuals may be less hindered by their differences than others with the same condition. Disabilities exist in many forms and to various degrees, which, combined with intersectionality, makes people's experiences of disability unique. Therefore, universal policies may fail to meet everyone's needs. Since the spectrum of disability is broad and difficult to precisely distinguish from

able, targeted policies may overlook some individuals who could benefit from better accessibility.

To capture some of the ways in which disability impacts people differently, Morris et al. (2018) use the 2017 CSD to examine the effect of age, gender, education, and severity of disability on employment and income. Morris et al. note there was an inverse relationship between employment and disability severity; people with disabilities who live alone were more likely to be living in poverty; and people with university degrees and severe disabilities were less likely to be employed than those with high school degrees or less and no disabilities. However, while the 2017 CSD provides some insight into how disability can impact people differently based on other factors, it fails to mention factors such as race, ethnicity, and sexuality.

The WHO (2021) claims factors such as age, sex, gender identity, sexual orientation, religion, race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status make people's experience with disability unique. Goethals et al. (2015) argue a primary weakness of traditional disability studies is the tendency to essentialize the group of people with disabilities when, in fact, this group is very diverse. People in this group are assumed to have similar views and experiences regardless of other factors, and priority is often given to disability, rather than intersectionality, when categorizing people into groups (Goethals et al., 2015). Goethals et al. explain that many disability studies compare people with and without disabilities, which generates binary data. In contrast to the traditional disabled/abled binary, Goethals et al. argue disability studies should be based

on intersectionality and avoid considering disability in isolation from other factors in order to better understand the complexity of people's experiences. Goethals et al.'s rejection of the disabled/abled binary indicates the inadequacy of targeted policies for meeting the needs of people with disabilities. Targeted policies depend on target group member/non-member binaries. In contrast, intersectionality and the social model of disability work to collapse the disabled/abled binary, making purely targeted approaches ineffective. TU, with a range of dynamic targeted strategies based on a universal goal, would better account for the diverse experiences of individuals with disabilities.

The range of people's experiences with disability emphasizes the importance of developing a comprehensive understanding of the accessibility challenges faced by individuals with disabilities. Recognizing the variety and value of lived experience, both disability justice and TU suggest putting affected individuals in leadership positions to create effective change. Protonentis (2021) also argues change should be directed by people who are disadvantaged by current structures. Steps four and five of TU involve examining groups' dynamic interactions with society's structures and developing a range of targeted strategies based on those interactions; Powell et al. (2019) emphasize the importance of involving group members in these steps.

Acting proactively can prevent the disproportionate harm of individuals with disabilities

Employment and Social Development Canada (2022) says the goal of the ACA is to benefit all Canadians, especially

individuals with disabilities, by proactively removing and preventing barriers to make Canada barrier-free by 2040. Powell et al. (2009) claims TU promotes proactive action due to its orientation around a universal goal. Crises, such as pandemics, natural disasters, and economic crises, disproportionately harm people with disabilities and emphasize the need for the proactive removal of barriers to help prevent the disproportionate harm of people with disabilities in future crises. Furthermore, since TU strives to benefit everyone, it may reduce harm for all in future crises. The United Nations (n.d.) states that people with disabilities are more likely to be abandoned during emergency evacuations due to a lack of preparation for their distinct needs and the inaccessibility of facilities, services, and transportation systems. Public Safety Canada (2010), in their emergency preparedness guide, explains that disasters and emergencies impact people with disabilities differently. Some people with physical impairments experience limited mobility and dependency on electrical devices, which may be threatened in emergencies, while others have difficulty understanding emergency warnings and evacuation instructions due to visual, auditory, or cognitive impairments (Public Safety Canada, 2010). In order to prevent the disproportionate harm of individuals with a wide range of needs, multiple targeted strategies, informed by individuals' complex experiences, should be implemented. Universal policies neglect individuals' unique needs, and targeted policies lack a universal goal that promotes proactive measures.

The COVID-19 pandemic underlined the disproportionate harm of people with disabilities (Protonentis, 2021). A survey

of Canadians with long-term disabilities, administered by Statistics Canada (2020), found that the majority of participants reported a major or moderate impact of COVID-19 on at least one financial obligation or essential need, and participants with multiple impairments were even more likely to report impacts than those with one disability. Arim et al. (2020) report about the impact of COVID-19 on families of children with disabilities in Canada: a greater percentage of parents of children with disabilities were extremely concerned for their children's academic success and mental health than parents of children without disabilities. The COVID-19 pandemic highlights the disproportionate harm inflicted on people with disabilities in crises. This harm could be mitigated for future crises by taking a proactive approach that aims to benefit everyone while acknowledging the unique needs of disadvantaged individuals. Furthermore, since anyone can acquire a disability at any point in life, proactivity removing barriers may prevent the disproportionate harm of anyone who is currently considered able-bodied.

Improving accessibility is not a zero-sum game

Regardless of the potential for anyone to become impacted by disability, even those who are not impaired may benefit directly from strategies that are targeted towards people with disabilities. Some examples include curb cuts, closed captioning, elevators, and accessible evacuation procedures. Closed captioning is targeted at individuals with hearing impairments. The deaf community created closed captioning inspired by the intertitles in silent films after they were excluded from the film industry (Gernsbacher, 2015). However,

closed captioning can also benefit others outside of this community: Gernsbacher (2015) notes many studies have found that closed captioning improves comprehension, attention, and memory for people without hearing impairments. Moreover, Gernsbacher found captions can improve reading skills, vocabulary, attention to lectures, pronunciation, and literacy rates in developing countries. Elevators are another example: while installed for wheelchair users or others with mobility challenges, elevators are beneficial for people who need to move a heavy load between stories or travel a large number of floors. Finally, more accessible evacuation procedures, targeted at people with disabilities, may improve evacuation for people without disabilities. For instance, the inclusion of both visual and auditory signals in fire alarm systems may enhance evacuation for everyone.

In addition, a range of targeted strategies that promote universal accessibility may have other broad advantages. For example, better accessibility may increase the number of potential workers. Currently, there is a labour shortage in Canada: Saba (2022) explains Canada's economy lost almost 13 billion dollars over the past year as a result of the labour shortage in the manufacturing sector. Many manufacturers have had to turn down contracts, postpone or cancel capital projects, and experience delays due to a lack of workers (Saba, 2022). The labour shortage has been heightened over the pandemic, especially with the baby boomer cohort nearing retirement age (Saba, 2022). The Canadian Manufacturers and Exporters' president and CEO, Dennis Darby, suggests the manufacturing sector needs to hire more underrepresented groups, including

women, people of colour, and Indigenous people (Saba, 2022). Universal accessibility achieved through TU may help mitigate the labour shortage by increasing the number of available workers – namely people with disabilities who are currently unable to work due to inaccessibility. Furthermore, better accessibility for individuals with disabilities may also benefit businesses by increasing the number of potential customers able to access their services.

Finally, universal accessibility achieved through TU may help mitigate the burden on government assistance programs. From the 2017 CSD, Morris et al. (2018) found the likelihood of living in poverty increased with the severity of disability. Statistics Canada (2020) adds that job loss during the COVID-19 pandemic has increased the vulnerability of people with disabilities and their need for government assistance. Increasing accessibility and ability to work for people with disabilities may help reduce the number of individuals with disabilities living in poverty and thus relieve their reliance on government assistance. Essentially, by implementing multiple strategies based on groups' positions relative to a universal goal, TU avoids zero-sum games.

Conclusion

Disabilities can impact anyone at any point in life and in various ways. Proactively removing barriers can prevent the harm caused by disabilities, and improving accessibility is not necessarily a zero-sum game. TU recognizes that people are situated differently in society and even the dominant group's position can be improved. With a universal goal that aims to serve everyone and targeted strategies that are developed based on groups' needs, TU works proactively, combats intergroup conflict, and avoids zero-sum games. The goal of universal accessibility should guide a TU approach to improve accessibility for everyone. The UDHR and Canadian Human Rights Act indicate the importance of equal opportunity and entitlement to human rights. Kallen (2010) asserts, "Every human being, simply by belonging to the human species, has the same, inalienable human rights" (p. 52). Universal accessibility within society is critical to the equal possession of human rights, which makes universal accessibility an important goal. To achieve this goal, governments and organizations should adopt a TU approach, using the five steps outlined by Powel et al. (2019).

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