

Capstone Project Proposal

Confronting Physical Therapy Ableism through Disability Justice Frameworks

In this project, ableism within the field of physical therapy will be investigated and addressed. Healthcare fields and their practitioners generally inherit the harmful medical model of disability. Specifically, physical therapy is a healthcare field and practitioners and teachers likely unwittingly subscribe to the harmful medical model of disability often when treating patients with disabilities or generally promote ableist ideas about disability. Thus, this investigation will analyze the ways in which this field intersects with disability, common models of disability, and ableism. Importantly, in order to uncover these relationships, this paper will investigate how the field of physical therapy is understood by its clinicians, how clinicians conduct their work, and how they are trained to understand and treat their patients and those with disabilities.

Working within a disability justice framework that prioritizes anti-ableism, accessibility, intersectionality, and agency, the analysis will serve to understand how and why ableism and physical therapy intersect, the factors or systems involved, as well as how to address and halt this process. In fact, with disability justice movement ideologies in mind, which center action and tangible change, this paper will also discuss and/or propose possible ways in which the physical therapy field and its clinicians can identify ableism in their work as well as attempt to transform their understandings of disability as well as transform their teaching and practice to be anti-ableist and address ableism within the field. Ultimately, this paper will utilize analyze how ableism intersects with the field of physical therapy and its practice and address any harmful beliefs and practices. Lastly, this paper will propose methods to counter those harmful beliefs and practices as well as to work towards explicit anti-ableism within physical therapy practice in order to better serve patients and the disability community.

Many disability studies scholars are apprehensive about, critical of, or outright opposed to the practice of physical therapy in its past and current forms, and rightfully so. Yet, despite the field of physical therapy being often criticized as ableist or contributing to ableism, my research has illustrated a gap in disability studies literature around critiques for suggestions or improvement of the field. In conducting this analysis and in utilizing disability justice principles and anti-ableism, as outlined by revolutionary, radical, and/or scholarly thinkers such as Sins Invalid, this project will attempt to close this gap. In doing so, this project aims to provide a much-needed example how a disability justice framework can be utilized to interrogate the intersection of ableism and physical therapy ideologies and practice in order to ultimately provide a constructive path to redefine normalcy and confront ableism in the field of physical therapy.