

**SOCIOPOLITICAL  
ASPECTS OF DISABILITIES**

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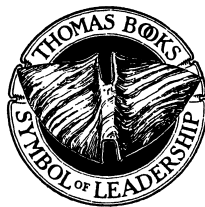
# **SOCIOPOLITICAL ASPECTS OF DISABILITIES**

**The Social Perspectives and  
Political History of Disabilities and  
Rehabilitation in the United States**

*By*

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*This book is dedicated to my grandchildren, Raymond and Donnita. It is also dedicated to my extended family: Cleo L. Bryan, Sr., James H. Davis, Sr. and to the memories of my aunts Hettie Hopkins, Odella Huffman, Leola Perkins, Oleona Jenkins, Merrilli Lowe and my uncles Roy C. Bryan and Diamond Lowe.*



## PREFACE

The social and political landscape of the United States is and has been in the process of changing for a number of years. Various groups, particularly ethnic and racial minority groups, have been demanding equal rights in all aspects of American society. In the United States, achieving equality has been an ongoing challenge for ethnic and racial minorities for over 300 years. Although the documents on which America has used as a foundation proclaim equality for everyone, for many groups of people the promise of equality has yet to be realized. People with disabilities, the largest minority group within the United States, can be counted within these groups of people still struggling for the promised equality.

Because of laws and increased involvement of persons with disabilities in advocating for themselves, the social environment has improved and hopefully will continue to improve. Through the efforts of enlightened and concerned law makers, laws that prohibit discrimination of persons with disabilities have been passed. In addition, laws that have increased educational opportunities as well as mandatory access to the country's goods and services have been passed. The passage and enactment of these laws mark a significant improvement in the treatment of persons with disabilities. As a result of increased access and educational opportunities, persons with disabilities are better equipped to interact in society. It is hoped that this increased interaction with nondisabled will hasten more positive and realistic attitudes toward persons with disabilities.

This book discusses the evolution of societal attitudes toward persons with disabilities. Moreover, the book addresses some of the concepts society has and continues to have about persons with disabilities. In this book, considerable emphasis has been placed on the role persons with disabilities have played in changing societal attitudes as well as how they have been able to get their agenda of a need for equality before the people of the United States.

This book attempts to document some of the most relevant social and political histories of persons with disabilities in the United States. A major objective of the book is to document some of the historical events and

actions that have produced the current state of affairs for persons with disabilities.

Although considerable progress has been made in the relationships of the nondisabled and persons with disabilities, there remains considerable room for improvement.

W.V.B.



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**SOCIOPOLITICAL  
ASPECTS OF DISABILITIES**





## **Chapter 1**

# **FOUNDATION OF BELIEFS AND TREATMENT OF PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES**

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### **OUTLINE**

- I. Introduction
- II. Foundation of Concepts of Disabilities
  - A. Worldviews
  - B. Early American Views
- III. Linkage among Education, Employment, and Economics
  - A. Use of Charity
- IV. Questions of Normalcy
  - A. Media Influence
  - B. Biblical Influence
  - C. Physical Influence
- V. History of Rehabilitation
  - A. Definition of Rehabilitation
  - B. Limited Efforts
  - C. Major Goals of Rehabilitation Legislation
- VI. Conclusion

### **OBJECTIVES**

- Establish foundation for more detailed discussion of information in following chapters
  - Establish how some Americans' view of disabilities have been developed
-

## INTRODUCTION

No matter where or what time, persons with disabilities have always been treated as special people; in too many instances they have been treated as deviants and freaks. Without question the existence of disabilities as part of the human condition is as old as humankind; consequently, the attempt to understand disabilities has a history of long standing. Similarly, the reaction to and treatment of persons with disabilities also has a lengthy history. As one considers the reality that the attempt of the human race to understand its own existence has frequently been met with frustration; therefore, there should be no surprise that attempts to understand the full meaning of why some people become disabled or are born with a disability as well as understand their usefulness to society has also often been an exercise in frustration. This notwithstanding, humans continually try to understand disability by extracting its significance in the past and, based on that, attempt to justify present reactions to disabilities and those who possess disabilities. Despite the time gap that separates the past and present, the lives of people who have disabilities too frequently are vivid testimony to unbelievable cruelty over prolonged periods of time. Such inhumane treatment may have been the catalyst for philosopher Samuel Beckett (1965), "Yesterday is not a milestone that has been passed, but a daystone on the beaten track of the years and irremediably a part of us, within us, heavy, and dangerous" (p. 3).

As we think of the history of disabilities we, in most cases, associate it with the past, falsely believing that we have progressed beyond the beliefs and attitudes of yesterday. However, Faried Haj (1970) cautions us that crude negative attitudes toward persons with disabilities once deeply rooted in the superstitions and mythologies of the ancestors of modern people have evolved into present-day sophisticated bigotry. Therefore, an understanding of the social and political history of disabilities is important for rehabilitation professionals and other helping professionals who work with persons with disabilities, not only to understand how history affects our current attitudes and behavior, but also to provide a prospective on current events. Hopefully with this knowledge, mistakes of the past will not be repeated. The human genome project that is an effort of some scientists to identify and classify all human genes and the deoxyribonucleic acid (DNA) codes that determine our makeup is a good example of the possibilities of relationships of the past to the present. It is widely believed that if this project is successful, many birth defects can be eliminated. Most people readily acknowledge the possible benefits of this achievement; however, if such an effort is carried too far we may find ourselves attempting to create a perfect race of people. History reminds us that this was attempted by the Nazi government (see Chapter 2),

and one of the first groups to be marked for extermination were people with disabilities, particularly those with mental disabilities.

## FOUNDATION OF CONCEPTS OF DISABILITIES

### Worldviews

Although this text concentrates on the social perspectives and political history of disabilities in the United States, it is necessary, from a historical perspective, to look at worldviews of disabilities to trace the historical development of social reactions and laws that have effected persons with disabilities within the United States. As one views the early Americans' perceptions and treatment of persons with disabilities, one will note that many laws and policies developed for persons who required assistance including persons with disabilities were patterned after the British system that required local entities to provide public assistance to those who through no fault of their own could not wholly support themselves. Some colonists were exposed to the system prior to migrating to the new land, and having been under British rule, the system was accepted. John Lenihan (1977) provides an example of early American attitudes derived from acceptance of the British perspective of social services; he states that the colonists were willing to provide assistance to persons who were destitute by virtue of age, disability, or other circumstances for which the person had no control; however, whereas they accepted this as a responsibility, they also considered them financial burdens that had to be controlled. To provide some measure of control, some American seaboard colonies required shipmasters or owners to post bond against the possibility of passengers or shipmates who would require assistance. Sanford Rubin and Richard Roessler (1978) explain why the colonists viewed their social obligations from such a narrow prospective:

With the typical colonist barely able to scratch out a living from the soil and with disability perceived as the result of God's punishment, conditions were not ripe in colonial America for the development of rehabilitation programs. In addition the state of the medical art in the colonies precluded much medical hope let alone vocational rehabilitation. (p. 4)

### Early American Views

In essence, the early colonists were to some extent willing to provide charity but the concept of rehabilitation was not part of their conceptual view of social services. Most colonists viewed the management of physical dis-