



CHAPTER 6

MISCONCEPTIONS ABOUT PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES

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Introduction

Historically, the concept of disability has been embedded in misconceptions which are founded on myths and beliefs that exist in various cultures and religions. In most societies in prehistoric times, children with disabilities were seen as being possessed by demons and not fit to live in the society. Most of these children were rejected, killed and in some cases used as objects of amusement (Ugbo, 2017). However, over the years and with various enlightenments, there is an apparent acceptance of people with disabilities as members of the society, with the same rights as other non-disabled people.

Many initiatives have been taken to accommodate, integrate and assimilate people with disabilities in different communities around the world. Relevant policies have been formulated to entrench inclusiveness for people with disabilities. Such policies include the Convention against Discrimination in Education (1960), the Declaration on the Rights of Disabled Persons (1975), United Nations Declaration (1975) and the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) (Obi, 2019). In 1994, the Salamanca statement brought to view inclusive education which is the current focus in education for persons with disabilities (Ainscow & Cesar, 2014).

Despite these various initiatives, there has been a rising concern about the incorrect perception and attitude of people towards persons with different forms of disabilities. Various associations of persons with different forms of disabilities still decry the psychological exclusivity of society which predominantly is a result of the perceptions and attitudes of non-disabled people towards people with different forms of disabilities (Yakobi, 2014).

Perception, generally, is defined as a sensory experience of the world. It involves organizing, identifying and interpreting sensory information in order to represent and understand current information or an environment (Cole, 2017). This implies that perception is an internalized interpretation of information gotten from the senses of sight, hearing, feeling, tasting and smelling. Hence perception is a reflection of underlying information within us which affects the meaning we give to the world around us. Babik and Gardner (2016) explained that in the context of psychology and disabilities, perception goes beyond sensory information and is largely influenced by beliefs which may be cultural or religious. These beliefs influence the interpretation of sensory information, aligning them to the ingrained belief system upheld by an individual. Some of these belief systems are not based



on facts and hence they lead to various misconceptions about people with disabilities, which are reinforced in a vicious circle.

Misconceptions about people with disabilities are fallacies largely accepted by society and which result in stereotyping people with different forms of disabilities. While some misconceptions are negative and view people with various forms of disabilities as 'abnormal', other misconceptions are positive, viewing people with disabilities to have some abilities that make them 'superhuman' when compared with non-disabled persons in specific areas of normal living. In both cases, these misconceptions result in negative attitudes which further heightens the propensity for stereotyping of people with disabilities, resulting in stigmatization, discrimination and labelling.

Attitude is defined as a set of emotions, tendency, beliefs, and behaviours toward a particular object, person, thing or events (Babik & Gardner, 2016). It is a learned assertiveness to evaluate things in a certain way with such evaluations being positive or negative or indifference. Yakobi (2014) explained that even when the society provides accessibility in the environments for persons with disabilities, negative attitudes act as a critical barrier to achieving inclusive society for people with disabilities. Accordingly, Sutton (2020) stated that the biggest challenge to people with disabilities, is not their disabilities, but rather the attitudinal barriers imposed by others in their social environment.

Attitudinal barriers are the ways people think and feel about people with different disabilities that result in limiting the potential of people with disabilities to maximize their fulfillment in living. These attitudinal barriers arise from perceptions, assumptions and misconceptions about disabilities and those living with disabilities. Alarmingly, these attitudinal barriers permeate every society, including schools where students with disabilities must relate with their non-disabled peers and teachers (Pivarc, 2019). This poses the question: can inclusiveness be truly achieved without society making concerted efforts at eliminating attitudinal barriers through eradicating misconceptions about people with disabilities?

The thesis statement of this chapter is hinged on the need to remove attitudinal barriers from the society, by eradicating misconceptions about people with disabilities, thereby enhancing the inclusivity of society for people with disabilities. To achieve this target, this chapter will discuss misconceptions about people with disabilities, identify the attitudinal barriers which result from these misconceptions, discuss ways to eradicate these misconceptions in the society and state implications for the eradication of misconceptions for people with disabilities and the larger society. Suggestions and conclusions will be discussed at the end of the chapter.

Misconceptions about People with Disabilities

Misconceptions about people with disabilities are incorrect assumptions and unfounded beliefs about these people because of their apparent disabilities. It is a



common phenomenon in every society due to the fact that the concepts of impairment, disabilities and handicaps are still not clearly understood by the majority of the populace. These concepts are still largely shrouded in various myths and beliefs handed down through culture and religion. As Agomoh and Kanu (2015) explained, these myths and beliefs are rooted in the desire of people to avoid whatever is associated with evil and largely, disabilities are erroneously associated with evil. For instance, despite medical proof that mental disabilities are rooted in physiological dysfunctions of the human mind and brain, mental disabilities are religiously explained as evidence that a person is possessed by evil spirits.

Currently, there is lacking a generally acceptable classification of misconceptions of people with disabilities. However, Cole (2017) opined that society's misconceived views of people with disabilities are at two extremely polarized ends which sees these groups of people as remarkable and heroic, or victims, pitiable and evil. Based on this, these misconceptions can be classified into negative and positive misconceptions. Negative misconceptions are those assumptions which portray people with disabilities as being pitiable, pathetic, sinister or evil, tragic, laughable, less than human, aggressive and incapable of living a normal lifestyle or contributing positively to society (Ainscow & Farrell, 2012). Negative misconceptions, by analysis, can be further subdivided into pre-conception, adventitious and disability-specific misconceptions. Pre-conception misconceptions are those fallacies that try to explain a child's disabilities with relation to the conception of the child. Some major pre-conception misconceptions listed by Sutton (2020) are:

1. A child's disability is as a result of the mother's infidelity
2. The parents' sought for riches by devilish means
3. The failure of the parents to worship God
4. Bewitchment of the child in the womb
5. Punishment from God
6. Curse from the ancestors.

Adventitious misconceptions are those beliefs about a child with disability with regards to his ability to live a fulfilled life and interact with his immediate society and the world around him. Some of these adventitious misconceptions listed by Sutton (2020) are:

1. People with disabilities are inferior to normal people
2. People with disabilities cannot have regular education in school
3. People with disabilities cannot be gainfully employed at a paid job.
4. People with disabilities should be pitied.
5. Disabilities are infectious, hence people with disabilities should be avoided.
6. A pregnant woman that sees a person with disability will give birth to a child with disability.
7. People with disabilities cannot live independent lives and they always need help.



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8. A person's disability defines who they are as an individual (this leads to labelling)
 9. People with disabilities always want to associate with only people with disabilities.
 10. People with disabilities are easily offended and hot tempered.

Disability-specific misconceptions are those negative misconceptions that are not generalized in nature but are negative perceptions of people with specific disabilities. Some negative specific disability misconceptions stated by Setume (2016) and Sutton (2020) are:

1. People with hearing impairment cannot speak
2. People who have cerebral palsy are less intelligent than normal people
3. People with autism cannot be trained in school
4. People who have hearing impairment cannot be entertained with music and movies.

Positive misconceptions, on the other hand, are assumptions which portray people with disability as having abilities that make them 'super human', remarkable or heroic in some aspects of life. In other words, their disabilities result in an extraordinary development of other abilities beyond the normal human ability. Positive misconceptions can be general or disability-specific in nature. General positive misconceptions are generalized assumptions about people with disabilities which though positive, are fallacies and misleading. Some general positive misconceptions stated by Setume (2016) are:

1. People with disabilities are brave and courageous since they survive even with their disabilities.
2. People with disabilities are inspirational for living with their disabilities.
3. People with disabilities are special and should always be treated differently.
4. People with disabilities are a one-dimensional group having the same needs, interests and opinions.

Most positive misconceptions are actually disability-specific as they apply directly at a specific disability rather than general disabilities. Some major positive disability specific misconception about people with disabilities listed by Setume (2016) are:

1. People who are visually impaired have excellent hearing abilities
2. A person with hearing impairment can read lips.
3. People who are blind acquire a 'sixth sense'.
4. Sleeping with albinos cure aids
5. Body parts of albinos and people with a hunched back, make potent charms that can make people rich.

All misconceptions, both negative and positive, have far reaching consequences on people with disabilities as they affect the care given to them and the general societal interactions with them. Negative misconceptions are both limiting and degrading for people with disabilities as they create a negative image that implies



these people are ‘unfit’ in the society. Consequently, “people with disabilities are relegated to the background, making them a largely oppressed minority group in the society” (Ainscow & Farrell, 2012, p.201). Furthermore, such inaccurate views dominate the understanding of some people with disabilities about their disability and make them see themselves as inferior and a burden to society. The resultant attitudes for these people with disabilities are self-pity, guilt and fear. Positive misconceptions also place people with disabilities in unfavourable positions since it results in stereotyping and labelling and hence affects how the society views and relates with these groups of people.

A critical impact of misconceptions is its impact on the attitude of members of society towards people with disabilities. As Scior (2011) explained, these misconceptions have enhanced the continuous stereotyping of people with disabilities and promotes negative images of disabilities, triggering fear or prejudice towards people with disabilities, and ultimately affects the attitude of people towards them. Consequently, misconceptions about people with disabilities are identified to be at the root of various attitudinal barriers against people with disabilities.

Attitudinal Barriers That Result from Misconceptions About People with Disabilities

Attitudinal barriers have been identified as a major hurdle to the effective integration of persons with disabilities into society (Zheng & Chan, 2019). Simply explained, attitudinal barriers are attitudes that are founded on misconceptions and which when present, limits the functioning of people with disabilities, further creating disabilities. They represent a summation of all the behaviours that result from perceptions and assumptions about people with disabilities, which discriminate against them (Babik & Gardner, 2016).

Attitudinal barriers are a major concern since its presence contributes to all other barriers against people with disabilities (Scior, 2011). For instance, in a society where people living with blindness are erroneously stereotyped as incapable of living independently and not educable, there will be a high propensity of parents of such children developing a negative attitude towards the consideration of enrolling their children in schools. Furthermore, schools in such a society will not be structured in a way that they can provide the necessary physical environment to accommodate students living with blindness, hence further limiting their functioning and creating disabilities. Consequently, Zheng and Chan (2019) explained that while it is generally accepted that it is the presence of an impairment that leads to disability, the real disabilities of persons having impairments are caused by the attitudinal barriers created by society. For this reason, attitudinal barriers are in reality, the biggest challenge for people with disabilities.

Attitudinal barriers focus on a person’s disability rather than abilities. In other words, attitudinal barriers perceive and judges’ people with impairments by their disabilities rather than by the summation of all the person really is, that is the



abilities and disabilities of the person. For this reason, a person with disability is often labelled even before given an opportunity to demonstrate his or her potential. Accordingly, attitudinal barriers lead to generalization, stereotyping, discrimination and many other negative behaviours.

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC, 2019) identified different forms of attitudinal barriers. These are:

1. **Dehumanizing:** These are attitudinal barriers founded on assumptions that see people with disabilities only on the terms of their disabilities. Dehumanizing leads to labelling and stigmatization.
2. **Generalizing:** These are attitudinal barriers that deny personal uniqueness by not recognizing the diversity of people who share the same kind of disability. Generalizing also enhances labelling and stereotyping.
3. **Disempowering:** These are attitudinal barriers that consider people with disabilities as inferior and incapable to do things that their non-disabled counterparts can do. Consequently, it leads to imposition of help on those with disabilities and discriminating against them in some activities which are considered exclusive for able-bodied people. It also affects their employability in different careers.
4. **Using offensive and oppressive languages:** This involves the wrong use of language and expressions with regards to terms used to refer to people with disabilities. For instance, equating disability with 'bad' and 'ill-will' with 'ill-fated' (Sutton (2020)). It also involves the verbal labelling of persons with disabilities which occurs when they are described by their disabilities. For instance, labelling a person with visual impairment as a visually impaired person.
5. **Segregation:** This attitudinal barrier is expressed through discrimination, isolation and seclusion. Segregation is an attitudinal barrier that insists that people with disabilities should be a community that is different from able-bodied people and it is based on the misconception that people with disabilities cannot compete with or live a normal life like people without disabilities. Consequently, their schools, jobs, and other necessary social associations should be limited to those with disabilities.
6. **Over-protecting:** This is an attitudinal barrier that is founded on a perception that people with disabilities are 'less capable' when compared with their non-disabled counterparts. Accordingly, people hold lower expectations of people with disabilities and make decisions for them, in order to protect them.
7. **Excluding:** This is an attitudinal barrier that is founded on an extreme view of disability which insists on segregation. An example is the view that disability is contagious and so people with disability should be avoided by non-disabled people in the society. Excluding leads to stigmatization as it upholds exclusivity in society.



These various forms of attitudinal barriers which CDC (2019) identified, all negate the rights and wellbeing of people with disabilities and affect the moral compass of society. Babik and Gardner (2016) summarized that attitudinal barriers disempower people with disabilities and lead to their social exclusion and isolation. Furthermore, attitudinal barriers, to a large extent, affect the perception of 'self' expressed by those with disabilities. Sometimes, people with disabilities perceive themselves as having the limitations placed on them by society through these attitudinal barriers. This places a limitation on their functioning and attempts to maximize and express their potentials and this further reinforces the misconceptions that enhance these attitudinal barriers.

Attitudinal barriers are pervasive in nature with a greater portion of people in a society believing and accepting various misconceptions about people with disabilities and guiding their relationship with such people by these misconceptions. Accordingly, attitudinal barriers are entrenched in the people's way of life. As Setume (2016) explained, attitudinal barriers are fundamentally embedded in human culture which are founded in societal culture and religious beliefs. This results in a high propensity for exclusivity within societies. It therefore indicates the far-reaching effects of attitudinal barriers against the integration of people with disability in their societies. For this reason, Setume (2016) stated that misconceptions about people with disabilities and the resultant attitudinal barriers are major hindrances to achieving an inclusive society. Consequently, to achieve an inclusive society, it is of utmost importance that misconceptions, which are at the root of these limiting attitudinal barriers, must be eradicated from the society.

Ways of Eradicating Misconceptions from Society

Eradicating misconceptions about people with disabilities must be achieved at three levels which are the personal level, organizational level, and government and institutional level. At the personal level, individuals are provided with true information to correct the erroneous information they have about people with disabilities. This can be achieved through awareness campaigns, awareness training, social contact programs and positive portrayal of persons with disabilities in the media (Fisher & Purcal, 2017).

Awareness campaigns involve providing information about disabilities in different formats to reach the individuals in a society through the use of various mass media. It involves educating the people about several issues relating to different disabilities of which the public may be ignorant or to which the public needs to show empathy or develop mindfulness. Such information is not targeted at any specific person but seeks to address community knowledge of disability. Currently, there are various awareness campaigns on different disabilities. An example is the awareness campaigns on autism-by-Autism Society which are directed to help the populace understand what autism is and how to relate with persons who suffer from autism in order to create an inclusive society for people living with autism (Autism Society, 2022).



Awareness training involves direct courses in tertiary schools or by non-governmental agencies to teach people about specific issues concerning disabilities, with the aim of educating these people, correcting erroneous information they may have about disabilities and thereby changing their attitudes towards persons with disabilities (CDC, 2019). These trainings are well structured and provide a means to ensure people who attend such training are properly enlightened about specific disabilities and can enlighten others. They give opportunity for interaction with the facilitators of such training and to ask pertinent questions regarding the disabilities being discussed. For this reason, awareness training is a very useful way of eradicating misconceptions since participants have the opportunity to seek correct information on their previous misconceptions about the disabilities being discussed and participants become trainers themselves as they interact with the larger society. Awareness training can take the form of self-advocacy, family advocacy, and advocacy by different associations of people with disabilities (Dekoninck, 2018).

Social contact programs involve creating direct and localized room for interaction of people with disabilities and those without disabilities. Murfitt (2016, p.3) stated that “studies have shown that knowledge of and familiarity with people with disability through consistent social contact, was most likely to lead to full respect and inclusion”. This is because one-on-one social interaction provides first-hand knowledge that challenges the misconceptions about people with disabilities and thereby improves the attitudes of people towards them (Cole, 2017). It can therefore be concluded that social interactions involving people with disabilities and their non-disabled counterparts, provide an avenue to gain better knowledge of people with disabilities, thereby aiding the eradication of misconceptions and hence eliminating negative attitudes that may have existed. This gives credence to the need to uphold social inclusiveness as an important tool for the integration of people with disabilities into an inclusive society as it will lead to the progressive elimination of attitudinal barriers and increasing the inclusivity of society.

Positive portrayal of people with disabilities in the media is a crucial step in eradicating misconceptions and their resultant attitudinal barriers. This is because the media plays a crucial role in information circulation in every society, globally. Often, people believe news found on various mass media, without confirming the genuineness of such news. Accordingly, the mass media can play a major role in either reinforcing or eradicating misconceptions about people with disabilities. It is for this reason that the International Labour Organization (2015, cited in Dekoninck, 2018) stated in its guidelines for media on reporting on disability, that there is a need for media to debunk common misconceptions about disability and people with disabilities. Also in Singapore, a five-year campaign to promote positive portrayal of persons with disabilities was launched in 2016 with various mass media employed to achieve the objectives of the campaign (Fisher & Purcal, 2017).



Eradicating misconceptions at the personal level generally involves education and awareness raising among people. These tools are powerful tools to change people's mind-set in the long run. Not only do they help non-disabled people to understand the rights and abilities of people with disabilities and the existence of prejudice which are based on misconceptions, they also help those with disabilities to understand their rights and abilities and how to co-create with relevant stakeholders for their betterment (Dekoninck, 2018). Scior (2011) expounded that these strategies at the personal level work on the theory of persuasion which indicates that persuasion comes through intensive exposure to information campaigns which challenge incorrect thinking, misconceptions and their resultant attitudes. Accordingly, to achieve reasonable change at the personal level, these strategies discussed must be intensively and consistently applied till the desired changes in the thinking and attitudes of the populace are achieved.

Eradicating misconceptions about people with disabilities at the organizational level can also be achieved using awareness campaigns, awareness training and social contact programs, as already discussed. In addition to these, strategies at the organizational level also include establishment of complaint mechanisms, targeted information programs and policies which are targeted at ensuring the rights of people with disabilities, and changing the attitudes of employers to ensure people with disabilities claim their rights to equal access and participation (Fisher & Purcal, 2017). These strategies, when implemented, provide opportunities for social contact with and positive portrayal of people with disabilities for individuals in these organizations. Consequently, strategies at the organizational level aids the strategies at the personal level.

The strategies at the organizational level are similar to those at the personal level. However, the personal level focuses on the individuals while the organizational level focuses on life domains and types of organizations. For instance, inclusive education is an organizational level strategy to ensure segregation and discrimination are eliminated from the schooling system, thereby giving equal rights and access to both people with disabilities and their non-disabled counterparts. Inclusive education, when implemented, further strengthens the gains of personal level strategies for eradicating misconceptions among students.

Strategies at the personal and organizational levels are useful, but their benefits are limited to a small percentage of the society. Systematic and large-scale changes require all-encompassing strategies at the government and institutional level. At the government and institutional level, mandatory behavioural changes can be achieved through the enactment, implementation and monitoring of laws and policies that ensure the eradication of misconceptions through upholding the social and economic integration of people with disabilities (Dekoninck, 2018). These laws and policies should take into account enforcing the needs and rights of people with disabilities, as well as including them in decision-making that affects their rights and wellbeing. Such laws and policies will ensure that at the



organizational and personal levels, strategies are enforced that work towards the eradication of misconceptions about people with disabilities.

Strategies at the personal, organization, and government and institutional levels are all equally important and reinforce each other. Consequently, for a sustainable impact to be realized in the eradication of misconceptions about people with disabilities and the resultant attitudinal barriers, the three levels are needed to complement each other to implement strategies that influence the way people think about disabilities and people with disabilities, with the aim of eliminating misconceptions. This will involve people with disabilities and non-disabled people as well as various stakeholders, in co-creating a society which is inclusive. A failure at any of the levels will limit the gains achieved at the other levels.

Implications for People with Disabilities

There are two major implications for eradicating or upholding misconceptions about people with disabilities. Firstly, attempts at eradicating these misconceptions from society will lead, increasingly, to a more inclusive society for people with disabilities. This is because the eradication of these misconceptions will result in an increase in the propensity for social inclusion as well as positively affecting the moral compass of the society. Such a society will offer an avenue for the maximization of the potential of people with disabilities. However, where these misconceptions are upheld, they will continue to reinforce a society that not only limits, but also actively hinders the attempts by people with disabilities to maximize their potential for attaining a more productive life. Consequently, upholding these misconceptions will enhance the exclusivity of society with regards to people with disabilities.

Secondly, eradication of these misconceptions will increase the growth opportunities available to people with disabilities, by ensuring they have equal access to and participation in the various domains of life, including employment and education. This will lead to an increase in the opportunities for people with disabilities to achieve economic freedom, thereby increasing their economic independence. In addition, it will maximize the gains of manpower as the workforce in the society will expand to include people with disabilities who have competence for diverse jobs in the society on the other hand, where these misconceptions are upheld, the resultant attitudinal barriers will remain a hindrance to the full participation of people with disabilities in the various domains of life.

Conclusion

Misconceptions about people with disabilities are prevalent in every human society. These misconceptions largely are founded on myths and beliefs which influence the cultural and religious beliefs and hence influence the way of life of people, giving root to their attitudes. For this reason, misconceptions have been identified as a critical factor in the attitudes of people towards people with



disabilities. This has led to various attitudinal barriers which include dehumanizing, segregation and disempowering. Ultimately, these misconceptions, through their impact on attitudinal barriers, are a major negation of attempts to create an inclusive society where the rights and needs of people with disabilities are respected and met. For this reason, it is important that steps be taken to eradicate misconceptions about people with disabilities. Strategies to achieve such eradication can be achieved at the personal, organizational, and government and institutional levels. Strategies should involve upholding social inclusiveness, education and awareness raising about disabilities, and people with disabilities with the aim of providing information that corrects these misconceptions. Critical to this process is the involvement of the government and institutional level, to enact, implement and monitor laws and policies which ensure and support the strategies at the personal and organizational levels. Although complete eradication of these misconceptions is a tough call, yet with intensive exposure of correct information about disabilities and people with disabilities, systematic gains can be achieved in removing attitudinal barriers and making society more inclusive, progressively.

Suggestions

Based on the foregone discussions, the following suggestions are made for the Nigerian society:

1. The mass media should be actively engaged by various associations of people living with disabilities to portray positive image of people with disabilities
2. The mass media should also be actively engaged in creating awareness and providing information to correct prevalent misconceptions about people with disabilities.
3. Government should enact laws and formulate policies that insist on companies employing people with disabilities who are qualified, despite their disabilities.
4. Companies should develop policies that uphold the rights of people with disabilities granting them equal access and participation.

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