ABLEISM AT WORK

The UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities promotes ability equality, but this is not reflected in national laws. Australia, Canada, Ireland, the United Kingdom and the United States all have one thing in common: regulatory frameworks that treat workers with psychosocial disabilities less favourably than workers with either physical or sensory disabilities. Whether it be denying anti-discrimination protection to people with episodic disabilities, addictions, or other psychological impairments, failing to make reasonable accommodations/adjustments for workers with psychosocial disabilities, or denying them workers compensation or occupational health and safety protections, regulatory interventions embed inequalities. Ableism, sanism and prejudice are expressly stated in laws, reflected in judgments and perpetuated by workplace practices.

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The Disability Law and Policy series examines these topics in interdisciplinary and comparative terms. The books in the series reflect the diversity of definitions, causes, and consequences of discrimination against persons with disabilities while illuminating fundamental themes that unite countries in their pursuit of human rights laws and policies to improve the social and economic status of persons with disabilities. The series contains historical, contemporary, and comparative scholarship crucial to identifying individual, organizational, cultural, attitudinal, and legal themes necessary for the advancement of disability law and policy.

The book topics covered in the series also are reflective of the new moral and political commitment by countries throughout the world toward equal opportunity for persons with disabilities in such areas as employment, housing, transportation, rehabilitation, and individual human rights. The series will thus play a significant role in informing policy makers, researchers, and citizens of issues central to disability rights and disability antidiscrimination policies. The series grounds the future of disability law and policy as a vehicle for ensuring that those living with disabilities participate as equal citizens of the world.

Books in the Series

Larry M. Logue and Peter Blanck, *Race, Ethnicity, and Disability: Veterans and Benefits in Post–Civil War America*, 2010
Alicia Ouellette, *Bioethics and Disability: Toward a Disability-Conscious Bioethics*, 2013
Andrew Power, Janet E. Lord and Allison S. DeFranco, *Active Citizenship and Disability: Implementing the Personalisation of Support*, 2013
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Robin Paul Malloy, *Land Use Law and Disability: Planning and Zoning for Accessible Communities*, 2014

Arie Rimmerman, *Family Policy and Disability*, 2015

Peter Blanck, *eQuality: The Struggle for Web Accessibility by Persons with Cognitive Disabilities*, 2016

Anna Arstein-Kerslake, *Restoring Voice to People with Cognitive Disabilities: Realizing the Right to Equal Recognition Before the Law*, 2017

Arie Rimmerman, *Disability and Community Living Policies*, 2017

Paul Harpur, *Discrimination, Copyright and Equality: Opening the e-Book for the Print-Disabled*, 2017

Aisling de Paor, *Genetics, Disability and the Law: Towards an EU Legal Framework*, 2017


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Karrie A. Shogren, Michael L. Wehmeyer, Jonathan Martinis and Peter Blanck, *Supported Decision-Making: Theory, Research, and Practice to Enhance Self-Determination and Quality of Life*, 2018

Gauthier de Beco, Janet E. Lord and Shivaun Quinlivan, *The Right to Inclusive Education in International Human Rights Law*, 2019


Paul Harpur, *Ableism at Work: Disablement and Hierarchies of Impairment*, 2020
Ableism at Work

DISABLEMENT AND HIERARCHIES OF IMPAIRMENT

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Contents

Foreword by Peter Blanck

Acknowledgements

1 Introduction

1 Preliminary

A Core Thesis

B Comparative Research Method

C A Note on Terminology: Mental Impairments and Psychosocial Disabilities

D Why Psychosocial Disability?

II Inequalities, Oppression and Ableism at Work

A Are Persons with Disabilities Experiencing Inequalities in Exercising Their Right to Work?

III Theorising Hierarchies of Impairment

A Understanding Hierarchies of Impairment and Prejudice at Work

B How Sites of Oppression Are Constructed between Impairment Categories

C Prejudice against Psychosocial Disabilities

Conclusion

2 International Disability Norms at Work: International Law on Ableism at Work and the Hierarchy of Impairments

Introduction

I How Has International Labour Law Historically Problematised the Disabled Worker?
Contents

A How the Collective Focus of the ILO Reduces Protection for Workers with Disabilities 21
B The ILO and the Problematising Disability through the Medical Model 24
C Workers with Disabilities and ILO Conventions and Jurisprudence: Discounting Ability Diversity at Work 26
D The Social Model and Developments in Ability Equality at Work 27
E ILO Embracing New Disability Human Rights Paradigm 30

II The UN and the New Disability Human Rights Paradigm 31
A The Emergence of the Disability Human Rights Paradigm and the CRPD 31
B The Right to Work and the CRPD 34
C No Hierarchies of Impairments: How the CRPD Promotes Ability Equality at Work 35

Conclusion 37

3 The CRPD Committee, Ableism and Hierarchies of Impairment at Work 38
Introduction 38
I The CRPD Committee and Its Role 40
II The CRPD Committee and Understanding the Problem of the Hierarchies of Impairments at Work 42
A The Right to Work and the Interdependency of Rights 42
B Understanding the Problem: The CRPD Committee and the Denial of the Right to Work 44

III Regulatory Failures Which Promote Ableism at Work and Hierarchies of Impairment 47
A The Ability Apartheid Is No Accident: Regulatory Interventions That Aim to Exclude Workers with Disabilities 47
B Hierarchies of Impairments in Laws Which Fail to Regulate Key Barriers to Ability Equality at Work 49

IV Importance of Comparable and Disaggregated Data in Identifying and Addressing the Hierarchy of Impairments at Work 50
A The CRPD on the Disaggregation of Data and Hierarchy of Impairments 51
B Disaggregation of Data and Hierarchy of Impairments 51

Conclusion 53
Contents

4 Hierarchies of Impairment at Work in the Regulation and Response to Sheltered Work 54
   Introduction 54
   I Introducing Sheltered Workshops 56
      A What Are Sheltered Workshops? 57
      B Funding Sheltered Work 58
   II The CRPD Committee and the Agenda against Sheltered Work 60
      A How Does the CRPD Distinguish between Acceptable and Unacceptable Employment Options? 60
      B What Has the CRPD Committee Said on Sheltered Workshops? 61
      C Transitioning from Sheltered Work to Open Work Can Take Considerable Effort and Retraining 62
      D Why the CRPD Committee Is Opposed to Sheltered Work 62
   III Disability Scholarship That Supports the Position Taken by the CRPD Committee 64
      A Separate Is Bad 64
      B Exploitative Not to Pay Equal for Workers with and without Disabilities 65
      C Inability to Transition out of Sheltered Work 66
   IV Ableism in the Open Labour Market and Transitioning from Sheltered Work to What? 67
      A Transitioning to What? From Sheltered Permanent Employment to Low-Skilled Casual Employment 67
      B Beyond Precarious Employment to Precarious Work: Unsheltered and Unregulated Work 69
      C Non-Ideal Employment to No Employment: Experiences When Sheltered Workshops Are Closed 71
   V We Know What Is Good for You: Everything about You without You 73
      A My Voice My Choice: Hear Me 73
      B You Have My Voice, Now Help Me Use It: Disability Person Organisations 78
   Conclusion 78
5 The Arbitrary Exclusion of Episodic and Psychosocial Disabilities from Legal Protection: The Duration Test Promoting Ableism at Work

Introduction 81

I Psychosocial Disabilities as Episodic Disabilities 82
   A What Are Episodic Disabilities? 82
   B Episodic Disabilities Are Misunderstood 83
   C Difference between Episodic and Stable Disabilities at Work 84

II International Disability Norms: Protecting by Categories and Not by Need 86
   A Minority Group and Universalist Approach to Disability 86
   B The CRPD Adopts the Minority Group Approach 88
   C The Duration Test in the CRPD 90

III Duration Tests and Disability Discrimination and Diversity Laws 91
   A Proving the Presence of a Psychosocial Disability 94
   B Faking or Real: Challenges in Proving Episodic Disability 95

Conclusion 100

6 Ability Apartheid at Work: The Policy of Stigmatising and Excluding ‘Unacceptable’ Psychosocial Disabilities from Anti-discrimination Laws

Introduction 102

I Examples of Psychological Conditions That Are Deemed Outside Protection 105
   A Psychological Conditions Where Propensity for Conduct Deemed Unacceptable in Society 105
   B Substance Abuse Addictions 108

II Is It Reasonable to Expect Workers with Psychosocial Disabilities to Rehabilitate to Gain Protection? 113
   A Attempts to Rehabilitate Can Enliven Anti-discrimination Protections 113
   B Mitigating an Impairment Is Normally Not Necessary 114
   C Should the Decision to Refuse Treatment Be Relevant in Considering What Are Reasonable Accommodations? 115
Contents

III The Mutability of the Condition and the Immutability
of the Legal and Social Stigma: Can Workers
Remove the Outsider Identity Once Marked? 117
A Counter-Productive to Deny Protection 117
B Criminal Spent Conviction Laws Have Time Limit Where
‘Unaccepted’ Psychosocial Impairments Do Not 119
Conclusion 121

7 Reasonable Accommodations in a Psychosocial
Diverse Workplace: Hierarchies of Impairment at Work 122
Introduction 122
I How Can Reasonable Accommodations Enable Persons with
Psychosocial Disabilities to Exercise Their Right to Work? 124
A General Wellness Programs vs. Reasonable
Accommodations 124
B The Subjective Nature of Reasonable Accommodations 124
II Hierarchies of Impairment and Reasonable Accommodations
under International Law 127
A Reasonable Accommodations and the ILO 127
B Reasonable Accommodations and the CRPD 128
 1 The First Prong: Universal Design 129
 2 The Second Prong: Right to Reasonable
   Accommodation 130
C CRPD Committee on the Right to Access and Reasonable
Accommodations 131
 1 The CRPD Committee Promoting the Two-Prong
   Approach 131
 2 The Right to Access and Hierarchies of Impairment 131
 3 The CRPD Committee and the Right of Reasonable
   Accommodation 134
III Law and Practices of Unreasonable Refusals to Accommodate
Psychosocial Diversity at Work 136
A The Test for Reasonable Accommodations 136
B Employers Designing Work Structures and the Business
Case for Exclusion: The Requirement for Standard
Range of Behavioural Abilities 140
IV Challenges for Workers with Psychosocial Disabilities
in Making Reasonable Accommodation Requests 142
A ‘Coming Out’ with Mental Disability as an Invisible
Impairment 142
Contents

B Dilemma for Reasonable Accommodation: Emphasising Sameness or Difference 143
C What Happens If the Accommodation Request Is Rejected? 145
D Employer Demanding Disclosure of Disability 146
E Resistance to Psychosocial Diversity at Work and to Making Accommodations for Workers with Mental Impairments 147
F Uncertainty on How to Accommodate Psychosocial Impairments 147
G Functional Accommodations vs. Changing Workplace Norms 148
H Role of Stigma 149
I Co-Worker Sanism 150
Conclusion 152

8 Using Occupational Safety and Health Laws to Promote Psychological Health at Work 153

Introduction 153
I International Law Norms on Occupational Safety and Health and Disability at Work 155
II Helping Psychosocial Diversity: Occupational Safety and Health Duties to Promote the Psychological Health of Workers 157
A Employers’ Duty to Manage Their Workers’ Psychological Health 158
B Failing to Discharge the Duty to Protect Workers’ Psychological Health: When Asking for Help Results in Unfavourable Treatment 162
C Employers Failure to Protect Workers Psychological Health Can Contribute to Bullying and Violence at Work 163
III How Occupational Health and Safety Laws Can Restrict Psychosocial Diversity at Work 164
A Employers’ Occupational Safety and Health Duty to Respond to Non-Ideal Social Interactions at Work 165
B Bullying and Mobbing Laws Intensify Employer Attention on Preventing Non-Ideal Social Interactions at Work 168
C Limitations on Excluding Workers due to Manifestations of Their Disability: The Limited Role of Anti-discrimination Law 172
Conclusion 177
Contents

9 Sanism and Ableism in the Law’s Response to Injured Workers 180
Introduction 180
I Comparing and Analysing Systems for Compensating Workers Injured at Work 182
II Workers’ Compensation Laws Failing Workers Mentally Injured at Work and Enshrining a Hierarchy of Impairments 184
A Higher Burden of Proof: Hierarchy of Impairments in Who Is Entitled to Workers’ Compensation Payments 184
B Scrutinising the Event Which Led to the Mental Injury: Traumatic or Unusual 187
C Mental Injuries That Are Caused by the Exercising of Managerial Prerogative Are Not Normally Recognised 189
D A Bizarre and Unfounded Assumption: Mental Injuries without an Associated Physical or Sensory Injury Are Not Real 192
E Where Workers Mentally Injured at Work Are Deemed Less Unworthy 193
F Hierarchy of Impairments in Compensating Workers for Mental Injuries 194
III Negligence at Work: Judicial Distinctions between Physical and Mental Impairments 197
A The Gap between the Cause of Mental Injuries and the Legal Right to Seek Redress 198
B Judicial Limitations on Damages for Mental Injuries 199
C Litigants with Mental Impairments as Responsible for Their Own Well-Being 201
Conclusion 204

10 Advancing Psychosocial Diversity Using Contract and Unfair Dismissal Laws 207
Introduction 207
I Fairness and Termination of Employment Contracts Under International Labour and Human Rights Laws 209
II Statutory Unfair Dismissal Protections 211
III Impairment Irrelevant: No Need to Identify or Prove the Presence of Disability 213
A Proving the Presence of Disability Can Be Challenging 213
B The Disclosure Conundrum and Unfair Dismissal Laws 213
Contents

IV The Notion of 'Fairness' Incorporates Ability Diversity 216
A Procedural Fairness in the *Fair Work Act 2009* (Cth) s 387(b)–(g) 216
B Whether There Was a Valid Reason for the Dismissal Related to the Person’s Capacity or Conduct (Including Its Effect on the Safety and Welfare of Other Employees) – *Fair Work Act 2009* (Cth) s 387(a) 221
C Any Other Matters That the FWC Considers Relevant – *Fair Work Act 2009* (Cth) s 387(h) 222
Conclusion 225

Index 227
Foreword

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (‘CRPD’) has swept in a new disability human rights paradigm.¹ As exemplified in the CRPD Committee’s General Comment on equality and non-discrimination,² there is a concordant global and normative shift towards ‘ability equality’.

Dr Paul Harpur’s important treatment in this book nonetheless underscores that the CRPD’s normative shift is leaving many workers with psychosocial disabilities behind. Although workplace laws and practices generally are becoming more supportive and accommodating of persons with mobility, physical, and sensory disabilities, particularly driven by new technologies, regulatory frameworks historically and today disproportionately exclude those who disclose psychosocial disabilities.

Discrimination against people with psychosocial disabilities is no accident.³ Harpur shows how such exclusion has been long enshrined in laws and policies, supported in judicial rulings and perpetuated by workplace practices across jurisdictions.

But Harpur breaks new ground in his analysis of how inequalities are experienced in work relationships depending upon the type of impairment. The presence of such socially constructed hierarchies of impairments, with psychosocial disabilities occupying the bottom rung, operate within systems

² Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, General Comment No. 6 (2018) on equality and non-discrimination, 19th sess, UN Doc CRPD/C/GC/6 (9 March 2018), 70.
affecting employment, such as for workers compensation, veterans seeking compensation for disablement, access to digital and online services, and in supports in decision-making.

This book advances an important means for understanding and addressing disablement on the basis of psychosocial impairment. It does this by analysing how the presence of ‘hierarchies of impairments’ in workplace laws, policies, and practices distort the impact of ability diversity, often creating and sustaining discrimination where indeed no such inequalities need exist.

Harpur considers the emerging international law norms established by the CRPD to critique the role that psychosocial ableism has on the law of work globally. He understands that even though some workplace regulatory interventions actively seek to promote ability equality at work, they also may perversely perpetuate prejudice and stigma experienced by workers with psychosocial disabilities.

We see the challenges confronting workers with psychosocial disabilities are neither limited to one jurisdiction nor even time period. Harpur’s comprehensive analysis of international law norms using comparative analysis of the operation of hierarchies of impairments in Australia, Canada, Ireland, the United Kingdom and United States, offers an illuminating and concerning message. The message is that prejudice, and devaluing of workers, is strongly influenced by the type of impairments they have, and particularly so for persons with psychosocial disabilities.

Harpur’s treatment is separated into three parts. The early chapters analyse how international law posits and develops norms to promote the human rights paradigm and oppose the presence of hierarchies of impairments at work. These chapters consider questions pertaining at the intersection of the global labour movement, such as by the International Labour Organization, with legal jurisprudence and structures, for example as set forth in the CRPD and by its Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

Harpur then turns towards reconciling the important debate on how labour markets generally may support persons with disabilities to work. This discussion considers timely opportunities and questions, such as involving

disability self-employment on the one hand, and segregated sheltered work on the other.

The middle chapters take the international law norms that have been prior unpacked and apply them to domestic anti-discrimination regimes in Australia, Canada, Ireland, the United Kingdom and United States. Across these venues, Harpur analyses the particular situation of workers with psychosocial disabilities. The core theme here is how these workers’ capacity to access anti-discrimination law protections is substantially limited, often only by ‘value judgments’ made as to the worthiness of certain impairment types.

Yet, even in those cases where workers with psychosocial disabilities may access anti-discrimination protections, Harpur brings us back to the irrational and unwavering prejudice that too often severs the capacity of workers with psychosocial disabilities to benefit from reasonable accommodations and adjustment laws designed towards integration and equality.

The final chapters provide an in-depth review of the operation of these ability and anti-psychosocial hierarchies as operating in state laws that focus on regulating work and the employment relationship. We understand from Harpur’s concerning analysis how the unfair mix of occupational safety and health laws, and bullying and anti-discrimination laws, produce and perpetuate discriminatory outcomes.

I have been fortunate indeed in prior work to collaborate with Harpur, examining the ways in which workers’ compensation and negligence laws serve to devalue the importance of psychosocial disabilities. But this book goes well beyond that initial foray. Here, Harpur writes a definitive treatment of how the deep-seated stigma surrounding psychosocial disabilities is engrained in our workplace structures and laws. We understand the pervasive problem of ableism as particularly facing workers with psychosocial disabilities is not confined to one jurisdiction, a single country, or a unidimensional aspect of workplace law and policy.

Thus, the ‘hierarchy of impairment’ harshly penalises workers with psychosocial disabilities, who experience greater inequalities than those with other more obvious disabilities. That this unequal treatment is engrained in workplace norms helps us understand the depth of injustice caused by this bigotry.

Harpur’s treatment recognises the importance of a transdisciplinary approach to the understanding of discrimination. The consideration of disability policies and practices across the disciplines – law, economics, psychology – and international and national comparisons, makes this book relevant.

8 Harpur, Connolly and Blanck, ‘Socially Constructed Hierarchies of Impairments at Work’, 50.
9 Peter Blanck, Disability Law and Policy (2020) Foundation Press.
Foreword

to lawyers, policymakers, disability rights practitioners, human resource professionals, and those in the social sciences. By illuminating the presence and operation of impairment hierarchies ‘at work’, Harpur provides a needed roadmap of how to identify and redress these inequalities, at bottom caused by prejudice, stigma, and erroneous assumptions.

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Acknowledgements

CONCEPT

The seed for this monograph started with a coffee with Ursula Connolly and myself in 2016 while I was an International Visiting Fellow, Centre for Disability Law and Policy, Institute for Lifecourse & Society, National University of Ireland, Galway. Ursula and I compared notes on how workers with mental injuries were treated between our respective home jurisdictions of Australia and Ireland. We started writing these thoughts down and I discussed them further with the towering intellect of Professor Peter Blanck while I was visiting with him a few weeks later at the Burton Blatt Institute, Syracuse University, New York. When the seed of an idea hit the fertile ground of Professor Blanck an output soon followed: Paul Harpur, Ursula Connolly and Peter Blanck, ‘Socially Constructed Hierarchies of Impairments at Work: Example of the Australian and Irish Workers’ Access to Compensation for Injuries’ (2017) 27 Journal of Occupational Rehabilitation 4, 507.

This paper stimulated my academic interest and I have expanded on it theoretically and legally to produce this monograph. I am academically and personally grateful to Peter and Ursula.

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