

The Limitations of Stature

Exposing the Ignorance, Stigmatization, Objectification, and Limitations Impacting People with Dwarfism

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People with dwarfism face myriad challenges in their daily lives. From a physical standpoint, accessibility to the structures relied on for functional existence is problematic. From an emotional perspective, people with dwarfism must grapple with societal ignorance, stigmatization, marginalization, objectification, and even infantilization. Society's definitions and terms for dwarfism, along with its history of treatment toward people of short stature, bear their own controversy. Combined, these factors adversely impact: access to physical spaces; inclusion and acceptance; self-image; relationships; and opportunities for education and employment. Privacy, a fundamental human right, is also a major concern for persons of short stature. It is time to dispel the myths that fuel ill-informed, unnecessary obstructions.

There is a wealth of ignorance surrounding dwarfism, scientifically referred to as a form of skeletal dysplasia. According to John Hopkins Medicine, skeletal dysplasia is the medical term for a group of about 400 conditions that affect bone development, neurological function, and cartilage growth, including its most common form, achondroplasia.¹ Each of these numerous types features different characteristics and comorbidities. According to Janet M. Legare, MD, "Achondroplasia accounts for more than

¹ "Skeletal Dysplasia." www.hopkinsmedicine.org, accessed 26 Nov. 2022. <http://www.hopkinsmedicine.org/health/conditions-and-diseases/skeletal-dysplasia>.

90% of disproportionate short stature or dwarfism.”² Achondroplasia is a spontaneous genetic mutation to the FGFR3 (fibroblast growth receptor) which often occurs in the developing embryo among average-statured parents.³ Despite the fact that the achondroplasia phenotype has been around for thousands of years and is considered the most recognizable form of dwarfism, ignorance and stigmatization regarding dwarfism still run rampant. Consequently, short-statured individuals are often pressed to explain their disability to strangers or simply to ignore unwanted stares.

Systemic ignorance and stigmatization adversely impact one’s subjective well-being. Quality of life (QOL) studies suggest that children with achondroplasia experience an equal quality of life to their average-height peers. Conversely, adults with achondroplasia reported being less satisfied with their quality of life as compared with their average-height peers. Gollust states: “We interpret the low QOL scores to reflect the social challenges that individuals with achondroplasia regularly experience in the average-sized world.”⁴ This psychological impact often defines the individual’s perception of themselves in relation to the challenges that they face; one major obstacle that short-statured individuals face is accessibility to physical structures.

One’s stature can be an asset or a barrier. For people with dwarfism, stature presents countless obstacles. Although efforts have been made to increase accessibility for persons with disabilities, dwarfism presents differently than more common disabilities. Not everyone with dwarfism requires a wheelchair or a mobility device, but most are unable to reach counters, shelves, water fountains, ATMs, and many other essential access points without assistance. The world is fundamentally designed to meet the needs of average-height, able-bodied individuals, but this need not be the case. According to Pritchard, “[a]ccessible spaces can aid in removing

² Richard M. Pauli and Janet M. Legare, “Achondroplasia,” nih.gov (University of Washington, Seattle, May 10, 2018). <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK1152/>.

³ Edward J. McDonald and Orlando De Jesus, “Achondroplasia,” PubMed (Treasure Island, FL: StatPearls Publishing, 2020). <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK559263/>.

⁴ Sarah E. Gollust et al., “Living with Achondroplasia in an Average-Sized World: An Assessment of Quality of Life,” *American Journal of Medical Genetics* 120A, no. 4 (July 22, 2003): 447. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ajmg.a.20127>.

some of the disabling barriers that people with dwarfism encounter within the built environment.”⁵ If disability is deemed a social construct, the “built environment” is disabling for people of short stature: “there are disabling barriers that limit the ability to engage in physical activity, and a deep assessment of environmental limitations should also be conducted toward improving the access and practice of adapted physical activity.”⁶ While such hurdles are apparent, there is contention between average-height individuals and people with dwarfism, who are often viewed as magical or mythical creatures rather than human beings. Because of its rarity (there is “an estimated 65,000 people with dwarfism in the United States, and 651,700 in the world”⁷), there is a deficit of social interaction and knowledge. Consequently, it is not common for average-height persons or people with dwarfism to see other little persons, although organizations such as Little People of America offer opportunities for education, social gatherings, and support. Even still, perceptions of people with dwarfism are formed largely based on the media and popular culture,⁸ which paves the way for marginalization and objectification.

Although public responses to people with dwarfism are varied, most responses involve some level of derogatory commentary or intrusion; whispers, stares, laughs, pointed figures, mimicry (walking on knees), and parents asking their young children to “look away” so as not to offend are common. According to a study conducted by Shakespeare, Thompson, and Wright: “96% [of people with dwarfism] have experienced staring or pointing; 77% have been on the receiving-end of verbal abuse; 75% feel they often attract unwanted attention; 63% of respondents have often felt unsafe when out; 33% have been physically touched by people in public; and 12% have experienced physical violence.”⁹ This study

⁵ Erin Pritchard, “Incongruous Encounters: The Problem of Accessing Accessible Spaces for People with Dwarfism,” *Disability & Society*, April 27, 2020, 542. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09687599.2020.1755236>.

⁶ Miguel Jacinto et al., “Physical Activity, Exercise, and Sports in Individuals with Skeletal Dysplasia: What Is Known about Their Benefits?,” *Sustainability* 14, no. 8 (January 1, 2022): 4487. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su14084487>.

⁷ LPAonline.org

⁸ Erin Pritchard, *Dwarfism, Spatiality and Disabling Experiences* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2021).

⁹ Tom Shakespeare, Sue Thompson, and Michael Wright, “No Laughing Matter: Medical and Social Experiences of Restricted Growth,”

highlights the ways in which people of short stature are blatantly harassed and thereby robbed of their dignity.

Little people (LP) are a minority group, yet they are not duly recognized as such because of their modest population numbers. As noted in *The Coming Good Society*, minority groups are often devalued and therefore at risk for human rights violations, particularly regarding privacy: “The violation of privacy rights is also a major worry for members of sexual or religious minority groups or other groups that may face harassment, intimidation, and discrimination. For such groups, the violation of privacy rights goes hand in hand with limitations on their freedom of expression and association.” The right to privacy is critical for every individual, regardless of their stature, appearance, or ability, it is: “a fundamental human right critical to the exercise of other rights and the ensuring of dignity.”¹⁰ Contemporary threats to privacy are not limited to people of short stature: “The loss of privacy, therefore, not only is a loss to each of us as individuals, but also impairs creativity in art, science, and living. The loss of privacy can hurt each of us and all of us.”¹¹ One example of a flagrant personal privacy violation relates to unwanted picture taking, as noted by Leslie Ellis. This fairly recent trend impacts anyone, regardless of stature, whose picture is taken without their consent. Thus, the issue transcends stature and becomes a human rights issue.

Society’s ambivalence toward people with dwarfism is evidenced in the desire to cure dwarfism, fix it, or completely eradicate its occurrence, which is now possible through surgery or eugenics. Limb-lengthening surgery was discovered in the 1950s and has been refined since that time. Today, people of short stature can undergo the procedure of extended limb lengthening (ELL). This procedure is expensive, drawn out, and quite painful. According to Schlitz, “ELL is a procedure undergone when a child reaches growth-spurt age, around eight or nine years. For a period of about two years, the bones in the child’s legs and arms are

Scandinavian Journal of Disability Research 12, no. 1 (March 2010): 26. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15017410902909118>.

¹⁰ William F. Schulz and Sushma Raman, *The Coming Good Society* (Harvard University Press, 2020), 94.

¹¹ Jon L. Mills, *Privacy: The Lost Right* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2008), 27.

repeatedly broken, stretched apart, braced, and allowed to heal.”¹² It is a costly procedure, typically not covered by insurance: “the total cost of a bilateral femur lengthening...is \$100,000.”¹³ This can be a divisive issue for people with dwarfism along with their families and friends. It certainly raises ethical questions. A child should never feel that they are broken and in need of repair, yet advocates claim that ELL surgery removes the barriers that impede both access and happiness. Doesn’t every parent want their child to be happy? Within the LP community, there may be animosity toward people who have opted to undergo this procedure.

Bioethics are also an emerging consideration. In some hospitals, pregnant women who receive in-utero diagnostic confirmation of dwarfism (or other genetic anomalies) are given the option to abort their unborn child regardless of the term of pregnancy. In addition, there is talk of eliminating the possibility of this genetic mutation altogether. BioMarin Pharmaceuticals has been working on eliminating the gene for achondroplasia for several years,¹⁴ and recently the FDA approved this drug. According to an article in *The New York Times*, people with dwarfism comprise a “community that sees “dwarf pride” as a hard-won tenet—where being a little person is a unique trait to be celebrated, not a problem in need of a cure.”¹⁵ It is difficult to imagine how individuals with dwarfism, and their families, feel about the possibility of eliminating dwarfism. It is equally and perhaps more difficult to understand the biases and judgements of the average height people they interact with every day.

Simon Mawer, author of the book *Mendel’s Dwarf*, warns about the dangers of appearance-based judgements and society’s tendency toward ableism: “You can tell nothing from a man’s

¹² Elizabeth R. Schiltz, “Navigating Ambivalence,” *Narrative Inquiry in Bioethics* 3, no. 3 (2013): 243. <https://doi.org/10.1353/nib.2013.0078>.

¹³ “Surgical Costs and Accommodations,” pennmedicine.org (Penn Medicine, 2022). <https://www.pennmedicine.org/for-patients-and-visitors/find-a-program-or-service/penn-orthoplastic-limb-salvage-center/limb-lengthening/get-taller-with-penn-medicine/costs-and-accommodations>.

¹⁴ Damian Garge, “FDA Approves First Drug for Genetic Cause of Dwarfism,” STAT, November 19, 2021. <https://www.statnews.com/2021/11/19/fda-approves-first-drug-for-genetic-cause-of-dwarfism/>.

¹⁵ Serena Solomon, “‘Dwarf Pride’ Was Hard Won. Will a Growth Drug Undermine It?,” *The New York Times*, September 5, 2020, sec. World. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/09/05/world/dwarfism-vosoritide.html>.

appearance, nothing except the depths of your own prejudice.”¹⁶ Mawer’s poignant observation applies not only to people with dwarfism but rather to any individual who appears different by society’s unforgiving standards.

Stigmatization is hardly a new concept, as it dates at least to ancient Greece: “The term stigma originates from ancient Greek language and in particular from the verb «στίζω», which means ‘to carve, to mark as a sign of shame, punishment, or disgrace.’”¹⁷ Over time, stigmatization has become firmly rooted in many cultures across the globe. According to 20th-century Canadian sociologist Erving Goffman, the term “stigma” describes the “situation of the individual who is disqualified from full social acceptance.”¹⁸ Anthropologist Roy Richard Grinker further suggests that Goffman’s concept of stigma “unfolds in the interactions of everyday life as the result of public intolerance, ignorance and fear.”¹⁹ Stigmatization is not limited to people of short stature; it reflects society’s desire to label, categorize, and overlook the traits that make all persons unique.

Stigmatization, objectification, and ridicule are wearying obstacles that individuals with dwarfism face. According to Leonard Sawich (a person of short stature), aide to the Governor of Michigan and former President of the Dwarf Athletic Association of America, “[m]ost of us in the United States have been teased or harassed or otherwise had our personal space invaded ‘just because’ we are members of the dwarf community.”²⁰ Average-height people discriminate against little people through their words or actions. Amidst the dawn of ever-advancing cellphone technology, the landscape of privacy has changed dramatically, giving rise to new avenues to deride others.

In addition to stares, pointed fingers, and/or rude comments, one recent and unfortunate trend that people with dwarfism have

¹⁶ Simon Mawer, *Mendel’s Dwarf* (Other Press, LLC, 2012), 44.

¹⁷ M. Economou, A. Bechraki, and M. Charitsi, “The Stigma of Mental Illness: A Historical Overview and Conceptual Approaches,” *Psychiatriki* 31, no. 1 (April 1, 2020). <https://doi.org/10.22365/jpsych.2020.311.36>.

¹⁸ Erving Goffman, *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* (London: Penguin Books, 1963), 154.

¹⁹ Roy Richard Grinker, *Nobody’s Normal: How Culture Created the Stigma of Mental Illness* (New York, NY: W. W. Norton, 2022), 7.

²⁰ Ebert, Roger. 2005. “Dwarfs, Little People and the M-Word | Roger Ebert | Roger Ebert.” www.rogerebert.com. May 1, 2005. <https://www.rogerebert.com/roger-ebert/dwarfs-little-people-and-the-m-word>.

been subject to is unauthorized picture-taking. Lesley Ellis' article "Through a Filtered Lens: Unauthorized Picture Taking of People with Dwarfism in Public Spaces" features interviews with people with dwarfism; in the essay, Ellis notes that "participants asserted that unauthorized picture-taking of them in public spaces was offensive, dehumanizing and violating."²¹ This overt objectification and dehumanization is invasive and cruel. According to Sarah Rupp-McKee, a little person and dwarfism awareness advocate, "[i]n 2020, it is a common occurrence for my photo to be taken in public without my permission. Sometimes people are discreet and act as if they are just on their phone, but I can see through the reflection in their sunglasses that the camera is pointed at me and they are taking my photo."²² Such actions are devoid of respect and empathy; they also violate personal privacy. An article in Ellis' research corroborates Sarah's experience and posits that this trend is fueled by the belief that people with dwarfism are indeed separate from society; a "different species or 'race' closer to gods, mythical beings, or animals than humans."²³ In the eyes of many, people of short stature are something other than human. This otherness has deep and lasting roots which fuel ignorance and objectification.

Individuals with dwarfism have appeared in historical records as far back as 2700–2190 BCE.²⁴ Although anatomical differences associated with dwarfism were embraced with reverence in ancient Egypt ("There was a significant value placed on dwarfs in ancient Egypt.... There were several elite dwarfs from the Old Kingdom who achieved important status and had a lavish burial place in the royal cemetery close to the pyramids"²⁵), this has not been the case over large portions of history. Greece's Classical Period embraced "the search for perfection in the human form, with concomitant

²¹ Lesley Ellis, "Through a Filtered Lens: Unauthorized Picture-Taking of People with Dwarfism in Public Spaces," *Disability & Society* 33, no. 2 (November 2017): 231. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09687599.2017.1392930>.

²² Sarah Rupp McKee, "Don't Take Pictures of People with Dwarfism without Consent," *The Mighty*, February 6, 2023, <https://themighty.com/topic/dwarfism/dont-take-pictures-little-people-dwarfism-disability/>.

²³ Ellis, 220.

²⁴ Chahira Kozma, "Dwarfs in Ancient Egypt," *American Journal of Medical Genetics Part A* 140A, no. 4 (February 15, 2006): 303–11. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ajmg.a.31068>.

²⁵ Chahira Kozma, "Dwarfs in Ancient Egypt," *American Journal of Medical Genetics Part A* 140A, no. 4 (February 15, 2006): 306.

rejection of deformity and disfigurement.”²⁶ Over time, people of short stature have been forced to perform demeaning roles, such as court jesters, entertainers, circus performers (P.T. Barnum), or pets and mascots for wealthy individuals, as was the case during the 18th century for Perkeo:

Perkeo, a real-life legend in Germany was a well known personality in his own time...through his stunted growth and rollicking jokes he became a well known local figure. Thus he was recognized by Count Palatine Karl Philipp, then governor of Tyrol, who attracted him to his court. Later, in 1716, when Karl Philipp became elector palatine, he took Perkeo with him to Heidelberg. Also later, when the court moved to Schwetzingen and Mannheim, Perkeo served the elector as a jester.²⁷

Although one could conclude that Perkeo’s appeal was based on his innate comedic genius, his role as jester conveys objectification and subordination.

Regrettably, people with dwarfism and other genetic anomalies have also been subjects for crude and cruel experimentation. According to Paul Lombardo’s article featured in *Ethics & Medicine* magazine, one such experiment occurred at a mental health facility in 1929: “Charles B. Davenport, a prominent biologist and leader in the American eugenics’ movement, carried out an experimental castration of a ‘Mongoloid dwarf’ at a New York State mental institution.” The subject’s parent possessed “limited intellectual capacity”²⁸ and the patient was severely intellectually disabled. It is no surprise that they unwittingly gave their consent. At the time, this appalling experiment did not elicit criticism from the public or the scientific community. That is unsettling.

Not surprisingly, cruel experiments were conducted on people with dwarfism during World War II. According to Jacek Hawiger,

²⁶ R. Sullivan, “Deformity: A Modern Western Prejudice with Ancient Origins,” *Proceedings of the Royal College of Physicians of Edinburgh* 31, no. 3 (2001): 262–66. <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/11713782/>.

²⁷ G. P. Hodge, “Perkeo, the Dwarf-Jester of Heidelberg,” *JAMA: The Journal of the American Medical Association* 209, no. 3 (July 21, 1969): 404. <https://doi.org/10.1001/jama.209.3.403>.

²⁸ Paul A. Lombardo, “Dwarves: Uninformed Consent in Eugenic Research,” *Ethics & Medicine* 25, no. 3 (2009): 149.

“[h]eart poisoning also terminated human sterilization experiments on imprisoned females and males and atrocious studies on twins and dwarfs.”²⁹ Such experiments were often conducted without anesthesia. According to Barbieri’s *Spies, Lies, and Citizenship: The Hunt for Nazi Criminals*, Dr. Mengele, the infamous Angel of Death, used the Holocaust to advance his own deviant interests: “The outbreak of war would allow Mengele to put his theories into practice through the research that he conducted on Auschwitz inmates—particularly twins and dwarfs.” Mengele’s goal was simple: eradication. As Barbier states, “Eradication of the DNA that produced dwarfism would result in a population of tall, strong Germans who could fulfill the Third Reich’s destiny.”³⁰ With or without experimentation, the Nazis’ brutal acts of cruelty and dehumanization impacted millions of individuals. Experimentation was simply a facet of their campaign. Cruel and invasive tests were conducted among persons with various disabilities and/or anatomical differences and therefore were not limited to persons of short stature, yet this shameful period in history illustrates society’s propensity for perfection and its disdain for anomaly.

Popular culture has created and perpetuated a wealth of negative stereotypes about dwarfism through films for nearly one hundred years. As noted in Pritchard’s *Dwarfism, Spatiality and Disabling Differences*:

When the freak shows began to diminish, the film industry became another way to exploit people with dwarfism for the amusement of others. People with dwarfism are prominent in films such as: Tod Browning’s *Freaks* (1932), *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937), *The Wizard of Oz* (1939), *Austin Powers: the Spy who Shagged Me* (1999) and *Austin Powers in Goldmember* (2002), *Time Bandits* (1981), *Willow* (1988), *Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory* (1971), and *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*

²⁹ Jacek Hawiger, “Heart Poisoning: Medicine Unlike Any Other,” *Ethics & Medicine: An International Journal of Bioethics* 35:2, no. Summer 2019 (July 8, 2019): 107. <https://www.ethicsandmedicine.com/ethics-medicine-volume-352-summer-2019/>.

³⁰ Mary Kathryn Barbier and Dennis E Showalter, *Spies, Lies, and Citizenship. The Hunt for Nazi Criminals* (Dulles, VA: Potomac Books, Inc, 2017), 78.

(2005), where their dwarfism is their main feature and is played upon in a comedic or fantasy way.³¹

Munchkins, Mini-Mes, elves, Oompa Loompas, leprechauns, and the like are derogatory and fantastical representations of little people. These depictions rob individuals of their humanness and their dignity. Yet for many people, this is the basis of their knowledge about dwarfism. These misrepresentations can lead to very awkward social situations in which average-height persons assume that adult LPs are children, and/or that children or adults with dwarfism are simply not human, resulting in objectification and infantilization. According to Backstrom, modern media promotes this misperception: “Reality series and documentaries that feature body size extremes, specifically little people and obese people, dominate the schedule in first runs and repeats.”³² The exploitative nature of reality television and social media platforms promotes curiosity and, perhaps, even voyeurism, which subsequently affects one’s right to privacy and personhood. Thus, popular culture fuels an unequal social construct and thwarts the efforts of the Disability Rights Movement, which seeks to eliminate oppression, increase acceptance and participation, and promote destigmatization.

Ryan Murphy’s controversial “Freak Show” season of *American Horror Story* was criticized for its exploitation of disabled individuals: “But what goes too often unsung is the fact that ‘freak’ is a term first applied to people with disabilities—and the sudden ubiquity of the word in popular culture risks bringing back into vogue a term used far too often to marginalize those who don’t match up with what is far too often termed as ‘normal.’”³³ This is the 21st century, and despite all of the advances humankind has

³¹ Erin Pritchard, *Dwarfism, Spatiality and Disabling Experiences* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2021), 83.

³² Laura Backstrom, “From the Freak Show to the Living Room: Cultural Representations of Dwarfism and Obesity,” *Sociological Forum* 27, no. 3 (August 26, 2012): 683. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1573-7861.2012.01341.x>.

³³ Howard Sherman, “‘Freak’ Is a Slur and ‘Freak Show’ Is Propagating It. Disabled People Deserve Better | Howard Sherman,” the Guardian (Guardian News and Media, September 26, 2014). <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/sep/26/disabled-people-freak-show-horror-story-pop-culture>.

made, the media have the ability to catapult people into the margins of otherness.

According to Little People of America, some progress has been made on the international front: On December 3, 1992, the United Nations General Assembly proclaimed “annual observance of the International Day of Persons with Disabilities (IDPD)...[to promote] our global understanding and support for the dignity, rights and well being of all of us who identify as persons with disabilities.”³⁴ In the words of William Shakespeare, “so shines a good deed in a weary world.”³⁵ Although the observance of this day is indeed a positive development, there is far more work to be done. Popular culture may be an avenue to amend cultural mistreatment.

People with dwarfism often face difficulties because of their deviation from normal or average: “Ignoring the very clear structural inequalities and discriminations faced by people with non-normative bodies, neoliberal policies assume a model of individual responsibility that pressures people with disabilities to heroically overcome the obstacles they face.”³⁶ These misperceptions must be challenged. Celebrities such as Peter Dinklage, Warwick Davis, and the Roloff family have shown the public that they are, first and foremost, human beings. If popular culture is one of the primary sources for knowledge about dwarfism, representations of little people should not be designed to mock, nor should they be fantastical. For Peter Dinklage, who gained notoriety (and several Emmys) for his role as Tyrion Lannister in *Game of Thrones*, this is no laughing matter: “Dwarves are still the butt of jokes. It’s one of the last bastions of acceptable prejudice. Not just by people who’ve had too much to drink in England and want to throw a person. But by media, everything.”³⁷ Prejudice is not meant to be tolerated. There are many players in

³⁴ United Nations, “International Day of Persons with Disabilities EN | United Nations,” un.org (United Nations, 2019). <https://www.un.org/en/observances/day-of-persons-with-disabilities>.

³⁵ Toby Malone, “Quoting Shakespeare in Twentieth-Century Film,” in *Shakespeare and Quotation*, ed. Julie Maxwell and Kate Rumbold (Cambridge, UK, Cambridge University Press, 2018), 204.

³⁶ Russell Meeuf, *Rebellious Bodies* (University of Texas Press, 2017), 90.

³⁷ Dan Kois, “Peter Dinklage Was Smart to Say No,” *The New York Times Magazine*, March 29, 2012. <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/04/01/magazine/peter-dinklage-was-smart-to-say-no.html>.

the entertainment industry who are equipped to change the landscape: actors, screenwriters, producers, directors, even viewers themselves.

Looking beyond short stature, all persons with disabilities are human beings who deserve the same rights and freedoms as non-disabled individuals. Countries across the globe have convened to discuss the importance of this topic. The United Nations has called for an end to human rights violations against persons with disabilities, calling for “respect for difference and acceptance of persons with disabilities as part of human diversity and humanity.”³⁸ The UN adopted the “first comprehensive human rights treaty of the 21st century,”³⁹ which entered into force in May of 2008. One of its several goals is to shift perspectives away from viewing disabled persons as “objects” of charity and move toward viewing them as “subjects” with rights (CRPD). The statistics speak for themselves: According to the World Bank Group, “one billion people, or 15% of the world’s population, experience some form of disability. Persons with disabilities, on average as a group, are more likely to experience adverse socioeconomic outcomes than persons without disabilities.”⁴⁰ If disability is a social construct, it is in dire need of reconstruction. Several forward-thinking individuals and organizations concur. Advocates such as Elise Roy are proponents of Design Thinking, which in its simplest terms, means “to look sideways, to reframe, to refine and to experiment.”⁴¹ According to Roy, this includes defining the problem, observing real-world situations, sharing, and synthesizing multiple perspectives and constructing a prototype prior to

³⁸ [www.un.org. “Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities \(CRPD\) | United Nations Enable,”](https://www.un.org/development/desa/disabilities/convention-on-the-rights-of-persons-with-disabilities.html) May 14, 2015. <https://www.un.org/development/desa/disabilities/convention-on-the-rights-of-persons-with-disabilities.html>.

³⁹ United Nations, “Guiding Principles of the Convention | United Nations Enable.” Un.org, 2019. <https://www.un.org/development/desa/disabilities/convention-on-the-rights-of-persons-with-disabilities/guiding-principles-of-the-convention.html>.

⁴⁰ “Disability Inclusion Overview,” World Bank (World Bank Group), accessed July 25, 2023. <https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/disability#:~:text=One%20billion%20people%2C%20or%2015.>

⁴¹ TED, “When We Design for Disability, We All Benefit.” https://www.ted.com/talks/elise_roy_when_we_design_for_disability_we_all_benefit?language=en.

implementation.⁴² Public policies and perceptions need transformation. Although this is a daunting task, it is worthy of pursuit.

Expanding the lens to include other marginalized groups with disabilities, it becomes clear that impairment can be embraced rather than discounted or devalued. When communities work collaboratively to accept and support their fellow community members, regardless of ability or impairment, wonderful things can happen. One such example features British settlers on Martha's Vineyard in the 1800s. Owing to a limited gene pool, the majority of settlers developed hearing impairments. Rather than shunning people who were partially or completely deaf, community members devised their own sign language to communicate. According to Annalies Kusters, "the community featured a dense social and kin network and this close contact between deaf and hearing people resulted in the evolution of a sign language that was widely used by both on a daily basis down the generations."⁴³ This is a shining example of a compassionate communal social construct; however, it did not extend past the boundaries of the island. In fact, it was vehemently rejected by educational institutions. American schools deemed this practice primitive; students were prohibited from using sign language by the end of the 19th century. Furthermore, doctors strongly discouraged deaf people from marrying or having children. This discouraging outcome does not suggest that social acceptance is impossible but rather that a lack of acceptance can have devastating consequences.

Intolerance is often characterized by longevity. In the 1930s, individuals with mental illnesses were often placed in asylums and underwent barbaric medical procedures. This practice was documented in a series of photographs taken by Alfred Eisenstaedt at Pilgrim State Hospital in Long Island.⁴⁴ These historical examples paint a brutal picture of a social construct that rejects nearly every form of diversity. Although it is fair to say that there

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ A. Kusters, "Deaf Utopias? Reviewing the Sociocultural Literature on the World's 'Martha's Vineyard Situations,'" *Journal of Deaf Studies and Deaf Education* 15, no. 1 (October 7, 2010): 3. <https://doi.org/10.1093/deafed/enp026>.

⁴⁴ Ben Cosgrove, "Strangers to Reason: Life inside a Psychiatric Hospital, 1938," *Time*, January 2020, <https://time.com/3506058/strangers-to-reason-life-inside-a-psychiatric-hospital-1938>.

are indeed many people who strive to exhibit empathy, seek to understand the unique and complex attributes of others, and treat others with respect and kindness, too little progress has been made. Expectations of “normal” or “productive” or “able” persist and are inextricably bound to established societal norms.

People with dwarfism or any other disability or unique attribute are human beings with thoughts, feelings, and aspirations like everyone else. They are forced to find their way in a world that was not built for them. The burdens of societal ignorance, ambivalence, stigmatization, objectification, and even infantilization are born of a social construct that is both antiquated and unkind. In the eyes of society, individuals with dwarfism are little, but they should not be viewed as less than. Contemporary culture embraces stereotypes and conformity; dwarfism and other disabilities are deemed unacceptable deviations or deformities: “If modern art can be extended today to include magazines and advertisements, then they provide a still disquieting reflection of society’s attitudes to deformity.”⁴⁵ Change is needed to promote accessibility, remove stigmatization, increase inclusion, secure individuals’ rights to privacy, cultivate awareness and acceptance, embrace diversity in every form, and ensure equal treatment.

Today’s diverse world is composed of people of all shapes, sizes, colors, races, cultures, ethnicities, and abilities, all of whom deserve dignity. Elie Wiesel, renowned Holocaust survivor, writer, and lecturer, offers a stark reminder regarding the marginalization of others: “I swore never to be silent whenever human beings endure suffering and humiliation.... Sometimes we must interfere.”⁴⁶ Although the atrocities of the Holocaust defy comparison, Wiesel’s words about humiliation ring true. For the greater good, it is time to interfere, to reject ignorance, stigmatization, and ambivalence, and confront the deficits of existing societal structures, norms, and policies.

⁴⁵ R. Sullivan, “Deformity: A Modern Western Prejudice with Ancient Origins,” *Proceedings of the Royal College of Physicians of Edinburgh* 31, no. 3 (2001): 265. <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/11713782/>.

⁴⁶ NobelPrize.org. “Elie Wiesel Acceptance Speech.” The Nobel Prize, 2017. <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/peace/1986/wiesel/acceptance-speech/>.