

Violence and Abuse through an Ability Studies Lens

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses violence and abuse through an ability studies lens. Ability studies investigates the social, cultural, legal, political, ethical and other considerations by which any given ability expectations (it would be nice to have certain abilities) and ableism – the more severe form of ability expectation (certain abilities are seen as absolutely essential) hierarchies and preferences – come to pass, and the impact of such hierarchies and preferences. This paper pays homage to the work done by disabled activists and the academic field of disability studies on ableism but expands on the concept of ableism in various ways such as broadening it beyond disabled people to decrease the otherism disabled people experience. It also engages with the enabling use of ableism to make the concept more useful. We provide two tools, the BIAS FREE (Building an Integrative Analytical System For Recognizing and Eliminating in Equities) framework, a tool for identifying biases that originate from social hierarchies including ability-based social hierarchies and ability expectation exercises. Both these tools can be used with everyone such as students to unravel unrecognized, hidden or blatant AAs (Ability expectation and Ableism) and disablisms and enablisms linked to them. The paper concludes with a better and more systematic AA governance discourse, a mapping out of AA conflicts and a much bigger community of practice on AA governance.

1.0 Introduction

Ability studies (short for ability expectation and ableism studies) investigates how ability expectations (it would be nice to have certain abilities) and ableism the more severe form of ability expectation (certain abilities are seen as absolutely essential) hierarchies and preferences come to pass. Ability studies furthermore investigates the complexity and impact of such hierarchies and preferences (2008b, 2008c). It is based on the concept of ableism coined by the disabled people’s rights movement during the 1960s and 1970s in order to question how body ability expectation norms are generated, the “ability privileges (i.e. ability to work, to gain education, to be part of society, to have a positive identity, to be seen a citizen)” that come with an ability normative body and the disablism, the ability expectation and ableism oppression, the negative treatment, experienced by disabled people because they were judged as being “ability-deficient” (Miller et al., 2004); (for many examples of academic work on ableism I am indebted to (Wolbring, 2020b). However, my engagement with ability expectations and ableism (AA) goes beyond its initial scope.

First, my premise is that AA is a cultural reality that goes beyond disabled people and impacts humans–humans relationships in general and humans-animals, humans-nature relationships in particular (Wolbring, 2008b, 2008c; Wolbring, 2013a; Wolbring, 2014a). It starts to play itself out on the intersections of humans-post/transhumans and humans-cyborg humans whereby post-transhuman and cyborg humans are humans with new or improved abilities beyond the species-typical obtained through genetic modifications or wearable and implantable technologies. AA also already plays itself out around humans-non sentient machines relationships (Wolbring, 2006, 2007) given that humans compete with machines such as robots for example in employment. Furthermore, if advancements in artificial intelligence and machine learning achieve what is envisioned, namely that the artificial intelligence becomes sentient, it will impact humans-sentient machines, animals-sentient machines and nature-sentient machines relationships (Wolbring, 2019) as well.

Secondly, AA is not only used to define a person but also to define social entities from small groups to nations and influences how social groups and nations interact (Wolbring, 2019).

Third, according to me AA means that one likes certain abilities like driving a car, using public transportation, having a decent life, living in an equitable society, having power. AA by itself is a desire one has as an individual or as social entities such as nations. What one does with the ability desire is where the consequences come into play. One can use AA to disable (disablism) and enable (enablism) (Wolbring & Yumakulov, 2015).

The disabling (disablism) use of AA was the focus of the initial use of the term ableism in relation to disabled people. However, the disabling use of AA is also applied against other social and biological entities. For example men as a social group decided that the ability of rationality is important, decided that women are not rational, and used and still use this AA to disable women by telling them that they cannot do certain things because they are not rational (Cornia, 1997; Daily Star, 2014; Goldberg, 1968; Oakley & Roberts, 1981; Toffel, 1996; Wolbring, 2019; Wolbring & Diep, 2016). AA are used in disabling ways to justify many negative isms such as racism, sexism, caste-ism, ageism, speciesism, and anti-Environmentalism (Wolbring, 2008c).

As to the enabling (enablism) use of AA there are many examples (see section 6). To experience positive and negative peace for example could be seen as a positive AA (Wolbring, 2013c, 2014b, 2019; Wolbring et al., 2020).

However, the relationship between disabling and enabling is very complex (more in section 6). Often the disabling use against some is done to enable others, such as the use of the AA of rationality to disable women, workers (Posusney, 1993) and others (Osborne, 2013; van Montagu, 2013) is done to enable men and the ones in conflict with workers and others. The question is who has the power to push their AA and what is their purpose behind pushing for certain abilities versus other abilities.

Ability Studies can make use of many different social theories. Furthermore, there are many ability related concepts in ability studies such as ability security (short for AA security), ability identity and self-identity security (short for AA identity and aa self-identity security), ability expectation oppression, ability privilege, ability discrimination, ability inequity, ability inequality or ability expectation creep (Wolbring, 2010a, 2014a, 2017c, 2020a; Wolbring & Ghai, 2015). I will make use of these ability focused concepts in the remainder of the paper.

Violence and abuse are two major societal realities defining how social and biological entities relate and interact. Violence and abuse greatly impact disabled people and other social and biological entities. AA are one factor that influences (enables or disables) violence and abuse.

The remainder of the paper looks at violence (which includes abuse) through an ability studies lens with a particular focus on ability identity abuse (section 2); structural violence with a particular focus on human security and ability security (section 3); ability expectation creep (expecting constantly new or improvement on old AA (section 4); eco-ableism (humans-nature, humans-animal relationships) (section 5); enabling use of AA (section 6); two tools to engage with AA namely BIAS FREE (Building an Integrative Analytical System For Recognizing and Eliminating in Equities) framework (Eichler & Burke, 2006a, 2006b), a tool for identifying biases that derive from social hierarchies and AA exercises (section 7) and conclusion (section 8).

2.0 Violence including abuse through an ability studies lens

Sexual abuse, related to disabled women in general and disabled males in institutions (disabled people, male and female, being committed to institutions, is still quite common in many countries) is equal to or higher than those related to non-disabled women. Along with abuse, violence such as police violence against disabled people is also high (Disability Without Abuse Project, 2020; Hansen et al.; Mansell & Sobsey, 1994; Mansell et al., 1992; Maqbool, 2018; Rudman Family foundation, 2016, 2019; D. Sobsey, 1994; Sobsey, 1995; Sobsey & Doe, 1991; R. Sobsey, 1994).

The 'Disability Without Abuse' project is a recent effort to increase the visibility of the violence and abuse against disabled people¹. The project aims to become a repository of knowledge and a place for exchange of views and plans for action.

Violence as a concept is undertheorized in ability studies even though one can make a case that the disabling use of AA is one main factor in the use and justification of violence. Furthermore, AA language is not used to identify AA that can affect a decrease in violence and abuse.

¹Violence and abuse against disabled people is evident in every country, for India-specific issues, see (Daruwalla et al., 2013; Dawn, 2014; Nayar & Mehrotra, 2016).

The World Health Organization (WHO) defines violence as: “The intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against oneself, another person, or against a group or community, that either results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, maldevelopment or deprivation” (World Health Organization, 2002, p. 5) whereby this definition includes acts that result from “a power relationship, including threats, intimidation, neglect and acts of omission” (World Health Organization, 2002, p. 5) and the violent act can be “physical, sexual, psychological, and involve deprivation or neglect” (World Health Organization, 2002, p. 6).

Many groups experience all of the various kinds of violence covered by the WHO report. This includes disabled people (albeit the report did not really cover disabled people) (Disability Without Abuse Project, 2020; Goodley & Runswick-Cole, 2011).

Violence, when seen through the lens of ability studies can be caused in two main ways:

- 1) Active or intentional disablism: One actively tries to generate social conditions that disable the one without the ability or where one generates new ability expectations with the expressed purpose to generate a hierarchy between social groups with one being the dominant one. So, the primary purpose is to disable one based on the difference in abilities (perceived or real).
- 2) Omission or passive or unintentional disablism: One disables someone else by not accommodating the other individual or social group that does not exhibit the ability. This could be due to a lack of awareness or not thinking about it. The primary purpose is not to generate the disablement due to ability differences (perceived or real) but it is a side effect of not thinking, not being aware of the consequences of one’s AA (Wolbring, 2020a).

The AA of dominating others, the AA of having power over others is at play in all aspects of the WHO description and is an obvious example of active, intentional disablism.

One can describe the violence outlined using various ability studies concepts, for example, many of the descriptions are facilitated by the exhibition of ability privilege. “Ability privilege describes the advantages enjoyed by those who exhibit certain abilities and the unwillingness of these individuals to relinquish the advantage linked to the abilities especially with the reason that these are earned or birth given (natural) abilities” (Wolbring, 2014a, 2020a). Violence and abuse generated by active disablism conceptualized within this meaning of ability privilege suggests that people with expected, normative body abilities are not willing to give up their ability privileges (Wolbring, 2014a, 2020a). Such form of ability privilege-based violence and abuse is one of the main drivers of violence and abuse disabled people experience.

However, violence and abuse based on ability privilege also plays itself out in relation to other social groups (e.g. race, gender, class) (Wolbring, 2014a, 2020a). Furthermore, “social groups are also formed based on ability privileges whereby the social group is defined by

whether its members have or don't have a given ability (the ability-have and the ability-non-have social groups)" (Wolbring, 2020a). Ability privilege of the 'haves' can be seen to provoke violence and abuse against the 'non-haves'.

One can use other AA concepts to call out AA violence and abuse. AA apartheid for example means that individuals or social structures deprive other individuals or social structures of a decent life based on the disabling use of AA (Wolbring, 2020a; Wolbring & Ghai, 2015) whereby AA apartheid is one form of social apartheid (Wolbring & Ghai, 2015). AA oppression means that one is being oppressed by AA of others (Wolbring, 2020a; Wolbring & Ghai, 2015).

The WHO continues to describe violence as follows:

"It includes self-directed violence, violence by other individuals (interpersonal violence) and larger groups such as states, organized and political groups (collective violence)" (World Health Organization, 2002, p. 6) whereby collective violence is subdivided into social, political and economic violence (World Health Organization, 2002, p. 6). "Collective violence that is committed to advance a particular social agenda. Political violence includes war and related violent conflicts, state violence and similar acts carried out by larger groups. The nature of violent acts can be physical, sexual, psychological, and involve deprivation or neglect."

(World Health Organisation, 2002, p. 6).

All these aspects of violence can be described using the ability studies concepts already mentioned.

The WHO on page 13 outlines societal factors supporting violence (World Health Organization, 2002, p. 13). All of them can be linked to some AA, and AA-based reasoning is used in many cases to justify it.

In the next section, I engage with one specific AA aspect of violence and abuse.

2.1. Ability identity abuse and ability identity security

Ability self-identity security/ ability identity security is the security to be able to be at ease with one's abilities and the abilities one wants to make use of (Wolbring, 2010a, 2020a). Ability identity abuse and violence is induced when others negate ability identity security. Often, due to external ability identity abuse, one internalizes such ability identity abuse leading to an ability identity self-abuse. Ability identity abuse is experienced by many disabled people as evident by the pathologization and other negative stereotypical descriptions of the set of abilities disabled people have (Nishida, 2016). One example of ability identity abuse is the attachment of the term "risk" to a group. There are many hits in Google and Google Scholar for the phrase "risk of Down Syndrome" (Wolbring, 2017a) used to 'indicate a danger if one is pregnant at a later age'. The use of the term "risk" is a judgment. The factual term is

“probability” which is 4 times less present in Google and 28 times less in Google Scholar (Wolbring, 2017a). Such bias makes positive language such as the following, impossible:

“Down syndrome is a naturally occurring chromosomal arrangement that has always been a part of the human condition. The occurrence of Down syndrome is universal across racial and gender lines, and it is present in approximately one in 781 births in Canada. Down syndrome is not a disease, disorder, defect, or medical condition. It is inappropriate and offensive to refer to people with Down syndrome as "afflicted with" or "suffering from" it. Down syndrome itself does not require either treatment or prevention.”

(Canadian Down Syndrome Society, 2020)

However, ability identity abuse has been experienced historically and is still experienced by various social groups. It is also used to justify an elevated level of rights and status of some people and social groups in relation to other people and social groups, and of humans in relation to other species and nature (Wolbring, 2008a, 2008b, 2008c, 2012c). With focus on the body being defective, as is in the case of disabled people, ability identity abuse, has been and still is used to justify, for example, sexism, by stating that women are deficient. Labelling of women as being unable to be rational therefore being ability deficient, was used to counter the fight of the suffragettes for women’s right to vote (Buechler, 1990; Wolbring, 2008c). This claim continues to be made even today to disable women in general. (Daily, 2014; Toffel, 1996; Wolbring & Diep, 2016) The linkage of hysteria to the uterus, which has been used for a long time (McCulloch, 1969), is another example of ability-based identity abuse of women. As Baynton stated “Disability [as in ability different] has functioned historically to justify inequality for disabled people themselves, but it has also done so for women and minority groups” (Baynton, 2013, p. 33). Racism has been and still is often justified by claiming that the undesired ethnic group is less able cognitively (Wolbring, 2008c), see for example the Bell Curve (Herrnstein, 1994). Negative portrayals linked to being seen as ability deficient are also used against indigenous people (Hutcheon & Lashewicz, 2020; Wolbring & Diep, 2016). Identity abuse is also experienced by the LGBTQ community; an Identity Abuse Scale has also been developed for this purpose (Woulfe & Goodman, 2018). If one digs deep enough, one often finds that such identity abuse is linked to abilities such as gays not being ‘male’ enough (Gil, 2007), being pathologized (Williamson, 1999) and being seen as morally inferior (Doan et al., 2014; Fish, 2006). Covering any of these could be linked to ability identity abuse

As to ability identity abuse, we not only see marginalized groups experiencing ability identity abuse caused by non-marginalized groups, but we also see different marginalized groups ability identity abusing other marginalized groups.

One example is evident in the discourse that questions the use of sex selection but rejects the questioning of deselection based on ‘ability deficiency’. These are some arguments used to justify the prohibition of sex selection:

- (i) Sex selection poses significant threats to the well-being of children and siblings, the children's sense of self-worth and the attitude of unconditional acceptance of a new child by parents, so psychologically crucial to parenting.
- (ii) Sex selection leads to the oppression of the people with the unwanted sex leading to social injustice.
- (iii) Sex selection is a form of sex discrimination.
- (iv) Sex selection leads to the enhancement of sex stereotypes which means that people will have certain expectations towards people with one sex or another.
- (v) Sex is not a disease.

(Wolbring, 2003)

These arguments make sense to many. Now, if we replace “sex” with “ability” at least arguments (i)-(iv) are just as valid (Wolbring, 2003).

As to point (v) one can also say that lack of a given ability or unwillingness to deploy a given ability is also not a disease as such. However, the battle is around point five and what can be labelled as a disease, disorder or impairment because if one can be labelled as such points (i)-(iv) are seen as not applicable or superseded by point (v) (Wolbring, 2003). An “Animal Farm” philosophy (some are more equal than others) (Wolbring, 2004) exists. Different ethical, moral and other standards are applied for the entities labelled or not labelled as diseased or impaired. This demarcation line is evident in the debates around the boundaries of pre-birth interventions (whether it is deselection based on genetic or other information or somatic gene and other therapy and germline gene therapy). As such any group that does not want to be targeted has to make the case that they are not a disease and also argue whether the disease label can be linked to a non-accepted ability difference that ‘their lacking or non-deployed abilities’ do not constitute a disease or disorder label. Let us look at the case of the gay gene. The gay genes is searched for because for the longest time in most places and still in some places being homosexual is seen as inferior because being homosexual is equated with a lack of abilities “homosexual sex is not capable of producing offspring, and thus serves no greater social purpose (as opposed to “productive” heterosexual sex)” (Clark, 2006, p. section III). Some of the arguments used to reject the search for a gay gene are similar to the ones used to prohibit sex selection such as “parents to reject the birth of a potential homosexual would reinforce the notion of the inferiority of homosexuals and so enhance prejudice and discrimination” (West, 2001, p. 440).

Given the danger of being attached to a disease/disorder label, the gay community makes the argument that they are not deficient, not a disease to draw a line that excludes them. Consider the following quote in this connection:

“There is a disanalogy between the argument I have made against the permissibility of orientation-selection procedures and the proposed argument against the permissibility of using genetic technology to prevent the birth of babies with serious disorders. Such disorders may dramatically decrease life expectancy, cause great

suffering, and intrinsically undermine a person's quality of life; further, a person with such a condition would say that she wishes that she did not have this condition. Homosexuality and bisexuality are not like this; in particular, the primary negative features of being a lesbian, gay man or bisexual have to do with societal attitudes towards these sexual orientations, not with intrinsic features of them”

(Stein, 1998, p. 22).

Of course, what the last sentence says is also what many disabled people say about their ability differences and the ongoing debate about the imagery of a disabled person and the origin of the disablement.

The same non-disease argument is also outlined for transgenders (Hutt, 2018). The literature suggests that being safe is linked to NOT being labelled as a disease, NOT being labelled as having ‘ability deficiencies’ that are linked to the label disease or disorder.

As such, the battle of who is labelling whom as ‘ability deficient’ and which ‘ability deficiency’ constitutes being a disease and disorder is one main cause of ability identity abuse and lack of ability identity security.

Now what abilities are expected and what ‘ability deficiencies’ are linked to a disease or disorder label is a constantly changing reality. It starts to play itself out around humans-posthumans/ transhumans and humans-cyborg humans relationships with new characteristics being linked to the disease, disorder or impairment label and new forms of ability identity abuse and lack of ability identity security (see further discussion in section 4 covering the topic of ability expectation creep).

That being labelled is the very problem, is also evident in the fact that around disabled people-to-be, prenatal testing is defended so as to allow to prepare the parents early on. If this benefit is so great and not a red herring, why does the gay community not go for the gay gene so that the parents can know early on during pregnancy and can read up on being parents of a gay kid? They don’t, because it is a red herring. They know once there is a test and a gene it will be about elimination/ prevention NOT early pre-warning system.

There are many examples of ability identity abuse and lack of ability identity security beyond the pre-birth example outlined above; for example, point 26 of the 2030 Sustainability Development goal main document is a clear example of the ones targeted as not being able to experience ability identity security:

“We are committed to the prevention and treatment of non-communicable diseases, including behavioural, developmental and neurological disorders, which constitute a major challenge for sustainable development (United Nations, 2015).

For sure neurodiversity would not be accepted under point 26. Additionally, as in the USA and Canada, ‘learning disability’ is defined as a neurological disorder (Wolbring & Yumakulov, 2015), everyone with a learning disability would be a target. It is interesting that up to 2018

the WHO listed transgender under “mental, behavioural and neurodevelopmental disorders” (Agence France-Presse, 2018) so point 26 at that time asked for the elimination of transgender. In 2018 transgender was moved to the category “conditions related to sexual health” (Agence France-Presse, 2018) which to me still sounds like a ‘problem’.

Being labelled in a negative way not only comes with elimination consequences but also leads to invisibility in non-medical policy discourses. Comments by disabled people taking part in sustainable development consultations revealed that disabled people are mostly excluded from sustainability policy discussions because their identity is fixed as a deficient one (Participants of the Global Online Discussion on Science Technology and Innovation for SDGs, 2016; Participants of the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA) and UNICEF organized Online Consultation - 8 March - 5 April Disability inclusive development agenda towards 2015 & beyond, 2013; Wolbring et al., 2013). This exclusion might be a deliberate disablism in some cases and an unintended disablism in other cases. As to the unintended disablism, it might simply not occur to someone that disabled people are impacted and need to be involved in certain policy discussions because of the medical imagery of disabled people in the person’s mind.

In case of the intended disablism, labelling a group or person as ability deficient, was and is a mechanism to justify the exclusion or discrediting of groups, persons or entire activist movements from policy discussions (Wolbring, 2019).

One consequence of pervasive ability identity abuse is that individuals internalise the ability oppression that ability identity abuse causes. Internalising one’s oppression (Akbar, 1984) for example recognized in relation to internalized ableism (Campbell, 2008)(used with a focus on disabled people), classism (Russell, 1996), internalized sexism and heterosexism (Bearman et al., 2009; Szymanski, 2005) and internalized racism (Delgado & Stefancic, 2000; Harper, 2007; Hipolito-Delgado, 2010; Pyke & Dang, 2003). Internalising ability oppression and ability identity abuse is one factor in accepting the negative treatments one is a target of (racism, sexism, casteism, etc.). For example, during the fight for women’s voting rights many women believed that women do not have the abilities needed to vote (being rational, etc.).

3.0 Structural violence through an ability studies lens

“Structural violence is a term commonly ascribed to Johan Galtung, which he introduced in the article “Violence, Peace, and Peace Research” (1969). It refers to a form of violence wherein some social structure or social institution may harm people by preventing them from meeting their basic needs. Institutionalized adultism, ageism, classism, elitism, ethnocentrism, nationalism, speciesism, racism, and sexism are some examples of structural violence as proposed by Galtung”.²

² *Structural Violence* entry in Wikipedia: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Structural_violence. Retrieved August 11, 2020 (John Galtung referred in Wikipedia).

This quote right away indicates the need for an ability studies lens. That ableism and disablism are not listed as “isms” in the list highlights the problem of silo-ism which is one reason why I expanded the concept of ableism. It is obvious that many of these “isms” are based on ability expectations and are covered by the scope of ability studies as outlined before.

Structural violence is “the avoidable disparity between the potential ability to fulfil basic needs and their actual fulfilment” (Ho, 2007, p. 1). In other words, there is a gap in AA and their fulfilments. According to Ho “inequality, *prima facie*, betrays the fact that an unrealized fundamental human need is avoidable. It also establishes a certain level of what constitutes the potential by comparing it to what others can achieve” (Ho, 2007, p. 4). One can phrase inequity and inequality in AA language whereby for both, ability inequity (an unjust or unfair distribution, right or wrong) and ability inequality (any uneven distribution), two subgroups exist. One group is linked to judgment of abilities of biological structures such as the human body (e.g. walking, flying) (group 1) and the other group is linked to access to and protection from abilities generated through human interventions that impact humans (e.g. education, employment, food security, clean water weapons, building things) (group 2) (Wolbring, 2010a, 2020a). Both groups support structural violence and are experienced by disabled people and others.

Both groups of definitions highlight numerous potentials for ability identity abuse and structural violence based on AA.

“Structural violence illuminates the causal relationship between power differentials in structures” (Ho, 2007, pp. 8-9). The examples around ability identity abuse highlight power differentials as to who decides what is a disease. “Structural violence is generally invisible because it is part of the routine grounds of everyday life” (Ho, 2007, p. 9). Many if not all the examples in this paper of AA related violence and abuse could fit this statement.

Finally, to finish this section on a positive an enabling use of AA, we can reword the language around peace and structural violence using AA language.

Johan Galtung in 1969³ defined negative peace as the absence of personal violence and positive peace as the absence of structural violence (Wolbring et al., 2020). In other words, negative peace is the ability to experience the absence of personal violence and positive peace is the ability to experience the absence of structural violence. According to Barash and Webel (2014), positive peace is the presence of desirable notions within society such as harmony, justice, equality and equity (Wolbring et al., 2020). In other words, it is about the positive ability expectation to experience harmony, justice, equality and equity.

3.1. Human Security and Ability Security

³ See note 2.

The concept of human security has been debated for some time (Brauch, 2009). It is seen as essential for all humans (Commission on Human Security, 2003). The Commission on Human Security defined human security as follows: “to protect the vital core of all human lives in ways that enhance human freedoms and human fulfilment” (Commission on Human Security, 2003, p. 4). The seven human security dimensions outlined in the 1994 human development report were: economic, food, health, environmental, personal, community and political (United Nations Development Programme, 1994, pp. 24-25). The 1994 report further states that “Human security can be said to have two main aspects. It means, first, safety from such chronic threats as hunger, disease and repression. And second, it means protection from sudden and hurtful disruptions in the patterns of daily life—whether in homes, in jobs or in communities” (United Nations Development Programme, 1994, p. 25). Structural violence is discussed in relation to human security (Schnabel, 2008).

Given the human security literature, it is clear that many of the human insecurities people face can be linked to the disabling use of AA. Furthermore, one should add ability security (the security to have a decent life with one’s set of abilities) and ability identity security as essential aspects of human security in general, especially under personal security (Wolbring, 2010a, 2014b, 2020a). It is obvious from the above write up on ability identity security and ability identity abuse that one cannot experience human security in general and personal security in particular if one cannot experience ability identity security and if one is a target for ability identity abuse.

Let us expand now on the concept of ability security.

Job security is an important aspect of human security and job insecurity is seen as one form of structural violence (Fryer & McCormack, 2012; Schwebel, 1997). Disabled people have been experiencing ability insecurity for a long-time in many areas but especially in the area of employment. For example, a 1906 New York Times article stated that in 1900, 20% of blind people had a gainful occupation and 38.5% of deaf people. The same number for non-disabled people was 50.2% (New York Times, 1909). If one looks at the July 2019 US labour force participation rate among non-institutionalized civilians aged 16 years and over, the rate was 20.8% for disabled people and 69.2% for non-disabled people (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2020). According to the United Nations Enable webpage, 80% to 90% of working age persons with disabilities are unemployed in developing countries, whereas in industrialized countries the figure is between 50% and 70% (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs Disability, 2015).

However, lack of ability security in, for example, employment, is also discussed and experienced by non-disabled people. Indeed, the impact of automatization, robotics and artificial intelligence on the ability security aspect of being employed has recently intensified (for many references see (Wolbring, 2016)). What is problematic is that my study from 2016 could not find a single academic article or Canadian newspaper article that discussed the negative impact of robotics on disabled people (Wolbring, 2016). Furthermore, a more recent

study from my research group found no content in the academic literature and Canadian newspapers related to the negative effects of artificial intelligence/ machine learning (AI/ ML) use by society on disabled people; of autonomous AI/ ML on disabled people; of AI/ ML causing social problems for disabled people (beyond the need to access AI/ ML related technologies or processes) (Lillywhite & Wolbring, 2020). Moreover, the coverage was purely techno-optimistic (Lillywhite & Wolbring, 2020). Such one-sided coverage of disabled people could be seen as a form of structural violence and one that decreases ability identity security.

4.0 The issue of ability expectation and ableism (AA) creep

Examples under ability identity abuse and what is defined as disease and ability security indicate that AA judgments are not static and that they change constantly. Expecting constantly new abilities or improvement on old abilities (ability expectation and ableism (AA) creep) (Wolbring, 2020a; Wolbring & Yumakulov, 2015) is a cultural reality. The appearance of the term “learning disability” in North America (Wolbring & Yumakulov, 2015) is one example of such an AA creep with the attached othering of the ones judged newly as ‘ability deficient’. The term “learning disability” did not exist till 1963 in North America. One can make the case that the term appeared because ability requirements in schools changed in the beginning of the 1960’s whereby many students could not fulfil the new requirements (Sleeter, 1986, 1987; Wolbring & Yumakulov, 2015). Learning disability was coined with a neurological deficiency meaning (Kirk, 1968; Learning Disabilities Association of Canada, 1981) and at that time was used for students who did not already have a label. There are many examples of AA creeps or total change in AA which are expected from the species-typical (a hunter-gatherer society has different ability expectations from its species-typical members than an agrarian society, a knowledge society and a post-knowledge society (Wolbring & Yumakulov, 2015)).

One emerging area of AA creep which will increasingly impact humans is the enhancement (cyborg or genetics) of humans beyond the species typical. This AA creep and the relationship between human-posthuman/ human-cyborg humans can be nicely analysed through an ability studies lens. Indeed, the emerging human-posthuman/ human-cyborg human relationships are already exhibiting the same ability identity abuse, lack of ability security, ability privilege, ability oppression, ability apartheid, ability inequity and ability inequality issues described for the human-human relationships. Within these relationships the so far species-typical now become the sub species-typical and the enhanced (post/trans humans and cyborg humans) become the new species-typical humans. With these relationships, the very meaning of disease changes with the non-enhanced beyond the old species typical now being classified as diseased (Wolbring, 2005, 2006, 2008c, 2012b); see also (Ball & Wolbring, 2014; Djebrouni & Wolbring, 2020; Fixed the Movie production company, 2020; Goodley et al., 2014; Jotterand, 2008; Miah, 2008; Racine & Forlini, 2010; UK House of Commons Science and Technology Committee, 2007; Williams, 2006; Wolbring, 2010b, 2013a;

Wolbring & Diep, 2016; Wolbring & Ghai, 2015; Wolbring et al., 2014) for some impact of the enhancement debate.

Enhancements are linked to societal AA such as productivity, efficiency or GDP (Goodley & Lawthom, 2019; Goodley et al., 2014; Wolbring, 2008c). A 2006 report outlined the following drivers for human enhancement technologies which are all AA: one's perceived social status; one's competitive advantage; market pressures; global competitiveness and quality of life/ consumer life-style demands (Williams, 2006). Many disabled people will go for enhancements beyond the species-typical if offered (Wolbring, 2013b) and indeed the promoters of enhancements bank on it (Wolbring, 2006). If one cannot have a good life being who one is (lacking ability security and ability identity security) and one lives in a constant state of ability oppression it seems logical that one buys into the offered solution of enhancement beyond the species typical.

5.0 Eco-ableism: humans-nature and humans-animal relationships through an ability studies lens)

Environmental issues and human animal relationships have been debated for a long time. The concept of “structural violence” is linked to how humans deal with nature (Conradie, 2014; Mami, 2012). Linking it to environmental injustice (Morales Jr et al., 2012). Schmitz et al. (2012) state, “The Brundtland Commission, formally the World Commission on Environment and Development, established by the United Nations in 1983, links peace, security, development and the environment claiming that war, poverty and structural violence result in the oppression and degradation of the human community as well as the physical environment”. Brantmeier (2013) links the social sustainability with the need to deal with structural and cultural violence.

Ability studies allows us to investigate eco-ability expectations and eco-ableism that impact human-animal and human-environment relationships. Eco-ableism is a conceptual framework for analysing enabling and disabling human ability desires, a class of desires that shape the relationship between humans and animals and humans and their environment (Wolbring, 2012a; Wolbring, 2013a; Wolbring & Lisitza, 2017). Different environment focused movement such as the Shallow ecology movement, the Deep ecology movement and Eco-feminism exhibit different ability expectations at the intersection of humans and nature (Wolbring, 2013a). For example, rephrasing words as outlined by (Besthorn & McMillen, 2002) into ability expectation language results into the following:

“ecological feminism is rejecting the ability expectation of ‘dominance, competition, materialism, and technoscientific exploitation inherent in modernist, competition-based social systems’ (Besthorn & McMillen, 2002, p. 226) and nourishing the ability expectation of ‘caring and compassion and the creation and nurturing of life’ (Besthorn & McMillen, 2002, p. 226)”

(Wolbring, 2013a).

How the relationship between humans and nature is discussed, impacts disabled people. For example, Desmond Tutu sees the climate change discussions exhibiting an adaptation apartheid (Tutu, 2007), meaning, that we expect certain groups to adapt their abilities so that others can live out their existing abilities (e.g. ability to consume). Such adaptation apartheid also impacts how disabled people must adapt to the climate change discussions (Wolbring, 2009). Elsewhere it is brought notice that one main avenue for environmental activism is to decrease “environmental degradation” and “environmental toxins” using the negative imagery of ‘disability such as autism’ to make its argument (Wolbring, 2013a). As such the environmental health discourse exhibits ability identity abuse towards many disabled people. Looking at social sustainability through the ability studies lens highlights that the very discourse of social sustainability exhibits numerous problems for disabled people (Wolbring & Rybchinski, 2013) which could be classified as structural and cultural violence. Indeed, there is an active eco-ability community covering disabled people with relation to nature (Bentley et al., 2017; Eco-ability facebook group members⁴; Nocella II, 2017; Nocella II et al., 2012) unravelling many of the structural and cultural violence.

But there are other problems with the environmental discourses if looked at through an ability studies lens. Some called out ability privileges inherent in these discussions such as that of the AA of green consumption is exhibiting race and class privilege assumptions (Mengel, 2012). Interestingly, ability-based language is not used to critique the privilege of being able to fulfil the AA of green consumption (Wolbring, 2014a). It is not really race and class but the abilities they have or not have (do they have the ability to afford expensive food, given that many already experience food insecurity?). And if it is about the abilities, then there are others not covered under race and class that do not have this ability.

As to human-animal relationships, this relationship has also been debated for a long time (see vegan discussions, animal liberation discussions or discussions around in-vitro-meat). AA are central to these discussions in general (for example which abilities does one use to rank certain animals over other animals) and also in relation to disabled people (Wolbring, 2014a). In the worthiness hierarchy, certain abilities were put forward to move animals fulfilling these AA ahead of certain disabled humans seen as not fulfilling these AA (Singer, 2016).

6.0 Moving beyond the disabling use of AA: Enabling use of AA

Another important aspect of AA is that it can also be enabling for some (Wolbring & Yumakulov, 2015). To be able to live in peace could be seen as a positive ability expectation (Wolbring, 2014b). Indigenous people’s relationship with nature is seen as an example of

⁴Eco-ability facebook group members, Eco-ability: Animal, Earth and Disability Liberation. <https://www.facebook.com/groups/ecoability/> (Retrieved August 11, 2020).

positive AA humans have of nature (Colchester, 1994; Hinch, 1998). Ho mentioned the capability approach (Human Development and Capability Association, 2010) as one initiative to decrease structural violence (Ho, 2007). The capability approach focuses on peoples' abilities to do and ability to be and also includes the ability to act, the opportunity to act upon something (Wolbring, 2011; Wolbring & Burke, 2013). Indeed, the members of the capability discourse have developed lists of capabilities (Alkire & Black, 1997; Nussbaum, 2000) which are lists of ability expectations one should be able to act upon (Wolbring, 2011; Wolbring & Burke, 2013). A social policy frame is used to identify "certain abilities as essential that people should have the right to act on, and so exhibits certain forms of ableisms" (Wolbring, 2011, p. 4). The creation of the concept of sustainable development is seen by many as enabling a more positive ability expectation narrative between humans and nature, although many think it does not go far enough (Wolbring, 2013a; Wolbring, 2014a; Wolbring & Burke, 2013; Wolbring & Yumakulov, 2015). The ability to experience equity/equality is another AA that some see as a positive.

However, once we also look at the enabling aspect, the complexity of AA becomes even more evident. Enabling use of AA often disables others. So, AA pits groups and individuals against each other. Which AA are important for whom? AA important within one cultural setting are not important in another setting. As such ability studies allows for the investigation of cultural aspects of AA which is very important in a time of global interconnectivity. Numerous authors cover the linkage between globalization and structural violence (Bucher, 2004; Padilla et al., 2007; Srikantia, 2016). The four bioethics principles of AA (autonomy, justice, beneficence, and non-maleficence) (Beauchamp & Childress, 2001) are all up for interpretation. At this moment, we see many AA conflicts around environmental issues. Many of these AA are put forward to enable human nature relationships or to enable nature as its own entity independent of humans (Wolbring, 2011). However, the fact that it will disable others is something often not thought through. The same can be said about the discourses around human enhancement and artificial intelligence, machine learning, robotics and automatizations. They change the AA landscape and we do not have a good enough leverage yet to deal with the disabling use (intended or unintended) of something sold as enabling. Ability studies is a useful lens to map out the AA, spelling out who wants which AA, who benefits from which AA and other aspects. We also need AA governance and AA conflict resolutions which really is underdeveloped. If we look at the situation in many countries it seems AA conflicts between groups and individuals is on the rise with no AA conflict resolutions in sight.

7.0 Tools to engage with AA

Tools are needed to unmask and make visible AA and their disabling and enabling actual and potential use. AA conflicts are already exhibited in disabled-non-disabled humans, human-human in general, humans-animals, human-nature, humans-post/transhumans, humans-

cyborg humans and human-non sentient machines relationships and will appear in human-sentient machine, animal-sentient machine and nature-sentient machine relationships. AA conflicts between groups of humans are evident in many political discussions and are also evident in how COVID-19 was/is dealt with. I showcase below two tools that I am using with students and others to make people realise the multifaceted nature of AA, the many abilities people take for granted and the unconscious judgments that people make that are linked to AA.

7.1 The BIAS FREE framework

Fulfilling AA is one factor that allows one to join dominant groups. The dominant groups themselves define AA and use AA as tools to generate and justify social hierarchies. It is reasonable to expect that to maintain their power, whether consciously or unconsciously, dominant groups will maintain their negative attitudes towards the “others” and use it as a means to preserve their position in the hierarchy and keep their ability privileges (Wolbring, 2014a).

The BIAS FREE (Building an Integrative Analytical System For Recognizing and Eliminating Inequities) framework (Eichler & Burke, 2006a, 2006b), is a tool for identifying biases that are derived from social hierarchies. The biases can be divided into three distinct set of problems, a) maintaining an existing hierarchy, b) failing to examine differences and c) using double standards. Maintaining hierarchy presents itself in: accepting hierarchy as natural, denying hierarchy exists, adopting the perspective of the dominant group, applying the norms of the dominant groups to non-dominant groups, objectification of specific persons or groups, pathologisation, victim blaming and appropriation. Failing to investigate the difference presents itself in the insensitivity to differences, decontextualization, over-generalization or universalization and assumed homogeneity. Using double standards presents itself in overt double standard, underrepresentation or exclusion, exceptional underrepresentation or exclusion, denying agency, treating dominant opinions as facts, stereotyping, exaggerating differences and hiding double standards (Eichler & Burke, 2006a, 2006b).

The BIAS FREE Framework has been applied to various topics such as gender and race. One project applied the BIAS FREE Framework to policies related to disabled children in Kyrgyzstan (H4, H5, F1, F4, D1, D2 (Burke & Pupulin, 2009)) I use the BIAS FREE Framework in various undergraduate and graduate University classes.

I posit that the BIAS FREE Framework is a useful tool to unmask AA based social hierarchies, AA biases that drive other-ism and other AA linked problems of social hierarchies.

7.2 Tools to engage with AA: AA Exercises

The second tool I want to mention is the performance of AA exercises. My research group published a variety of AA exercises covering the unmasking of AA participants and the consequences of their AA, AA related to advancements in science and technology, AA related to different societies, peace related AA exercises and AA linked to being an active citizen, to mention a few topics (Wolbring, 2017b, 2019; Wolbring et al., 2020). One can develop unlimited amounts of exercises given that AA is so multifaceted.

8.0 Conclusion

Sherwin, an eminent bioethicist stated, “we [ethicists] lack the appropriate intellectual tools for promoting deep moral change in our society” (Sherwin, 2011, p. 80). She further states that “to find ways of addressing these difficult questions, we need to learn about the levers of social and political change” (Sherwin, 2011, p. 80)”. I have argued elsewhere that “understanding ability expectation dynamics is essential for understanding how to make a real difference” (Wolbring, 2012b, p. 300). I stated further that “ethical reasoning and the use of ethics theories per se does not lead people or institutions to change. Change in ability expectations are the levers of social and political change” (Wolbring, 2012b, p. 300). The question is who has the power to push their AA and which AA do they push for what intent.

I hope that the paper has showcased the complexity of AA. There are many issues in need of data and policy decisions. The ability studies lens which is a system analysis tool could be used to cut down on silo thinking and to call out social hierarchies that are detrimental. The paper also hopes to show that the challenge of AA is a constant one with new AA constantly appearing and old ones becoming obsolete.

We need a much stronger and systematic AA governance discourse, in addition to a mapping out of AA conflicts and a much bigger community of practice on AA governance (Wolbring, 2015, 2017b, 2019).

I leave the reader with a quote from a 2003 computer game which sums up the pervasiveness of AA and the need for AA governance.

“Conversation between Alex D and Paul Denton:

Paul Denton: If you want to even out the social order, you have to change the nature of power itself. Right? And what creates power? Wealth, physical strength, legislation — maybe — but none of those is the root principle of power.

Alex D: I’m listening.

Paul Denton: Ability is the ideal that drives the modern state. It’s a synonym for one’s worth, one’s social reach, one’s “election,” in the Biblical sense, and it’s the ideal that needs to be changed if people are to begin living as equals.

Alex D: And you think you can equalise humanity with biomodification?

Paul Denton: The commodification of ability – tuition, of course, but increasingly, genetic treatments, cybernetic protocols, now biomods – has had the side effect of creating a self-perpetuating aristocracy in all advanced societies. When ability becomes a public resource, what will distinguish people will be what they do with it. Intention. Dedication. Integrity. The qualities we would choose as the bedrock of the social order. (Deus Ex: Invisible War⁵)”.

⁵Deus Ex: Invisible War. (Wikiquote)
http://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Deus_Ex:_Invisible_War (Retrieved August 11, 2020).

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