

Discrimination creates differences but differences do not create discrimination. Differences can be positive and by accepting them we create a more resilient society. Negative differences become discrimination when they are imposed and harm other people.

Discrimination

Discrimination is imposed by groups or people that seek power. The desire for power is essential in discrimination. To obtain power we discriminate against other people in terms of race, sanity, religion, place of birth or ideology. A recent example is George Floyd. He was different because he was black, but discrimination used by power represented by police, caused his death. Negative difference and inequalities caused discrimination and his death.

But not only inequalities cause discrimination. For example, in my case I cannot articulate freely due to a brain injury caused by an accident. This circumstance becomes discrimination because people think that I cannot defend my ideas. People who cannot express themselves properly encounter obstacles—literal or symbolic—that leave them unable to access society in normal ways. Verbal communication with other people is regarded as essential, but society does not understand that communication is not only verbal. Gestures are important, as is demonstrated by the lockdown brought on by the covid virus. The way we work has become different. Remote working causes less verbal communication. Now the normal way of working has become less verbal and more distancing.

The most common and subtle reason for discrimination is lack of information. It is important to know, distinguish and analyzed discrimination events in order to change them. It is important to accept that there are different ways to accomplish everything. Companies are not aware enough, of the advances made by and for people with disabilities, and they discriminate because they think they cannot do the job. I was discriminated against in a job interview because the studio did not know that there is a system like Siri under development for people with speech deficiencies. This system will allow me to talk normally.

On top of my speech impairment, another example of discrimination is not being able to speak another language. If you do not speak a language you cannot participate in an intellectual discussion conducted in it. James Baldwin, an African American writer and activist during the 60's, lived in France but he could not speak French. He remained in silence with other people and at conferences. He was effectively erased from the intellectual discussions of the time. But being in silence can be beneficial. Baldwin was not discriminated in France because he was black. Its silence allowed him to better analyze society and listen to what other people say and how they say it. In this way he was better able to see the problems of society and became a better activist.

Another problem is posed by physical impediments. Because of my accident I make use of a wheel chair; while I can walk, it is usually quicker for me to move for any distance in the chair. I can go everywhere but I have to ask first if I can enter a store, go to the movie theater, or visit a friend at home. The world is not accessible. I am different but discrimination when I cannot move with freedom. I am different but I am discriminated against because I cannot visit you at your home or at work. The environment is not prepared for people like me.

Difference

People with disabilities are different but they encounter discrimination because is widely believed that they need help. Accessibility is a human right but it is important to think of what is involved in improving it as an opportunity. Many things designed for people with disabilities are now used by everybody in the “able” world because they make life more

convenient for us all. Ultimately, to think of accessibility as something positive makes people who are disabled useful and capable of helping society.

Universal design helps everybody and not only people with disabilities. A computer mouse is an example of design originally meant to help people with Parkinson's Disease but now used by everybody. Another example is the thick peeler. It was designed for people with limited hand movement, but now is used by everybody because it is easy to use. Another example is the inclined ramp that connects streets and sidewalks. Originally designed to help people with wheel chairs to cross the street, these ramps are now in general use because they make life easier for everybody. Wide and automatic doors are now compulsory in the design of public buildings. Other things designed for people with disabilities that are used now by everybody else include accessible bathrooms, textured floors, electric toothbrushes, velcro to close things, audiobooks, wheeled luggage, buses with low access levels, flexible drinking straws, and Google maps.

Another thing that creates differences are grades for young people in schools. Better or worse grades should never be an excuse to discriminate. In my case I did not get good grades in school but it was never an excuse to discriminate. I was different but never discriminated against, as at the end I went on a scholarship to Harvard.

We have to promote differences, and like this we create a society more resilient and accessibility becomes good for business. Accessibility should not be seen simply as a rights issue, but as a benefit to everybody.