

A Bad Attitude Is Not a Disability: An Analysis of the Definition of Disability

Mayesha Awal

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Introduction

Today, many social media posts consist of inspirational quotes that convey uplifting messages. Even the most inspirational quotes may seem positive at first, yet once we examine the latent meaning of these quotes, they can hold nuances that may be subject to dispute. The esteemed American figure skater Scott Hamilton once said, “The only disability in life is a bad attitude.” This statement is problematic in that it limits disability to a bad attitude, which is very damaging.

Hamilton’s understanding of a bad attitude contradicts Campbell and Stromondo’s definition of disabilities that they are, for the most part, are intrinsically neutral. However, a bad attitude is not intrinsically neutral, it is intrinsically, and in other ways, bad—it reduces the experience of individuals with a disability and that is harmful. In fact, Hamilton's claim that the only disability in life is a bad attitude is incorrect. To explain and clarify Hamilton’s quote, I will first establish a definition of disability and a bad attitude. Then, I will argue that his quote is not a good way to look at disability because his definition of a bad attitude as a disability is false, reductionist to disability, and ultimately harmful.

A Bad Attitude Is Not Intrinsically Neutral

Since a bad attitude cannot be defined as intrinsically neutral—unlike disability, Hamilton’s quote is not a good way to look at disability as the definition of a bad attitude is not the same as that of disability. To thoroughly examine and understand this, we must first deconstruct his quote and establish an accurate definition of disability. Campbell and Stramondo argue that most disabilities are an intrinsically neutral trait, meaning that having the disability is neither good nor bad for an individual (Campbell & Stramondo, 2017, pg. 162-163). To be intrinsically neutral means that the disability is not bad in it of itself but are “neither beneficial

nor harmful to those who have them” (pg. 163). For instance, if an individual was born without an arm, it does not necessarily mean that the absence of an arm is bad in itself. What might make it bad is the challenge brings to the daily lives of people who are afflicted by this condition. For instance, it may be difficult to engage in activities such as playing sports. Nonetheless, this does not reduce the overall quality of life as the individual would still be able to participate in these activities, but with slight difficulty. In addition, the lack of an arm does not induce intense pain for that individual that would render it to be bad in itself. Therefore, having a disability is not intrinsically bad for an individual (pg. 163). On the other hand, having a disability is not intrinsically good either. For instance, the missing arm itself is not good in and of itself; it does not necessarily increase the well-being of an individual from the fact of missing an arm (pg. 154)

Since the definition of disability has been established, a precise definition of a bad attitude is also necessary. Whereas a disability is intrinsically neutral, a bad attitude is intrinsically bad. This is because a bad attitude is an unwillingness or a stubbornness that results in a pessimistic outlook on life. This negative disposition hampers an individual in their pursuits because of their uncooperative behavior. Hence, a bad attitude affects every aspect of life once an individual adopts it. The bad attitude can be paralleled to chronic pain—just as intense pain carries with itself unpleasant feelings of chronic pain, a bad attitude carries with itself detrimental and emotionally painful characteristics (pg. 154). Therefore, a bad attitude is not intrinsically neutral because it carries with it negative qualities that are detrimental to an individual. Consequently, in many ways, a bad attitude is more of a hindrance than a disability. This is why Hamilton’s claim of a bad attitude as the only disability is not a good way to look at disability. From this analysis, Hamilton’s understanding of a bad attitude as a disability is too

narrow because it contradicts Campbell and Stramondo's definition of disability as an intrinsically neutral trait.

A Bad Attitude Diminishes the Experience of a Disability

Hamilton's quote is not a good way to look at disability because it proposes that in order to "get over" their obstacles all that people with a disability have to do is change their attitudes. His proposal is inappropriate as it equalizes the experience of those with bad attitudes to those individuals with actual disabilities. This equation is quite problematic. A bad attitude is not a disability; an individual with a bad attitude can simply work on bettering their disposition. In other words, a bad attitude is a rectifiable condition, which cannot be said for a disability. An individual with a disability cannot simply decide that he or she can change their condition because in most cases, it is not alterable. Instead, those with disabilities are often faced with the task of learning to live with their condition since they cannot change it. This is important because of the fact that Hamilton's statement implies a distorted understanding of the experience of disability. It wrongly assumes that the individual has the power to change his or her disability even though actually have no control over their disability. Evidently, this assumption is false and it is clear that disability cannot be easily fixed by a simple change of attitude.

Placing blame on the individual for their "bad attitude" as a contribution to their disability can be compared to Barnes' analysis of society's perception of those with chronic illness—that they are responsible for their own disabilities (Wendell, 2001, pg. 29). For example, rheumatoid arthritis is a chronic illness and an individual who has this condition may find difficulty working. Their joints may ache from working from a prolonged period of time because of their disability. However, others may place blame and responsibility on the individual for their

disability because their painful condition is not clearly visible from their physical appearance (pg. 29). As a result, these people label them “lazy” or “unmotivated,” when, in reality, the individual is not to blame as they really have no control over their disability (pg. 29). Similar to the consequences from the assumptions of those with chronic illness, this narrative of a bad attitude as a disability can affect other aspects of an individual’s life. For instance, others may have a suspicion of those with disabilities for causing them because of their “bad attitude,” even if it may be a legitimate concern. Seeing bad attitude as a disability underestimates the very real experience of those who are disabled adding yet another reason why Hamilton’s view of disability is problematic.

A Bad Attitude Is Harmful

Unlike a disability, a bad attitude is intrinsically bad because it is harmful in and of itself to an individual. Campbell and Stromondo define harm to be something that “negatively impacts your well-being” (Campbell & Stramondo, 2017, pg. 154). In addition, “well-being” is defined by how sound life is for the individual (pg 156). If this is the definition of harm, then a bad attitude does lead to this negative outcome and is even worse than the disability itself. As a result, it prevents one from accomplishing achievements in their lives and has a negative impact on their overall quality of life.

A bad attitude is also harmful because it excludes the entire class of disabled individuals, which can have significant negative repercussions. Within this category of intrinsically neutral, there is a wide range of disabilities; it includes chronic illnesses, mental and physical barriers that are not in it of itself bad (Barnes, 2009, pg. 346). Hamilton’s quote can be very damaging to the disability community because it delegitimizes and excludes these disabilities. A negative

implication is that his quote “can reduce attention to those disabled people whose bodies are highly medicalized because of their suffering, their deteriorating health, or the threat of death” (Wendell, 2001, pg. 18). This is problematic because Hamilton’s quote can have negative policy implications, which would exclude the care of these individuals. Therefore, it is important to not blame individuals for their condition because this could lead to a widespread attitude of having the disabled community finding their own means to resolve their condition, which is why Hamilton’s quote is not a suitable way to examine disability.

Conclusion

Through this analysis, we have reached several important conclusions of why Hamilton’s quote is not a good way to look at disability. First, a bad attitude is not a disability because it is not intrinsically neutral. Second, a bad attitude normalizes a disability because it holds the disabled individual responsible for their condition. Third, a bad attitude is harmful because it not only affects the overall well-being of an individual but it also affects the entire disabled community. Hamilton’s quote should prompt us to be more cautious when defining disabilities because, if taken seriously, such a misunderstanding of the comparison between disability and a bad attitude is harmful.

References

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