



Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion and the Multicultural Populations with Disabilities It Affects

Introduction

A significant percentage of people in the United States have a disability. In fact, 1 in 4 adults in the United States have a disability.⁴ According to the CDC, adults with disabilities report frequent mental distress about 5 times more than those without disabilities.⁵ These are adults of all different races/ethnicities. There are experiences more common to people of color and people with disabilities that can affect mental health. For example, feeling like people avoid you out of ignorance and/or fear can be a common reality for people with disabilities and people of color. As said by Mental Health America, this kind of experience can be a significant “mental health burden.”⁷ This is one reason why considering the intersection of race/ethnicity, disabilities, and mental health is important. Also, a person’s cultural background and beliefs can affect their view and expectations of services. Learning about equity, diversity, and inclusion can help professionals serve multicultural individuals with disabilities better.

This fact sheet will provide a brief overview of:

- important concepts related to equity, diversity, and inclusion, and
- diversity in the United States among people with disabilities

Concepts Related to Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion

Culture generally refers to a group’s values, beliefs, and practices that inform thoughts and behaviors.¹⁴ Although culture can be related to race/ethnicity it is not the same concept. A person’s culture can be influenced by their identification with many groups beyond race/ethnicity too. For example, identifying as part of the disability community and LGBTQ

(lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer) community can be part of a person’s culture.

Intersectionality is an important concept related to equity, diversity, and inclusion. Intersectionality calls attention to how a person’s identity is made up of overlapping parts which affects their interactions with society.¹¹ In [Kayla Rodriguez’s digital storytelling episode](#), she states “(...) often autistic women get misdiagnosed or get diagnosed later. We have to deal with masking more often and there’s specific things that autistic women deal with differently than autistic men.”⁸ “Masking” is when a person minimizes or tries to hide their neurodiverse traits, often to be accepted by others more easily. This example from Kayla, a self-advocate, demonstrates how being a woman overlaps with being autistic and contributes to unique challenges.

Cultural competence is another important concept related to equity, diversity, and inclusion. If services practice cultural competence, they can work effectively for people from diverse cultures. Some features of cultural competence include valuing diversity, being self-aware, seeking to improve cultural knowledge, and adapting to a community’s unique needs. It is important to realize that cultural competence exists on a continuum, meaning it can always be improved.² By making continuous efforts to become more culturally competent, providers and organizations can become more inclusive.

Inclusion is “the meaningful representation and consideration of diverse groups.” This goes beyond just including diverse people on advisory boards or as part of staff. When inclusion efforts are meaningful, they “undo systems of oppression.”¹ Systems of oppression are policies and practices that are unfair towards diverse groups. Being willing to examine and change ineffective or unjust policies

and procedures can be critical for improving services.

Diversity Among People with Disabilities

As mentioned earlier, many people in the United States have a disability, with 61 million adults having a disability.⁴ Also, the United States has and is becoming increasingly diverse. For example, about half of the youth under 18 years old are Hispanic/Latinx, Black or African American, American Indian and Alaska Native, Asian, and Native Hawaiian and other Pacific Islander.¹² Diversity among people with disabilities is important to recognize, because there are disparities needing to be addressed. For example, it is known that people with disabilities are underrepresented in the workforce. However, data shows that this disparity has been found to be particularly worse for racial/ethnic minorities with disabilities. The jobless rates for Hispanic, African American, and Asian people with disabilities are all higher than for White people with disabilities.³ This may contribute to how 40% of African Americans with disabilities live in poverty, compared to 24% of White Americans with disabilities.⁹ These experiences can affect a person's mental health, and vice versa, poor mental health can contribute to existing challenges.

Another factor that can affect mental health is how someone views themselves and their disability. This can be influenced by the messages received from family, friends, and educators. Like if disability is seen as a problem that needs to be fixed, as a difference, or as a strength. Disability rights advocates have emphasized the need for more recognition of disabled role models, especially for racial/ethnic minorities.¹⁰ Data shows that disability rates for children are actually highest among American Indian/Alaska Native and African Americans.¹³ When taught about influential activists in school, students are often told about their accomplishments but not told about their disability. For example, Harriet Tubman and Fannie Lou Hamer are both influential African American activists who had disabilities, but many are not told this.⁶ What message does this send?

Contributors

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