Examining Ableism in Higher Education through Social Dominance Theory and Social Learning Theory

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Abstract In most societies, some social identity groups hold a disproportionate amount of social, cultural, and economic power, while other groups hold little. In contemporary U.S. society, examples of this power are evident around issues of ability/disability, with able-bodied individuals wielding social dominance and people with disabilities experiencing a lack of social, cultural, and economic power. However, this relationship between able-bodied individuals and people with disabilities is neither static nor determinant; and through social modeling it may be altered to foster increased positive outcomes for people with disabilities, including both undergraduate and graduate students. As educators and institutional staff members frequently engage with students with disabilities, improving ally behavior and overall accessibility will increase rapport building with students, leading to more just and equitable interactions.

Keywords ableism · ally behavior · diversity · disability · higher education

The extensive literature on diversity reflects a significant amount of work on issues of racism, sexism, and heterosexism, and their corresponding privileges. The discussion around disability has been going on for several decades. The mainstream disability rights movement gained momentum in the 1960s and 1970s (Wolbring, 2012), and the Americans with Disabilities Act was enacted in 1990 (United States Code, 2008). However, significantly less attention has been given to ableism and the privilege of those who do not have disabilities. Ableism, which is defined as the act of prejudice or discrimination against people with disabilities and the devaluation of disability (Hehir, 2002), and able-bodied privilege, which is the set of unearned privileges held by individuals without disabilities, are connected systems that maintain stratification around disability. Ableism covers a wide range of behaviors and structural and cultural norms, and it is

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...a pervasive system of discrimination and exclusion that oppresses people who have mental, emotional and physical disabilities...deeply rooted beliefs about health, productivity, beauty and the value of human of life, perpetuated by the public and private media, combined to create an environment that is often hostile to those whose physical, mental, cognitive, and sensory abilities...fall out of the scope of what is currently defined as socially acceptable (Rauscher and McClintock, 1996, p. 198).

The United States Census Bureau (2012) reported that in the 2010 Census 18.7% of all those surveyed, including children, had a disability and that 12.7% of the entire population had a disability designated as severe. Those numbers are even greater when only looking at older youth and adults, the portion of the population that is age 15 and above, with 21.3% having a disability and 14.8% of all those 15 and older having a disability labeled as being severe. Disabilities that meet the guidelines to be defined as severe include being deaf or blind (or unable to see, hear, or have speech understood); using a cane, crutches or wheelchair; being unable to walk, use stairs, carry or lift objects; or needing another adult to perform activities of daily living. These findings together suggest that approximately one fifth of U.S. residents are currently living with a disability.

Privilege of all kinds (e.g., male privilege, heterosexual privilege, White privilege, Christian privilege) and various isms significantly shape society. Identities shape almost every interaction from the identities of those holding leadership roles at various institutions, including educational settings (Tisdell, 1993), to how the media portrays members of different identity groups (Marks, 1996). While sexism, racism, and other isms certainly are prevalent in all types of systems and interactions, Wolbring (2008) argued that ableism is one of the most accepted and wide spread isms in society and that it works in conjunction with many other isms. Because of the lack of conversation around ableism and able-bodied privilege, prejudice against people with disabilities is more prevalent and socially acceptable, at times, than prejudice against people of color (Ford, 2009). One scholar commented as follows.

Public caricatures of Blacks as uneducated, promiscuous or intellectually inferior, while enduring, increasingly offend the social and political sensibilities of most. However, the depiction of a person with a physical disability as unprofessional, helpless, ignorant or lazy is not seen as comparably offensive. In fact, outcry against those depictions is viewed by some as unjustified complaining (Ford, 2009, p. 16).

In exploring ableism, it is important to understand its origins and how it continues to be reinforced in today’s society. Without a basic understanding of how privilege and oppression are created and maintained, it is difficult to challenge ableism on a systemic or personal level. In this article, social dominance theory will be used as the lens through which to better comprehend ableism. With a basic knowledge of how ableism is constructed, one can then examine possible ways with which ableism can be challenged and dismantled. Social learning theory has been used in a variety of ways to change attitudes and behaviors, and it is a potential framework through which ableist behavior could be modified in higher education setting.

Social dominance theory contends that all societies have systems based on social identity group-based hierarchies. Within these hierarchies, at least one social identity group holds dominance (with this privilege being unearned) over others, and at least one social identity group occupies a subordinate position (Encyclopedia of Power, 2011; Sidanis & Pratto, 1999; Sidanis, Pratto, Laar & Levi, 2004; Walls, 2005). In the context of ableism and able-bodied privilege, able-bodied people are the dominant group, while people with disabilities are the subordinate group.

Social learning theory (Bandura, 1977; Franks, 1974; Rotter, 1954) is a predictive theory in the field of psychology that explains how behaviors can be changed through social modeling
(Means, 2009; Thyer & Myers, 1998). It examines how an individual’s beliefs about certain outcomes of specific behaviors can actually influence how that individual acts and may even shift their worldview. Based on this, social learning theory is an excellent model that may be able to help people, specifically those working in higher education, recognize their able-bodied perspective and understand how their actions maintain ableism. Social learning theory also provides a framework for the development of interventions that can foster social change in society. Together, social dominance theory and social learning theory can be used to explain the existence of ableism and able-bodied privilege in our society and to provide a framework for changing individuals’ behaviors through social modeling to move towards the creation of a more inclusive culture. This article examines these two theories, their origins, their applications in relationship to ableism and able-bodied privilege, and suggests how they can be used to promote social change in higher education settings.

**Social Dominance Theory**

Social dominance theory was developed in the late 1990s in an effort to examine discrimination and prejudice (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999; Sidanius, et al., 2004). This theoretical framework addresses three questions. Why is it that members of certain social groups act to oppress and discriminate against members of other specific social groups, why is this oppression so engrained in most societies, and why is it so incredibly challenging to change this oppression (Encyclopedia of Power, 2011; Pratto, Sidanius and Levin, 2006; Walls, 2005)? Unlike structural theories that aim to pin prejudice and discrimination to one root social cause, social dominance theory includes both individuals and the structural factors that work together to create various practices of oppression that are social identity group-based (Pratto, Sidanius & Levin, 2006; Sidanius, Pratto, Laar & Levi, 2004).

Originally social dominance theory argued that societies that had stable economies encompassed three distinctly different systems that enforced group-based hierarchy: 1) an age system, in which those who are considered adults hold a high level of social capital and dominance over those who are considered children; 2) a gender system, in which men have disparate political and social power as compared to women; and 3) an arbitrary-set system, in which there are many groups that are created on a capricious basis (i.e., with no correlation to the human life-cycle) ad that have a large disparity in their access to social capital (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999; Sidanius, Pratto, Laar & Levi, 2004). Arbitrary-set groups can include social identity groups around race, class, religion, sexual orientation, gender presentation and nationality, among others. It is through this concept of arbitrary-set groups that social dominance regarding ability fits (Sidanius, Pratto, Laar & Levi, 2004). Despite ability expectations being a cultural and/or social creation, being in the able-bodied social group grants members of that group unearned privilege, resulting in the systemic oppression and subordination of people with disabilities (Wolbring, 2012).

Because of the multiple social aspects that are included in this theory, it is generalizable to society as whole, rather than just pockets of society or specific identity groups, or even specific issues of oppression, as is expressed in this comment.

Social dominance theory has included consideration of the cultural, ideological, political and structural aspects of societies, leading to a focus on similarities and differences across societies, interactions between psychological and social-contextual processes, and the subtle yet important similarities and differences between various types of group based oppression. (Sidanius, Pratto, Laar & Levi, 2004, pp. 847)
Due to how society values ability (specifically, physical and cognitive abilities) over disability or ability variation of any sort, it is clear that social dominance theory informs the examination of these origins and perpetuations of ableism. This theory explains the disproportionate social capital that people who are viewed as traditionally able-bodied have when compared to people with disabilities and how prejudice, discrimination, and overall oppression become interwoven into everyday interactions, systems, and institutions, resulting in pervasive ableism.

Social identity group hierarchy is created by the combined effects of discrimination and prejudice from multiple sources, including institutions, individuals, and intergroup processes. All of these foundations of discrimination work together to give power to dominant groups rather than the subordinate groups. Together, the constructs continue to perpetuate this oppression through social ideologies that are consensually shared by members of the dominant social groups as well as by the members of marginalized groups (Pratto, Sidanius & Levin, 2006).

People in the dominant identity groups have the social, cultural, and economic power to enact laws, reinforce norms, and define ideals. There are many ways in which these power differentials regarding disability are authorized in society. One of the more widely known examples is how long it took to enact the Americans with Disabilities Act (United States Code, 2008), which was not passed until 1990. On this note, many exceptions are made for places not to have to be ADA accessible (United States Department of Justice Civil Rights Division, 2011) including exceptions for all religious organizations and historical buildings. There has been research regarding the fact that employers may comply with ADA regulations around hiring, but continue to maintain disability-based hostile work environments (Massengill, 2004), thereby reducing access and opportunities for people with disabilities in the workforce. The ways in which people with disabilities are portrayed in the media (Farnall & Smith, 1999; Parasha & Devanathan, 2006) also demonstrate social dominance, with able-bodied individuals deciding the ways in which people with disabilities will be showcased. Even the pejorative and common use of ableist language like “crazy” and “flame” in everyday vernacular (Garland-Thomson, 2002) serves to reinforce the privilege/oppression binary that separates able-bodied individuals from those with disabilities. The dominance of the social identity group of those with able-bodied privilege is pervasive in many areas of society and remains one of the less controversial forms of discrimination and prejudice in our culture.

The cultural values a society holds around identities and equity has an impact on how social dominance theory plays out among its members. Batalha, Reynolds & Newbigin (2011) examined groups of both men and women in Australia, which has a higher level of social dominance orientation in masculine people indicating that men are a much more dominant social identity group, and in Sweden, which has almost equal levels of social dominance orientation in men and women, indicating that these two genders hold equal dominance or social capital in their society. Their findings suggest that a society that has accepted a cultural value of gender equality is more likely to reduce dominant groups’ levels of social dominance orientation, resulting in multiple genders sharing practices and beliefs of equality.

The ways in which social dominance theory informs ableism and, more specifically, the ways that able-bodied privilege may impact education are evident in the discussion of the power dynamics of teachers educating students about social identity groups of which they are not members (Marks, 1996). To address ableism in educational settings, able-bodied educators discussing privilege and oppression may create a learning environment that offers allyship (the acts of those with privilege working to understand and dismantle the oppression of others from which they benefit (Broido, 2000)) by first recognizing and exploring their own privilege and discussing that journey with their students so as to acknowledge this power differential (Middleton, Anderson & Banning, 2009). For example, having an able-bodied professor teaching disability studies may further reinforce the social dominance of able-bodied individuals over people with disabilities, potentially silencing students
with disabilities who might be afraid to share their perspectives on disabilities or dissenting thoughts with a professor whose power lies in being part of a dominant social identity group (Marks, 1996). Given that disability is socially constructed as a weaker or subordinate social identity group (Wolbring, 2012), educators must provide examples to the contrary in order to challenge these beliefs by including materials that feature people with disabilities, encouraging critiques of how people with disabilities may be portrayed, and being open to discussion regarding how ableism occurs in classroom and ableism settings.

One criticism of social dominance theory is that it too conceptual rather than useful in applied contexts (Encyclopedia of Power, 2011). Some argue that the theory is inaccessible to those outside the fields of academia. However, this theory can be communicated in a way that is understandable to people across educational levels so as to explain how existing systems of inequality, oppression, and dominance are reinforced throughout society. Another criticism is that social dominance theory has gone through three distinctly different iterations, including foundational changes to the theory (Rubin and Hewstone, 2004), all of which are considered social dominance theory. Rubin and Hewstone argued that the three iterations of social dominance theory are separate hypotheses supporting social dominance orientation. Social dominance orientation is the concept from which social dominance theory emerged, where those who score higher on the social dominance orientation scale frequently have more interest in maintaining a hierarchical world. While this point does raise interesting questions around foundational changes in theoretical development, a theory that changes to incorporate new data so as to better reflect social reality can also be seen as flexible enough to explain the constantly fluctuating concepts of power, privilege, and oppression, and adapt to new evidence.

While social dominance theory acknowledges how dominance and oppression can happen throughout various identities (age, sex, gender, race, ability, orientation, class, nationality, etc.), it does not explore intersectional identities. For example, a low-income, bisexual Black woman with a disability is likely to experience subjugation across the facets of her various identities. As such, a new direction for social dominance theory to continue its adaptive approach is for it to examine how belonging to multiple subordinate groups can affect someone’s experience of social dominance or how being part of both socially dominant and socially subordinate groups, like a man of color or a heterosexual person with disabilities. Intersections of identities are present in all individuals because every person holds multiple identities and membership in different social identities groups, and these intersections of identities should be included as part of all identity specific discussions. This new direction shifts the focus from salient identities to the combination of multiple identities, in particular, the intersection of these identities.

Social Learning Theory

Developed by Rotter and Bandura throughout the 1950s, 60s, and 70s, (Bandura, 1977; Mearns, 2009; Franks, 1974; Rotter, 1954), social learning theory (social cognitive theory as it was renamed in Bandura’s later works) is a psychological theory explaining how social influences impact the beliefs and actions of individual members of society. These influences include how someone was raised and how the views of a person’s social peers may impact an individual’s beliefs and actions. Rotter focused on behavior potential and postulated that behavior is based on two things: the desirability of outcomes of the behavior and the supposed probability that the behavior will result in a desirable outcome. Different behaviors will be observed in different situations, depending on the perceived values of others in that situation and the assumed desired outcomes. This demonstrates why the same person may act differently in two different situations, given a subjective context.
Social learning theory attempted to close the divide between personality theory, traditional learning theory, and experimental psychology (Franks, 1974) by creating a theory that encompasses aspects of all of these fields. Bandura later continued the work begun by Rotter, believing in a similar vein that the personalities of individuals develop over time through vicarious and direct interactions with other individuals, social groups, and the environment as a whole (Bandura, 1977; Mearns, 2009). Narrowing Rotter's overview, Bandura contended that there are two factors regarding personality and behavior. The first is self-efficacy, whether an individual has the skills to complete a specific behavior. The second is outcome expectancies, how an individual thinks about the results of their behavior. Positive beliefs in a behavior will result in reinforcement, while negative beliefs about that behavior will not (Bandura, 1977; Mearns, 2009).

Social learning theory is now widely accepted in the fields of psychology, counseling, social work, and higher education. In addition to discussions in many Human Behavior in the Social Environment (HBSE) textbooks in social work, more than half of the published studies in social work literature that have demonstrated positive outcomes have been based on the foundations of social learning theory (Thyer & Myers, 2008). These studies use techniques based on operant conditioning, respondent conditioning, and behavioral learning, all with the intent of changing behavior based on the social modeling of desirable outcomes. Thyer and Myers (2008) also assert how social learning theory works well in educating people in various helping professions, given how well it works within the person-in-environment model. In the case of ableism, rather than telling someone that they are a ‘bad’ person or a ‘bad’ professional for having able-bodied privilege and potentially for having perpetuated ableism, discrimination, and prejudice (whether intentionally or not), an application of social learning theory would be to meet them where they are as an individual. It would then use social modeling to shift their views and behaviors to a more neutral place, with an end goal of eventually having them fit into a more anti-ableism or anti-oppressive framework. This social modeling would be used to support professionals in higher education to understand able-bodied privilege and offer a higher level of cultural responsiveness to people with disabilities.

Across disciplines, social learning theory has been used to explain discrepancies and disparities between dominant and subordinate social identity groups, such as between White people and people of color, men and women, youth and adults, in regard to many issues, including crime rates, sexual activity, interpersonal violence, educational settings, and outcomes. While social dominance theory is able to explain much of the construction of the concept of ableism, social learning theory has the potential to be used as a framework to improve or reform ableist culture. It can be used as model for intervention to educate those with able-bodied privilege about their unearned privilege and how that plays into reinforcing an ableist culture. Peer groups that model acknowledgement of privilege create a desired outcome of being privilege aware. Therefore, able-bodied individuals can be encouraged to work on changing their behavior not only to recognize their own able-bodied privilege, but also to identify how social identity groups gain and retain unearned privilege, perceived dominance, and social capital over those social identity groups that are perceived as subordinate.

More specifically, it is possible to look at using social learning theory to model the similarities between those who have disabilities and those who experience able-bodied privilege.

When we emphasize the similarities between disabled and non-disabled people, we blur the boundaries and reduce the otherness of those who are not able-bodied. Able-bodied people who reflect upon their own mental and physical limitations are more likely to identify with the struggles of disabled people (Pease, 2010, p. 161).
Social learning theory suggests that, when those who are able-bodied are engaged by their peers in positive conversations around disability, ableism, and able-bodied privilege with the aim of acknowledging able-bodied privilege and reducing ableism, it is likely that these individuals will be more open to expanding their views. If able-bodied people, such as professors and institutional staff members, are put in a social setting where they are positively encouraged to examine some of their own issues around potential limitations or where others discuss how they are only temporarily able-bodied or have experienced short term disabilities like mobility issues from sprains and broken bones or lack of vision from ocular surgery, they are more likely to learn about the experience of able-bodied privilege and ableism and seek acceptance by acknowledging their experiences of privilege.

Some view Rotter as more a personality theorist than a behavioral theorist (Franks, 1974); yet he has created a theory that specifically predicts potential behavioral changes based on perceived positive outcomes. Also, this theory, while having more practical applications than social dominance theory, remains largely theoretical in design. However, evidence supports the use of social learning theory as a method to change behavior not only around socially constructed identities, but also around things like drug and alcohol use, depression and grief, sexual disorders, insomnia, panic disorders, and more (Thyer and Myers, 2008). While this criticism may have been valid at the inception of social learning theory, empirical evidence has since demonstrated many practical applications, negating the concern that this theory is too ideological.

This theory operates under the assumptions that people genuinely care about how their behavior outcome will be viewed by others and that people are in environments where there are others in their social group who can provide the interaction needed to facilitate change around their worldview. If that is not the case, it is possible that no amount of social engagement and modeling will persuade these individuals to change their beliefs, or even question whether they are valid. As people frequently tend to surround themselves with like-minded individuals from similar social groups, there may not be the presence of people willing to model challenging ableism in everyone’s life. When looking at the intersections of other social identity groups and isms, such as classism, racism, and sexism, some of these intersections actually reinforce ableism and able-bodied privilege rather than challenging someone’s existing views.

A recent news story demonstrated the intersection of ableism and classism. According to Palmeri (2013), a wealthy Manhattan mother was hiring tour guides with disabilities to get through the lines more quickly at Disney World. Rather than other wealthy parents attempting to model a more egalitarian model, some actually requested contact information from the original tour guide user so that they, too, could use a person with a disability as a guide to soar through the lines. Social modeling works both positively and negatively and can sometimes serve to reinforce behavior that reinforces the dominant paradigm.

A review of research in criminological and sociological literature found that 95% of the studies reviewed reported that social learning theory did indeed promote positive reinforcement (Brauer & Tittle, 2012). However, Brauer and Tittle also pointed out that many aspects of social learning theory are difficult to measure; and, if interventions are done on paper or online, these methodologies do not follow the original tenets of social learning theory (using the modeling behavior of others, in person), making it hard to assess whether specific interventions with a social learning theory framework are in fact successful. Additionally, a meta-analysis of social learning theory studies in criminal justice and criminology journals (Pratt, et al., 2010) found that effect sizes varied from study to study, offering inconclusive evidence of the efficacy of social learning theory as a useful framework for various behavioral interventions.
Gaps

A gap in both theories is that they each work only on a specific part of the challenge of social justice for people with disabilities. Just as social dominance theory works specifically to explain some of the how and why behind prejudice, discrimination, and subsequent oppression of social identity groups seen as subordinate, social learning theory only applies in a predictive model, looking at the behaviors of individuals and how to change those behaviors through social modeling. Consequently, social dominance theory does not promote the practical implications that are required for anti-oppressive work and change. Social learning theory does not examine where these prejudiced and discriminatory behaviors came from as much as it focuses upon how to change them. Without looking at both the systemic establishment of oppression and the method of social change together, each theory only addresses one facet of how oppression happens in our society.

The literature contains a variety of theoretical and empirical articles on using social dominance theory to explain specific isms, such as racism, sexism, ageism, and others, and even to provide a foundation for intergroup relations between a social identity group that holds social dominance and one that is perceived as subordinate. However, there are few articles discussing how to apply it to intersectional identities or between groups that are both socially dominant or both socially subordinate. Social learning theory offers significant evidence and numerous studies applying this method to changing behaviors around specific beliefs or privileges (e.g., racist views, White privilege, and sexism/male privilege.), but there is little conversation about its application around multiple privileges (for example, how to work with straight, White, cisgender [those whose sex assigned at birth matches their gender identity], the able-bodied, upper-class men or about people who hold some socially dominant identities and some socially subordinate identities. Further research could be done to examine ways in which both of these theories could be used in conjunction with one another, supporting ally behavior across identities, instead of just one social identity at a time.

There is also the argument that changing the consciousness of individuals with privilege around social dominance and oppression alone does not solve the problem completely (Pease, 2010). Oppression is engrained into many aspects of our society, into systems, institutions, and reaches beyond simply individuals. While changing how individuals view dominance and subordination can be a step towards changing the way oppression presents itself, where it exists and/or how it is socially constructed, individual identities and social capital do not exist in a vacuum. Missing are the findings on how social dominance theory and social learning theory can be applied to institutions, governments, and other systems, if they can be applied at all. If this is not feasible and these theories really do focus more on the individual and how an individual fits into the larger social context, there is a need for research on how society can move forward by using these theories either in collaboration with theories that examine systems or to create complementary theories that look at systems and creating systemic change. This area of research would provide a larger framework with which to view the work that is needed to reduce the inequality afforded to members of different social identities groups.

Implications for Ally Behavior

These two theories can be used together in both formal and informal educational settings to teach individuals about the social creation of dominance and to demonstrate how that dominance informs ableism and able-bodied privilege. This information can then be used to help able-bodied higher education faculty and staff members to recognize from where
unearned able-bodied privilege comes and to support these individuals in examining their behavior through an ally lens. Allies are those individuals who have identities which are part of groups that hold social dominance and who are committed to working to change systems of oppression from which they benefit in the way of having unearned privilege and power based on their membership in a social group (Washington & Evans, 1991; Broido, 2000). By providing social modeling on how to act in ways that do not continue to maintain ableism, it could create change in how ableism is perpetuated in higher educational settings, making the climate more inclusive. The actions of able-bodied individuals working to reduce ableism language, policies, and activities is a demonstration of ally behavior, whether on a smaller, individual, or classroom level or in a manner that impacts a campus or institution on a larger scale.

While many institutions of higher education have disability centers, ableist microaggressions may be taking place in classrooms, in residence halls, and in interactions between students and staff or faculty. Microaggressions are everyday interactions that perpetuate inequalities and stereotypes against persons who are part of marginalized communities (Solórzano, Ceja & Yosso, 2000; Sue, 2010). Microaggressions are the brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, and environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory or negative racial, gender, sexual, and religious slights and insults to the target person or group (Sue, 2010, p. 6). While much of the discourse on microaggressions is focused on racism, sexism, and heterosexism, this concept is also evident in ableist behavior.

Such microaggressions may include, for example, telling someone that they speak very well for a Deaf person, asking everyone in a group to stand for an activity (with the assumption that everyone can stand), making a joke about how fast someone can go in their wheelchair (Storey, 2007), or telling someone they are "lucky" that they are able to bring their support dog to class with them. When able-bodied individuals can draw attention to these often intentional but potentially hurtful acts of ableism, gently calling them out (including when they themselves are behind these acts) and leading discussions on what impact ableism may have, this practical application of social learning theory can have wide reaching impacts, and not only on students with disabilities. Other ally behavior that could reduce microaggressions in higher education might entail including visuals, guest speakers, and materials that showcase individuals with disabilities; offering alternatives to class activities or institutional activities that require movement of all participants; using intentional language (for example, using the term "move forward, move back" rather than "step up, step back" to encourage self-awareness around participation); automatically including subtitles when showing videos; and remembering that not all disabilities are visible. Even though it may appear that there is no one with an "obvious" disability in a class or group or at an institutional event, we should all continue to work to make it an accessible environment. When discussing disabilities, particularly mental illness and learning disabilities, instructors should ensure that language is inclusive, rather than using a phrase such as "those people," given that students in classroom settings might have some of the disabilities and impairments being discussed.

Microaggressions are not the only way that ableism manifests itself in higher education. Sternberg’s study (1997) revealed that certain types of learners and learning styles are valued over others; that students who have learning disabilities often felt misunderstood, as if they needed to work harder than their peers; and that they had to intentionally seek out strategies for success in order to make it through their educational programs (Denthart, 2008). While disability centers on campuses operate with the intention of supporting students, some students needing to use these centers reported feelings of shame and stigma from being "different" and requiring special accommodations (Hutchison & Wolbring, 2012). Students in the same study reported a need for increased awareness around disability issues on campus with the goal of
awareness becoming implicit so that campuses and classrooms would already be aware and inclusive of disability from the beginning rather than just having discussions about disability issues. Even the assumption that all students with disabilities require accommodations and should register with the disability center on their campus is an assumption grounded in ableism.

On a grander scale than changing language and classroom examples, ally behavior includes supporting students with disabilities in serving on campus committees, commissions and boards; actively seeking out and recruiting students with disabilities (learning and other wise) as applicants for academic programs; restructuring curricula to apply to all types of learning styles and abilities; and always centering disability-related decisions and policies around people with disabilities, ensuring that they have a place at the table. While these suggestions may not be as simple as holding an in-service day to address ableist language, systemic changes have the ability to enact powerful change on campuses of higher education, significantly increasing access and opportunity for persons with disabilities and challenging ableist practices already in place and those that might be put into place.

This combination of theories has worked well in explaining racism and in socially modeling anti-racist thinking and practices amongst individuals who have recognized their own White privilege (Pettijohn & Walzer, 2008; Spencer, 1998) and also in the current national conversation around lesbian, gay, and bisexual rights (Draughn, Elkins & Roy, 2002; Pettijohn & Walzer, 2008; Rogers, McRee & Amrtz, 2009). One belief is that, as people gain information about the systemic oppression that is maintained by those who have privilege and are exposed to modeling behavior demonstrating that it is not a zero-sum game, those with privilege are more likely to be more open to shifting their views around racism, sexism, and hetero-centrism (Pettijohn & Walzer, 2008). It is probable that repeating this method around ableism and able-bodied privilege would have a similar effect in reducing ableism and increasing able-bodied ally behavior.

There are, of course, limitations not only with the application of these theories, but also with targeting only higher education. Given that ableism is implicit throughout society, and throughout the educational system, attention should also be given towards increasing ally behavior and decreasing ableism at all educational levels, including elementary and secondary. Much of the literature (Hehir, 2002; Storey, 2007) focuses on these age groups and how ableism occurs in these educational settings, creating an opening for new dialogue and training of teachers and staff in these settings. Additionally, it is important to recognize that socially constructed dominance cannot be "fixed" or changed overnight or by one group of individuals. As ableism is systemic throughout not only the educational system, but also evident in city design, health care, and other arenas, it would be impossible to dismantle it through only addressing educational disparities and microaggressions. Rather, the suggestions offered here should be used in conjunction with other facets of disability rights activism to address ableism in multiple ways and on various levels, not just in the educational context.

**Conclusion**

By using social dominance theory to view and explain the existence and prevalence of ableism in our society that is perpetuated by those with able-bodied privilege and by using social learning theory to encourage people who have able-bodied privilege to examine their privilege and views on people with disabilities, one can examine why discrimination and prejudice against communities of disability exist. We can think about using social modeling to create sustainable change and positive ally behaviors in higher education. Such changes could be accomplished through educating current and potential higher education professionals to support the establishment of ally behavior by able-bodied individuals in order to establish a
deeper rapport with students with disabilities and lead to increased positive learning outcomes. These theories work well together in elucidating the social construction of ableism and able-bodied privilege, and they provide a map for how to encourage behavior shifts on the part of those in privileged and dominant groups. Literature demonstrates that they have worked well in combination when used to examine and combat racism, sexism, and heteroentrism; and they could be expected to be successfully transferable for use in examining and combating ableism in higher education.

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