

foundations from the Foundation:

LEE MEYERSON

Meyerson, L. (1948). Physical disability as a social psychological problem. *Journal of Social Issues*, 4(4), 2-10.

We were unable to obtain permission to reprint the original article; hence a summary of its content is presented below.

Lee Meyerson (1920 – 2002) was an early pioneer in the field of Rehabilitation Psychology. The following facts about his life were drawn from an *American Psychologist* obituary written by Morris (2003). Dr. Meyerson was one of the founding members of Division 22, which was formally recognized in the American Psychological Association (APA) in 1957. Meyerson helped to elevate what was then a special interest group within the APA to a standalone organization dedicated to the amelioration for disability and chronic health problems. With Drs. Roger Barker and Beatrice A. Wright, he wrote the revised edition of *Adjustment to Physical Disability and Illness* (Barker, Wright, Meyerson, & Gonick, 1953). He was Past President of Division 22 and served as the founding editor of *Rehabilitation Psychology*. He and his late wife, Nancy Kerr, created the David and Minnie Meyerson Foundation. Named for his parents, the Meyerson Foundation offers financial support for efforts involving people with disabilities, particularly in the state of Arizona, and to advance Rehabilitation Psychology more broadly. Currently, the Meyerson Foundation sponsors the award at the annual Rehabilitation Psychology conference each spring.

Dr. Meyerson knew disability based on his own lived experience. Following a severe infection in his early teens, he developed profound deafness. He learned to lip read quite well. In his later teens, he had osteomyelitis, which required surgery and led him to wear corrective footwear for the rest of his life. Dr. Meyerson also experienced discrimination due to his disability—and in academe no less. While a professor at Arizona State University (ASU), he informed the university administration about his discrimination claims. No action was taken. Following the passage of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, Dr. Meyerson took legal action. In 1986, his claim was settled out of court. In 1988, he was recognized by ASU as a Regents' Professor for his scholarly excellence and dedicated mentoring of students.

The Article

Physical Disability as a Social Psychological Problem appeared in a special issue of the *Journal of Social Issues* on *The Social Psychology of Physical Disability* edited by Meyerson (1948a). The article served as the overview piece introducing the special issue and aimed at drawing “physical disability out of its customary limited area concerned with specific ways of helping the handicapped to

a more central position in psychology as an area that can contribute to the solution of basic psychological problems” (p. 2).

“Physique” is identified by Meyerson as one of Gordon Allport’s three raw materials of personality, so that any departures from expectations or a normal figure necessarily render disability a psychological problem. Meyerson notes that if variations in height, strength, and attractiveness are linked to personality, then it must be the case that differences due to physical disability are important factors in self and other perception. How people with disabilities view themselves and how others regard them matters, as well.

Meyerson goes on to review both popular and historical images of disability to argue that a socio-cultural focus on physique is nothing but a means to advance social classification and stratification. Meyerson anticipates Wright’s (1988) fundamental negative bias and spread effects (Dembo, Leviton, & Wright, 1956) when he suggests that observers typically place negative values on variations in physique. Some negative values are imposed by society (e.g., employment challenges for disabled persons), some by the affected person (e.g., self-devaluation of minority group members by adopting majority group beliefs), and others by the atypical physique itself, which can prevent the execution of some behaviors (e.g., communication challenges for deaf individuals with those who hear). Meyerson highlights two important implications that continue to guide research on the social psychology of disability today:

- Adjustment to physical disability is promoted by creating favorable social psychological situations for persons with disabilities (i.e., positive person-environment relations).
- Adjustment to physical disability is not just an issue for people with disabilities; nondisabled people must also learn to adjust to the experiences and outlooks of disabled individuals.

The remainder of the article provides an overview for readers about the aims and content of the special issue, but Meyerson does make one final point that resonates with rehabilitation research and practice today: Psychologists must develop guiding theories for creating and exploring meaningful questions concerning physical disability.

Despite dated language (e.g., physique, handicap), Meyerson’s insights in this fine article remain true today. The end of his opening sentence makes the point well: “. . . the major problems of the handicapped are not physical but social and psychological” (p. 2). Rehabilitation psychologists should always rely on this foundational wisdom in their work (see Dunn, 2015).

References

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