speed history of *(the language describing)* whiteness

The idea of white privilege has been around since the very first white colonising missions, when Spaniards began to come to the Americas, around the same time as the Spanish Inquisition.

late 1400's

The Spanish Inquisition introduced the idea of blood purity or "limpieza de sangre". This was the first time discrimination had been explicitly tied to ancestry and not to personal religion. After the Reconquista (where there were mass conversions of Muslims and Jews to Christianity), the Spanish started requiring proof of cleanliness of blood (i.e. not having Muslim or Jewish ancestors) to get jobs and to hold positions of power. This was the first form of legally codified racial hierarchisation.

late 1600's - early 1800's

During the colonial and antebellum era in America, racial hierarchies were used to determine who was enslaved and who was free. This was especially relevant for colonists who didn't know what to do with the mixed-race children of enslaved Black women and white men. This is when the derogatory descriptive words "mulatto/mulatta" (and, in Spanish, the classifications "mestizo/mestiza") became racial categories. These words would be used specifically for Black and white, Indigenous and white, and Indigenous and Black mixed children, and they determined who would be born into slavery and who would be free. This was the first time that different levels of whiteness were given different statuses and privileges, not just in a binary way.

why are we looking at race?

seeing how language talking whiteness shifts over time (with different consequences) can give us context to how meanings of disability can evolve.

late 1960's - 70's

Noel Ignatiev first introduced the idea of "white skin privilege" - it was debuted in his 1995 book *How the Irish Became White* but was inspired by what he saw in the factory that he worked in the 1960s - 70s. He worked in a steel mill that would pass over black workers for promotions and so white and Black workers organised to "abolish whiteness" for better labor conditions and against workplace racism. This was the first

recorded use of the phrases "abolish whiteness" and "white privilege," but it was a very localised discussion in the steel mill. This phrase was also used by civil rights activists in the late 1960s, but there is less record of that.

late 1980's

White privilege as a phrase took off in popular culture due to Peggy McIntosh's 1988 essay called "White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack." Black people had been discussing this concept for many years, but McIntosh's phrase put it into public view.
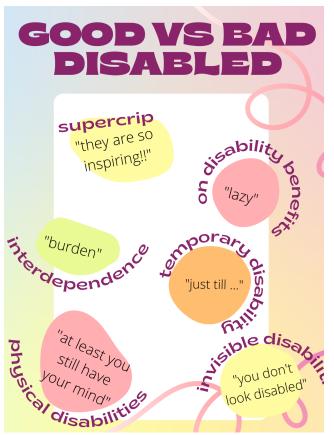
2019-2020

The phrase "proximity to whiteness" came into circulation around 2019 when talking about East Asians in America experiencing privileges of being lighter-skinned. There is no one person credited with the rise of this phrase but with the Black Lives Matter movement in 2020 and violence against East Asians in COVID times, this phrase has been used a lot to talk about different levels of privilege being assigned to different racial groups, based on lightness of the skin, class, immigration status, and general assimilation to white American culture.

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The evolution of how people talk about whiteness gives us context for how language around disability can change to talk about different phenomena. This project aims to look at how non-disabled folks perceive different disabled people, and how that perception is fluid based on context and location. The metric that I want to introduce to this discussion is the idea of **proximity to non-disability**, which would operate similarly to the phrase proximity to whiteness. There is positive bias towards those who present as non-disabled; generally, the closer you are to that standard the more privileged you are. The privileges include but are not limited to things like increased access, not having to ask for accommodations and job opportunities.

Oppression from individual non-disabled people, institutions and structures in society is what perpetuates ableism. One way it rears its ugly head is by non-disabled folks "ranking" how palatable someone's disability is. This often takes the form of discounting the legitimacy of different disabilities, having some disabilities be automatic cause for pity but some disabilities be symbols of resilience, and interrogation of someone's disability. This comes from the idea of **good disabled vs bad disabled**, where certain disabilities are favoured by society because of their impact on nondisabled people (i.e.

GOOD VS BAD DISABLED

supercrip
"they are so inspiring!!"
on disability benefits
"lazy"
"burden"
interdependence
temporary disability
"just till ..."
"at least you still have your mind"
physical disabilities
invisible disability
"you don't look disabled"

by how much a non-disabled person has to adjust their behavior for a disabled person or how it affects their desire to feel like a saviour.)

I made this graphic to pick out quotes from different disabled bloggers about how non-disabled people react to their disabilities to illustrate good vs bad disabilities & shows how even marking a disability as good is harmful

How is this hierarchy created and continued?

1. This hierarchy is intrinsically connected to the eugenics movement. This movement especially blamed people with intellectual and developmental disabilities for society's "social problems" and wanted them isolated and institutionalised whenever possible. This hierarchy created a real division between different disabilities (i.e. between physical and intellectual or developmental disabilities) in life outcomes, opportunities and treatment. It caused systems like sterilisation, warehousing, euthanizing and imprisonment of disabled people and these are systems that we still see the aftershocks of today within prisons, special education programs and immigration policies.

2. Late-stage capitalism does not care about people other than by their ability to labour. A person's value as a member of the workforce is what defines their worth, which leads to the disrespect towards disabled people who cannot work. This hierarchy of "disabled enough" to be on disability benefits, and how narrow that categorisation is, shows that governments do not value people who cannot work. The average of $1277/month allotted towards those on disability benefits is an extremely low amount, and in a society

where people's worth is attached to their income, provides a quantitative way to see how the government views disabled folks.

3. Neoliberal policies have cut social services and privatised healthcare, aides, and nursing homes. This is in part due to Western society and capitalism's hatred of dependence (because that is more time going to caring for someone and less time working for money), and it puts a lot of pressure on families and caregivers, creating a hierarchy that devalues disabled folks who are unable to be completely independent.

4. Invisible disabilities are a double-edged sword. They are preferred in a society that refuses to have people look unlike the "norm" and prefers quiet suffering but they also call into question the legitimacy of any disability - and invisible disabilities are what are interrogated the most in this situation. This hints that proximity to non-disability prefers invisible disabilities *only* if they ask for no accommodations and do not make themselves known, which introduces the phenomenon of "not disabled enough" vs. "too disabled" and the impossible line between it.

Where are you on the "proximity to non-disability" meter?

- Are you disabled? Do you have a visible disability?
- Have you had to say no to something because it was inaccessible to you?
- Do you have to think about the energy you exert throughout the day and have to pace yourself?
- Have people offered remedies or "tips and tricks" about how to "fix" symptoms of your disability? Was it unsolicited?

- Can you count on your employer to provide reasonable accommodations at work? Would these accommodations be available at every work place?
- Does a significant amount of your pay check to go towards healthcare?
- Can you go to a general practitioner for most of your health needs? And can you count on a doctor to address you directly (as opposed to addressing whoever you are with)?
- In school were you educated in a mainstream setting? If you were, could you count on your teacher to have encountered your disability in the past?

The questions that I have above aren't a way to put people on some sliding scale or create a distinct order that commensurates with the privileges that come with the proximity to non-disability. These questions are points to **spur reflection** about how complicated this idea can be. Different situations (i.e. workplaces, schools, states and countries) have different norms about what privileges come with being non-disabled; similar to how proximity to whiteness means different things in different contexts, recontextualisation of proximity to non-disability causes different effects when structural factors change. The world is built for non-disabled folks, and accessibility and accommodations must be fought for. These questions can help give context to calculations disabled people may have to make to exist.

Why are the "proximity to ..." strategies used?

Looking to why proximity to whiteness is used can give us context as to why proximity to non-disability is both a hierarchy that non-disabled people use to treat disabled people but also a strategy that disabled people can (consciously or not) use to access privileges of being non-disabled.

Proximity to whiteness is used most often to talk about Asian people, who have assimilated into white American culture, accessed higher paying jobs, nice homes and the privileges that come with that. This comes at the expense of losing ties to their own heritage - having to change accents, eat different food, holding white people as the standard, etc. In many ways, proximity to whiteness is a response to the racial trauma they or their family have endured. If we recontextualise this to think about disability, we can see that proximity to non-disability can similarly be a self-preservation technique to seek social safety in situations where disabled people are surrounded by many non-disabled people. This can present itself in many ways - by not wanting to ask for accommodations or not feeling comfortable to disclose their disability and more. The devaluation of disabled people as respected members of society is what causes this strategy to have to be used. In a less conscious way, disabled people can use the idea of proximity to non-disability to deal with their own internalised ableism and downplay the different facets of their disability because they aren't in a place where they can consider that. Disability is largely self defined and so two people with the exact same impairments can consider themselves disabled in different ways or not disabled at all, and so the idea of proximity to non-disability is both one that society pushes on disabled people but also can be due to the differences in how people see themselves and their lived experiences.

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