

Disability in the New York Times: Then and Now

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Word Count: 2040 (and a really long Appendix A)

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### INTRODUCTION

The New York Times has over 9 million digital and physical subscribers combined (New York Times 2022), granting it great influence over the representation of marginalized populations people see. Media representation of group diversity and binaries plays a large role in shaping the stereotypes society holds of that group (Kang 1997). While disability is under-represented in mainstream American media, gaining insight into how disability is portrayed is still important. With the popularity and accessible archives of the NYT, I pose the following question:

RQ1: Since 1985-1995, how has the representation of disabled people in the NYT changed?

To answer this question, a foundation of intersectionality (Collins 2016) must be laid that encapsulates race (Bell 2011; Bailey, Moya, and Mobley 2019), gender (Ridgeway 2011, Hans 2015, Bailey et al 2019), class, age, and dis/abled status (Clare 2009; Bailey et al 2019). Within disabled representation, it is especially crucial to consider race due to societal assumptions about the Black body as being hyper-able but the Black mind as being disabled (Bell 2011; Bailey et al. 2019). However, even within the disability activist community, there is a lack of discussion surrounding the intersection between race and disability (Clare 2009; Bailey et al. 2019; Bell 2011). Historically, gender has also been an overlooked identity within the disabled community partially due to activists historically being “white men with privilege upset about the ways they have been excluded from mainstream society and their birthright” (Bailey et al. 2019:27) but also due to societal perception of disabled people as genderless and asexual (Hans 2015). With this

knowledge, I hypothesize that the NYT will lack diversity in its representation of disabled people, depicting predominantly white men, but there will be a slight improvement over time.

I also rely on Goffman's (1977) and Lorber's (1993) arguments of societal reliance on dimorphic identities that are shaped by societal norms and schemas. However, rather than applying this assumption to gender, I apply it to an able-bodied/disabled-bodied binary. Thus, my second hypothesis is that disabled subjects will be clearly marked as different from the able-bodied people around them.

## METHODS AND ANALYSIS

To understand how the NYT has represented disabled people, both historically and currently, I analyzed articles from the decade surrounding the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), 1985-1995 ( $n=14$ ), and the past decade, 2012-2022 ( $n=13$ ) for both textual and visual representations. To gather these articles, I used the search term "disability OR disabled OR cripple" for all sources to avoid articles that would lack significance to my research. Articles were selected based on if they had at least one image and had at least one section that explicitly discussed quality of life in that current decade. Pieces that were historical reports or were not fully digitized by the NYT were excluded. In selecting my images for analysis, most articles had only one or two images, but in the case where there were more, I selected based on legibility and the presence of a disabled subject. In total, I analyzed 40 images from 1985-1995 ( $n=17$ ) and 2012-2022 ( $n=23$ ). Due to issues with the digitized versions of articles, some historic images required subjective speculation on what was happening in the image.

In the textual analysis, I coded for supercrip framing (Clare 2015), discussion of gender (Hans 2015), discussion of class, discussion of race (Bell 2011; Bailey et al. 2019), discussion of

age, and the dis/abled status of the author. I used Clare's definition of supercrip to code for when an author presents normal everyday tasks as momentous accomplishments for the disabled subject (2009). When I coded for gender, I looked for the presence of various gender stereotypes such as passive or nurturing traits for femininity or dominance and independence for masculine traits (Ridgeway 2011; Goffman 1977; Lorber 1993).

In my visual analysis, I created an image description for each image (see appendix A), to aid in my analysis and as a measure of accessibility. I coded for the subject's gender, race, and positionality, as well as if they displayed licensed withdrawal (Kang 1997), and if their disability was visible (Buysse and Borcharding 2010). I relied on my own assumptions and textual evidence to code for race, gender, and visibility of the disability. I defined the subject's positionality as active (ex. standing, independently moving, walking) or passive (ex. sitting, leaning on something, moving dependently such as being pushed in a wheelchair). When I coded for licensed withdrawal, I exempted images that were not staged, such as an actor performing a scene in a play.

In my qualitative analysis, I used traits such as passivity, assumption of dependence, despair at the situation, and licensed withdrawal as feminine traits. The opposite of these traits, activeness, assumption of independence, anger at the situation, and engagement in surroundings, were used as masculine traits.

## RESULTS

### *1985-1995*

In the decade surrounding the passage of the ADA 14 articles (see table B1) were published in the NYT that met the search criteria. 86% of the articles ( $n=14$ ) analyzed discussed

gender<sup>1</sup> ( $n=12$ ), 64% discussed class ( $n=8$ ), and 7% discussed race ( $n=1$ ). In the 17 images selected from these articles (see table B2), 100% of the disabled people represented were white ( $n=14$ ). 47% of the images represented disabled men ( $n=7$ ), 33% represented disabled women ( $n=5$ ), and 20% displayed images with multiple genders represented ( $n=3$ ). Many images did not meet the qualifications to be coded for the licensed withdrawal but of those that did ( $n=7$ ) 57% depicted the disabled subject being withdrawn from the scene ( $n=4$ ), however, 77% of the images depicted the subject as being passive ( $n=10$ ). 53% of the images did not depict visual evidence of the subject's disability ( $n=9$ ).

Gendered discussions primarily focused on women's role as caregivers for their disabled family members and spouses (Ridgeway 2011; Goffman 1977) and around how disabled men are "gruff", "contentious", and ambivalent. When disabled women are discussed, they are framed as dependent on the generosity of able-bodied people or as if any amount of "grace" they display is a great accomplishment. Both disabled men and women were framed as being unable to form romantic and sexual connections with people.

### 2012-2022

In the past decade, 2012-2022, 13 articles (see table B1) published in the NYT met the criteria to be analyzed. Of those 13 articles, 31% discussed race ( $n=4$ ), 54% discussed class ( $n=7$ ), and 100% discussed gender ( $n=13$ ). In those articles, 23 images were pulled for analysis (see table B2). Unlike 1985-1995, women were more represented at 48% ( $n=10$ ), with men being represented in 29% ( $n=6$ ) of the images, and 24% depicting multiple genders ( $n=5$ ). 72%

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<sup>1</sup> All articles and images only depicted cis-binary men and women

of the images represented white disabled people ( $n=13$ ), 6% represented black disabled people ( $n=1$ ), and 22% represented South Asian disabled people ( $n=4$ ). 55% of disabled subjects were depicted as active ( $n=11$ ), however 56% of the images depicted licensed withdrawal ( $n=9$ ). In 67% of the images, the subject was visibly disabled ( $n=14$ ).

There were more well-rounded representations of women in the past decade than in 1985-1995, however, all but two women were white. Four of the articles were written by self-identified disabled women, but often in recounting their experiences they still paid more attention to conceptions of attractiveness than what is expected of men. One article, which featured three brief autobiographical stories, was written by a gay disabled man and discussed his sexuality, though this was the only article that discussed queer sexuality. One other article, written by a disabled woman, also discussed sexuality but framed it as making herself “sexy” for her husband.

## CONCLUSION

### *Normativity*

Building on theories of intersectionality and media representation, it becomes evident not only the lack of diversity in what the NYT publishes on disability but that there is a clear binary between being able-bodied and disabled. Able-bodied authors take for granted that they are the norm, and thus rarely identify as such, even when writing about disability. This normative framework is then reinforced by the representation they are creating. In reference to gender, Lorber argues that “bodies differ in many ways physiologically, but they are completely transformed by the social practices to fit into the salient categories of a society” (1993:569). Yet, this same argument applies to disability, unlike the very real gradient of disability that even

includes identities such as temporarily disabled in society there are just two categories, abled and disabled. In creating media representation that relies so heavily on the dis/abled binary, those two categories become further embedded. Both through textual and visual representations of disabled people, there is also evidence of forming disabled as the disadvantaged counterpoint to the advantaged (Goffman 1977) abled-bodied. While this stratification was certainly present before the NYT started depicting it, media depiction plays an important role in forming schemas and stereotypes (Kang 1997).

Furthering the normativity of bodies depicted is the immense lack of black or brown disabled people, with only one image depicting a black man and four depicting South Asian women (see table B2). The lack of diversity is not surprising, considering the societal expectations of the black body (Bell 2011; Bailey et al. 2019), but it is important to note that a lack of diversity also contributes to formations of social schemas around disability, as not even having a schema for black and brown people that allows them to be disabled, is just as harmful as a schema that relies on assumptions of dependence and low-quality of life.

Photographers and illustrators for the NYT also enforced corporeal normativity by displaying a distinct binary of disability. While the visual depiction of disability increased from the decade surrounding the passage of the ADA to today, the depiction has remained relatively similar, such as wheelchair users relying on able-bodied people to move (see image B2) or to maintain good posture (see image B3). There are few images where a person's disability is portrayed as something normal, rather than the certain of attention of as something to shock you. In the 2013 article about access to Medicaid, a photograph of an older man dialing a phone, his crutches rest surreptitiously in the background (see image B4). From the article, we know that this man is disabled without having to see his crutches leaning about the wall, but if this visual

marker wasn't present, it would be more difficult to place him firmly in the category of disabled. Thus, we come to rely on what we can see of someone's disability to mark them in one category or the other (Lorber 1997).

### *Feminization of Disability*

Contrary to what I hypothesized, women are slightly more represented in the NYT than men, though this is due to an increase in representation during the past decade from disabled women activists writing guest columns for the NYT. However, men were often feminized in visual depictions. Illustrations of disabled men from 1985-1995 depicted them as timid, weak, and withdrawn from the scene. However, photographs either depicted them as vulnerable or were photographed before they became disabled. This created an interesting line where authors would try and uphold the masculinity of disabled men. In both textual and visual representation, there is a constant tug-of-war in depicting disabled men as more feminine than abled men but also still masculine enough to be a man, and thus better than a woman. Hans refers to this disabled masculinity as "corrupted" that is "generated by *enforced* dependency" (2015:28). Not only is this dependency enforced in day-to-day life, but also in media depictions that show disabled men struggling to open a door in their wheelchair (see figure B1).

### *Limitations and Further Research*

Since gender and disability both act as background identities (Ridgeway 2011) and parsing out whether the feminization of a certain disabled person is due to their disability, class, race, gender, sexuality, or any other identity they may hold, research regarding the intersectional (Collins 2016) nature of media representation comes with its challenges and limitations. Further research should be conducted on how disabled subjects are portrayed through a damaged lens,



rather than one that allows for resilience, renewal, joy (Bailey et al, 2019; Tuck 2014), and sexuality (Hans 2015).

This research was conducted as an individual, there is potential for bias in how I coded for visual variables like race and the visibility of a disability. Introducing more researchers with diverse identities to code the images and articles would help mitigate this bias. Additionally, running a p-test to find the statistical significance of variables such as passivity or licensed withdrawal against gender would provide a better understanding of if disabled men are more feminized than abled men depicted in the NYT, or even disabled women.

Going forward, it would be beneficial to incorporate more sources by broadening the search criteria, such as searching each term individually rather than in one search term. Part of this limitation was due to the NYT Time Machine search engine, so incorporating other prominent new sources that have past issues archives would also provide a better understanding of how disabled people are represented in the news. Finally, disability is not something that is limited to the United States, so a global perspective must be taken to fully understand what media representation of disabled people looks like.

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## APPENDIX A: IMAGE DESCRIPTIONS AND ARTICLES ANALYZED

“For Us, the War is Over” by Michael Norman (1985).

Image 1a: In a low-quality black and white photo, a young soldier leans against a pile of sandbags, wearing a bucket hat, army pants, and a V-neck t-shirt. He is smiling and has his hand on his hip.

Image 1b: In a low-quality black and white photo, a young man and woman stand in front of an RV. The man appears to be standing on something to appear taller than the woman, though most of him is in shadow.

“Practical Traveler; Making America Accessible” by Paul Grimes (1986).

Image 2: An illustrated plane on a grey and black background has a wing drooped to the ground in a ramp-like fashion. At the top of the ramp, a stewardess gestures inside the plane while three people in wheelchairs get rolled onto the plane.

“Hers” by Nancy Mairs (1987).

Image 3: An illustrated woman in a lightly patterned dress sits in her wheelchair, looking down at a TV that appears to be reflecting her image.

“Practical Traveler; A Bill of Rights for the Disabled Nears Passage” by Betsy Wade (1989).

Image 4: An illustrated man is passing through a double-door that spells out CA-FE on each door. A man in a suit holds one door open, and a woman sits behind the other at a table with a wine glass. The man appears embarrassed or apologetic as he enters the café.

“Personal Health: Lending a Helping Hand to All Members of the Family Where a Spouse is Chronically Ill” by Jane E. Brody (1989).

Image 5: Two illustrated men push a woman in a wheelchair. The two men appear to be in conversation while the woman is staring straight ahead as if she is not a part of the group.

“An Angry Man Fights to Die. Then Tests Life” by Peter Applebome (1990).

Image 6: A man with a tracheostomy lies in a hospital bed while a woman points to a piece of paper that she is holding in front of his face.

“At Issue: Who Best to Care for a Child, Body and Soul” by Ralph Blumenthal (1991)

Image 7a: A black and white photo of a young girl with short hair and what appears to be a large birthmark on the lower right side of her lip. It appears she also has a clear pallet

Image 7b: A black and white photo of a man who is sitting on the arm of a couch with his arm around a woman sitting on the couch. The woman is holding a photo of a young girl and looking into the camera while the man looks at the woman.

“Mastering the Language of Disability” by Claudia H. Deutsch (1991).

Image 8: A black and white photo of a man and a woman facing each other. The man has a keyboard on his lap that is connected to a desktop computer monitor that reads "First Line S Manager Director Other" and has a large plus sign on it. Another monitor, which is closer to him, is mostly black with a large white staticky line cutting across the screen.

“Epidemic at the Computer: Hand and Arm Injuries” by Jane E. Brody (1992).

Image 9: a black and white illustration of two hands typing at a computer is complicated by displaying multiple forms the hand can take while typing, all overlaid on each other. This makes it seem like the hands are actually contorting in pain. Between and slightly below the two hands is a skeletal/muscular diagram of a human hand.

“Parent and Child” by Lawrence Kutner (1992).

Image 10: A black and white illustration of five children dancing around a maypole. Each child has a ribbon attached to the maypole and is skipping in different directions.

“Finding Better Health on Horseback” by Michael Decourcy Hinds (1993)

Image 11: A black-and-white photo of a woman in equestrian gear sitting atop a horse that is mid-stride. She makes eye contact with the camera.

“Coping; Eight Struggling Actors: A Story of Hope” by Robert Lipsyte (1994).

Image 12: A black and white illustration of a wheelchair with a bouquet of flowers resting on the seat. The wheelchair is on a stage and between parted curtains.

“No Ordinary Inspirational ‘Cripple Story’” by Neal Karlen (1995).

Image 13: A black and white photo of a white man with disheveled hair, a white shirt, and dark colored jacket stares off into the distance.

“Hard Choices, Troubled Voices; Pataki’s Budget Plans Leave Some Aid Recipients Anxious” by Charisse Jones (1995).

Image 14a: A man sits in the background while a woman in a white lab coat and singular white glove reaches for something in front of her. The man is looking at the camera, but the woman is focused on what she is doing

Image 14b: A white man stands in a crowded room, leaning on a counter in front of a boiler. He looks off into the distance as if something across the room caught his eye.

“Pain Pills Add Cost and Delays to Job” by Barry Meier (2012).

Image 15a: Kulakowski (a white man) stands in next to his dining room table with his hands on the back of a chair. He seems to lean forward slightly and be putting pressure on his hands. He is looking off in the distance. It is a dignified shot, as he is well-groomed and wearing a white polo shirt

Image 15b: A white hand reaches in from the upper left corner. It tilts a CVS Pharmacy Pill Bottle so the camera can read some of the text. There are two other pill bottles next to it, and a grey tray with six pill bottles behind it, blurred by the camera focus.

“Tables Reserved for the Healthiest” by Paula Span (2012).

Image 16a: An elaborate country club-style dining room sprawls in front of the camera. Each table seats four and has a crisp white tablecloth with a piece of glass over it. The tables are set with folded napkins, water glasses, appetizer plates, and silverware.

Image 16b: Schapiro (a white woman) smiles at the camera. She has deep wrinkle lines around her eyes and mouth. She is leaning slightly to the side and is wearing a teal shirt with a dark blue cardigan over it. She has a large necklace, small hoop earrings, and well-kept hair.

“Tennessee Race for Medicaid: Dial Fast and Try, Try Again” by Abby Goodnough (2013).

Image 17: Casteel (black man) is reclining on his floral-patterned couch, looking down at his flip phone. He is bald with grey stubble and wears a brown graphic tee with blue jeans. A pair of crutches lean against the wall behind him.

“Caregivers Sometimes Must Sacrifice Their Careers” by Paula Span (2015).

Image 18: A blue cartoon person sits hunched over paperwork, grimacing, inside of yellow and orange shape that looks like a factory. The person is reaching through a window into

another yellow and orange shape that looks like a house. They are handing another blue person in a rocking a mug with steam coming off of it. The person in the rocking chair is smiling and appears relaxed.

“Actors with Disabilities Are Ready, Willing and Able to Take More Roles” by Alexis Soloski (2016).

Image 19a: Two people stand inside of a blue picture frame, one white man and one white woman with two prosthetic legs. The man appears to be gazing just slightly in front of the woman, who is leaning against the picture frame.

Image 19b: A white woman in a wheelchair is on stage with two white women behind her and one black and one white woman in front of her. Everyone is looking at the black woman who has a look of concern on her face and her arms raised as if to say "why?".

Image 19c: A white man in a blue button-down shirt is gesturing towards the sky, perhaps signing in ASL, on stage. Behind him is the caption "Until all beings are freed from sorrow and all are awakened". There are two men also behind him, partially obscured in shadow.

“Becoming Disabled” by Rosemarie Garland-Thomson (2016).

Image 20a: On a dark blue background a series of illustrated people are nested inside each other. The largest figure is a tan bust with a cochlear implant, followed by a pink masculine person in a manual wheelchair, a red feminine person using a white cane, a dark red masculine person who has a partial left arm, and a blue feminine person in the very middle.



Image 20b: An illustrated shadowy figure, with long hair, stands in front of a bustling colorful background. This background is composed of people using mobility aids, signing ASL, and who have partial limbs.

“My Paralympic Blues” by Emily Rapp Black (2016).

Image 21: An illustrated white woman with a prosthetic leg is standing on a pedestal wearing black bike shorts and a black sports bra. The background is black except for the spotlight on the woman, who is holding an arm up to shield her eyes.

“Review: Reanimating an Autistic Artist with ‘Soot and Spit’” by Laura Collins-Hughes (2017).

Image 22: Chris Lopes, a white man, who identifies as "an actor with down syndrome" stands before the camera with a finger on his mouth in a shushing motion. He is wearing a brown suit, holding a leather briefcase, and is looking down and to the left.

“Why is Our Existence as Humans Still Being Denied” by Emily Rapp Black (2017).

Image 23: A group of illustrated people using mobility aids are going up a set of stairs to a lone illustrated figure who is crossing their arms. The background of this illustration is a series of stairs. The mobility aids used are powered wheelchairs, crutches, a white cane, a walking cane, and a prosthetic leg.

“Infinitesimal Odds: A Scientist Finds Her Child’s Rare Illness Stems from the Gene She Studies” by Pam Belluck (2018).

Image 24a: Yuna stands in her "gait trainer" outside on her Elementary school's playground asphalt. She is looking at chalk drawings while all of her peers are in groups or lined up behind her.

Image 24b: Yuna sits in her mother's lap, Soo-Kyung, while her father, Jae, and brother, Joon, play guitars. She is reaching toward her brother's guitar while her father laughs and mother tries to distract her with a stuffed animal.

Image 24c: Yuna, a young South-Korean American girl, sits in a wheelchair behind her peers who are seated on the floor listening to an adult read from a book. While her chair has a harness to help her stay sitting upright, Yuna is leaning strongly to her right.

“Anita Silvers, An Author on Disability Rights, Dies at 78” by Neil Genzlinger (2019).

Image 25a: Silvers, a white woman, looks into the camera with a slight lazy eye. She has grey hair pulled back into a ponytail and is wearing a dark navy turtle neck. A large colorful beaded Hamsa Hand pendant hangs from a small gold chain around her neck.

Image 25b: In a very cluttered room, Silvers sits in a chair with her hand resting on her knee. Behind the chair is a desk covered in tribal statues, presumably of African origin. On the wall to her left there are five masks of the same style.

“How I Came Out About My Disability” by Helen Hoan, Ryan J. Haddad, and Krysten Chambrot (2020).

Image 26a: Hoang, a Vietnamese woman, stands in a lush green yard looking into the distance with a slight smile. She is wearing a dark blue dress and has her arms relaxed at her side, but one leg at a slight angle/

Image 26b: Chambrot, a white woman stands in a grassy area, holding her left arm with her right. She is wearing a red, short-sleeved, dress with white polka dots. Her dress is knee-

length, showing her flesh-toned prosthetic leg. She is looking into the camera while the wind blows her hair slightly in front of her face.

Image 26c: Haddad, a white man, stands in a yard with a tree and several pinwheels behind him. He has leg braces and a walker and is wearing a teal shirt and khaki shorts. He is far away from the camera but appears to be smiling.

“Neil Marcus, Whose Art Illuminated Disability, dies at 67” by Annabelle Williams (2021).

Image 27: A white man in a green hoodie and yellow sweatpants crouches at the base of his black powered wheelchair. He is holding onto a tree with his left hand for support while looking directly into the camera. There is green grass and a blue sky behind him.

## APPENDIX B: TABLES AND FIGURES

*Table B1: Articles in the timeframe that discuss the variable in relation to a disabled subject*

<i>Variable</i>	<i>1985-1995</i>	<i>2012-2022</i>	<i>Total</i>
	<i>n(%)</i>	<i>n(%)</i>	<i>n(%)</i>
<b>Race</b>	1(7)	4(31)	5(19)
<b>Class</b>	8(64)	7(54)	15(70)
<b>Gender</b>	12(86)	13(100)	25(93)
<i>Total</i>	14(51)	13(49)	27(100)

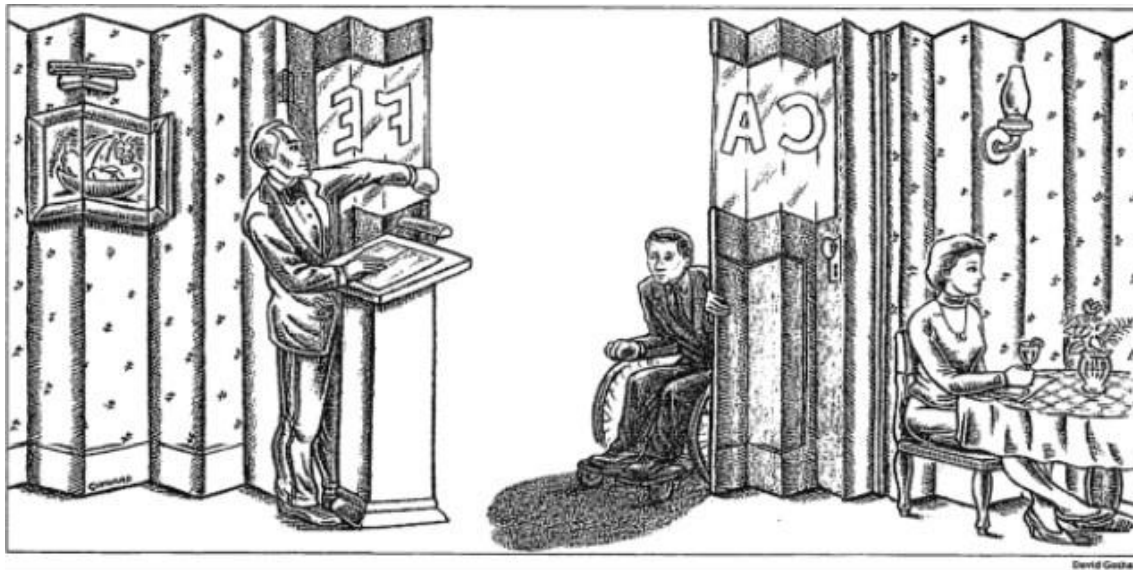
*Table B2: Demographics represented in the images*

<i>Year</i>	<i>Type Of Image</i>		<i>Gender</i>			<i>Race</i>			<i>Activity</i>		<i>Licensed</i>		<i>Visibly Disabled</i>	
											<i>Withdrawal</i>		<i>Yes</i>	<i>No</i>
	<i>Photo</i>	<i>Illustration</i>	<i>Man</i>	<i>Woman</i>	<i>Multiple</i>	<i>White</i>	<i>Black</i>	<i>Asian</i>	<i>Active</i>	<i>Passive</i>	<i>Yes</i>	<i>No</i>	<i>Yes</i>	<i>No</i>
	<i>n(%)</i>	<i>n(%)</i>	<i>n(%)</i>	<i>n(%)</i>	<i>n(%)</i>	<i>n(%)</i>	<i>n(%)</i>	<i>n(%)</i>	<i>n(%)</i>	<i>n(%)</i>	<i>n(%)</i>	<i>n(%)</i>	<i>n(%)</i>	<i>n(%)</i>
<b>1985-1995</b>	10(59)	7(41)	7(47)	5(33)	3(20)	14(100)	0(0)	0(0)	3(23)	10(77)	4(57)	3(43)	8(47)	9(53)
<b>2012-2022</b>	18(78)	5(22)	6(29)	10(48)	5(24)	13(72)	1(6)	4(22)	11(55)	9(45)	9(56)	7(44)	14(67)	7(37)
<b>TOTAL</b>	28(70)	12(30)	13(36)	15(42)	8(22)	27(84)	1(3)	4(13)	14(42)	19(58)	13(56)	10(44)	22(58)	16(42)

Table B3: Cumulative assessment of gender and disability across decades in images

Gender	Race			Activity		Licensed Withdrawal		Visibly Disabled	
	White n(%)	Black n(%)	Asian n(%)	Active n(%)	Passive n(%)	Yes n(%)	No n(%)	Yes n(%)	No n(%)
<b>Women</b>	11(73)	0(0)	4(27)	5(36)	9(64)	5(45)	6(55)	9(60)	6(40)
<b>Men</b>	12(92)	1(8)	0(0)	5(42)	7(58)	3(43)	4(57)	5(38)	8(62)

Image B1: Image from 1989 NYT article “A New Bill of Rights for the Disabled Nears Passage” by Betsy Wade



*Image B2: Image from 1989 NYT article “Personal Health: Lending A Helping Hand to All Members of the Family Where a Spouse is Chronically Ill” by Jane E. Brody*



*Image B3: Image from 2018 NYT article “Infinitesimal Odds: A Scientist Finds Her Child’s Rare Illness Stems from the Gene She Studies” by Pam Belluck*



*Figure B4: Image from 2013 NYT Article “Tennessee Race for Medicaid: Dial Fast and Try, Try Again” by Abby Goodnough*



