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Persuasive Writing

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How Stereotypes Affect Lives

The status of people with disabilities has been greatly elevated in recent years, but in certain areas—specifically social security benefits—ingrained stereotypes are harming people with disabilities’ reputation and health. Andrew Pulrang successfully demonstrates this bias and harm in his blog post “Ableist Narratives That Poison Disability Policy and Disabled People’s Lives” for disabilitythinking.com. The post is formatted in a way that uses ethos, pathos, and logos to make this issue easy to understand, teaches the reader about a problem they may have never thought about, and leaves them thinking about if they perpetuate harmful stereotypes unknowingly.

The topic of this blog post is the stereotype of Social Security benefits and how Americans with disabilities are viewed as lazy or that they are faking their disability for money. The author, Andrew Pulrang had a health crisis after high school resulting in his diagnosis of arthrogyrosis, a tracheotomy, and using a ventilator at night. He completed his Masters thesis on depictions of disability in television and movies, was the Executive Director of North Country Center for independence, and now dedicates his time to writing for his blog, “Disability Thinking”. Often, Pulrang chooses to write about injustices for people with disabilities and how these injustices go unnoticed.

In the particular blog post I analyzed, Pulrang offers an introduction to injustices related to social security for people with disabilities due to stereotypes and bias, and talks about where these stereotypes come from. Then, a breakdown of specific types of stereotypes and why they are harmful to the lives and opportunities to people with disabilities. According to Pulrang, this topic is particularly relevant to today's society because the Trump administration is currently trying to pass legislation that would limit benefits received by people with disabilities, even though the problem this would fix is pretty much non-existent. Pulrang points out that even if this legislation is never passed, and regardless of the extent to which it affects people's lives, this proposal still shows how pervasive these stereotypes are in America.

Pulrang is effective in this blog post at persuading the audience because he is able to be generative instead of shutting down the opinions of others. The basis of his argument is that people without disabilities are perpetuating stereotypes that are harming people with disabilities. He references the counterargument that there are people taking advantage of social security, but explains that this is a very seldom occurrence. He backs it up with stats, saying "However, this narrative pre-existed the recent rise in SSDI, and this ableist story apparently continues to thrive, even though SSDI rolls have since gone down. If it ever was a crisis, it isn't a crisis now" (Pulrang). So while addressing that there are other opinions on this subject, he shows that many claims are baseless and harmful in the long run, thereby strengthening his argument.

Furthermore, by outlining the stereotypes present in America and around the world regarding social security benefit receivers, Pulrang is able to breakdown the beliefs people have about the issue. This is helpful because it gets people thinking about if they have heard these stereotypes before, and if they have, helps them to realize the falsity of those statements. After

explaining where the stereotype comes from, Pulrang goes on to describe the harm these statements cause to people receiving these benefits. By breaking down the type of bias, the definition and origin of the bias, and finally the affect the bias has on others, the article is very understandable and thought provoking.

This aspect of the argument is particularly convincing because of the author's personal experience with the subject. As a person with a disability, Pulrang offers insight into the issue that would not be evident to a person not receiving benefits from the government. Compared to a paper about the same subject written by Kaleigh Garthwaite who does not have a disability, Pulrang's piece has more depth and is more interesting to read (Garthwaite). Garthwaite's paper is informative, but lacks the personal touch Pulrang offers his readers.

One thing I noticed that was slightly off putting about Pulrang's argument was his lack of Person First language. I am learning about Person First language in another class, RMP 501, and I have been recognizing its presence and absence much more lately. Person First language is the practice of putting the person before their disability when introducing or describing them. For example, you would say "a child with a disability" instead of "a disabled child. As far as I can tell, this seems to be a relatively common practice, and important to people with disabilities because it centers on the person and not the disease. This is why I was surprised that Pulrang said, "finding a disability organization that wasn't begging for medical research funds with sad pictures of disabled kids was a revelation to me" in his bio on his blog (About). The title of the blog post refers to "Disabled People" instead of "people with disabilities" as well. Pulrang is a member of this community and I am not, so perhaps I am being sensitive to something most

people with disabilities would not be, but nonetheless this was one of the weaknesses of the blog post in my opinion.

Another reason he may have decided to use the title he did, may have been because of the audience. If you don't know about person-first language or are not very knowledgeable when it comes to disabilities or disability services, you might not understand his message if he were to write the way I would expect him to. With the ever-changing nature of the terminology surrounding disabilities, perhaps Pulrang decided to simplify things and use terms that ordinary citizens would be familiar with. However, this does not help educate people on Person-first language and does not help the terminology progress and become more commonplace.

On the other hand, a strength of Pulrang's in this article is educating the audience about a topic that is relevant in the life of all Americans. The legislation I talked about earlier is based on the same ableist narratives Pulrang talks about and disputes in his paper. After reading the blog post, one is left with a more accurate understanding of the situation at hand, and is not blinded by the stereotypes present even in the highest office of government. This is an important feat, because the post shows how present this stereotype is and how it affects the lives of people with disabilities. People are more likely to be interested in this topic simply because it is related to politics and current events.

Along with its content, this post is successful because of its readability. There is an obvious structure to the argument; everything is stated and explained in a way that an everyday reader would understand. It is not too long, and gives people the information they want quickly and simply. Again, comparing this paper to another, we find that Pulrang does an excellent job of convincing his target audience. The Scanddinavian Journal of Disability Research published an

article about ableist narratives as well (Tarvainen). This paper uses complicated scientific jargon, is very long, and is sometimes hard to follow. Although this paper is no doubt an important piece of writing, it is not as effective as inciting thought as Pulrang's blog post is. Pulrang's post is not as scientific, but it is able to grab his audience's attention, give them the information in a way they understand, and leave them thinking about the issue.

Connected to the success of the layout, is the success of the content of this post. The most important success achieved by Pulrang is his ability to effectively disprove the counterargument: that people are constantly abusing social security by being lazy, faking a disability, being irrational, and so on. The first technique he uses to accomplish this is through references. Pulrang cites many other news articles to strengthen certain claims he makes. An example of this is when Pulrang claims that the proposal made by the Trump Administration to cut back on social security benefits to people with disabilities is "largely driven by a widespread belief" in false stereotypes. He backs up his claim by citing an NPR article called "Unfit for Work" that talks about these stereotypes and how disability is looked at in America. The NPR article uses statistics and numbers that back up his claim, but are not included in his paper, in order to preserve readability. His personal experience with discrimination and social security stereotypes also show that the average social security beneficiary is not faking or lazy. He talks about his own life and his own struggles, strengthening the pathos of the argument.

This article is worthy of the audience's time because it is relevant in today's society, and affects a good amount of people in the world. In some cases, people might be perpetuating a false stereotype that they weren't even aware of. And if they were aware of it, they might not be aware about the real ramifications of their words. Again, the urgency of this topic is apparent, as

there is currently a proposal for legislation that could potentially deprive a person with a disability of money they truly need, all based on a groundless stereotype that is ingrained in the mind of people everywhere.

Pulrang's argument is concise, easy to read, and is informative and thought provoking. He uses his own personal experiences and expertise to communicate the depth of the problem, and presents that problem to an audience who may have never encountered it before. Despite a few missteps, I think this is an excellent piece of writing to educate the American public about the harmful stereotypes surrounding social security benefits, and persuade them to think critically about if they are involved in the problem or not.

Works Cited

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