

## X-Men and Disability: **Disability Studies Brought to Life in Film**

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**ABSTRACT**: I intend to apply disability studies to the X-Men movie trilogy produced by Bryan Singer and 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox: X-Men, X2: X-Men United, and X-Men: The Last Stand. I will begin by defining disability as a social construction, that is, a concept developed in a context in which human variation is not treated respectfully. I will list the ways in which disability has been improperly treated and will cite examples in each of the X-Men movies in order to show how the X-Men universe relates to our reality. Then, I will illustrate how X-Men characters serve as archetypes, making manifest the ways in which people with disabilities might react to discrimination.

Rogue has the power to drain people's lives when she touches them. As a result, she is incapable of human contact. Her uniqueness affects her romantic interactions. She responds to alienation both by running away whenever she frightens others and by constructing an identity that is withdrawn and insecure. She and Wolverine both choose new names to



**DEFINITION:** Disability ought to be understood not as a biological given but a social product. Rather than being located in the individual, disability should identify human variation that has been marginalized by people who are comfortable with perpetuating an unjust social context. While people do have impairments regarding vision, mobility, hearing, and so forth, a society that treats these impairments as deviations and fails to accommodate persons with these impairments contributes to the development of the concept of disability.

**UNJUST CULTURAL PRACTICES:** When cultural contexts are faced with differences that challenge their notions of normalcy, they tend to identify anomaly as pollution or taboo rather than as neutral difference (Mary Douglas). The following are inappropriate cultural responses to disability, made manifest in both reality and the

connote the solitary nature of their lives. She reflects the isolation and alienation people with disabilities tend to feel.

> Wolverine has the ability to regenerate and so he can heal from wounds and the effects of old age. He has a long-standing history of being exploited and abused because people have taken advantage of his mutation. Those who harmed him justify themselves by regarding Wolverine as an animal and consequently, Wolverine becomes untrusting in life, feral when threatened. When in community with others like himself, however, he rediscovers his humanity and develops paternal and romantic relationships. Wolverine demonstrates how people with disabilities might construct their identities and interact socially in response to the ways in which they are treated.

Jean Gray has telekinetic and telepathic abilities. She is a complex character who can act heroic by using her powers to save her friends at the cost of her life, but can also pose a significant threat when she fails to control her abilities. Through her journey she demonstrates that people with disabilities, particularly psychiatric in nature, face difficulties pertaining to adjustment to their contexts.



## X-Men universe:

• The reduction of ambiguities to categories for the purpose of surveillance. Madness has been subject to medical categories that have been used to justify institutionalization (Michel Foucault). Intelligence testing has been used to justify discriminatory immigration policies, undergirded by the assumption that intelligence can be measured and ranked (Stephen Jay Gould). In X-Men, the Mutant Registration Act is supported even though mutants who have come forward with their abilities have met hostility and violence: "Mutants are among us. We must know who they are and most of all, what they can do" (Senator Robert Kelly).

• Elimination of difference. North America has a history of having forced people with developmental impairments to be sterilized so that they could not reproduce offspring with impairments (Adrienne Asch). An extreme example of elimination would be Nazi Germany, where people with disabilities were killed systematically (Marta Russell). In X2: X-Men United, Colonel William Striker regards mutants as a threat and attempts to destroy all mutants in the world.

Mystique is a shape-shifting villainess. She reveals that her parents tried to have her killed, which helps explain why she regards the world as a place that has tried to control her because of her uniqueness. She unabashedly displays her mutation, showing off her blue skin and her serpentine, yellow eyes. She compels us to open up the boundaries we place around humanity and beauty. When asked why she maintains her appearance when she can look like anybody she wishes, she responds, "Because we shouldn't have to".

Magneto, capable of manipulating metal, is the central villain of all three movies, whose main purpose is to destroy the human race so mutants can flourish. While his scope is megalomaniacal, he always acts in response to his context, where people and governments have sought to oppress him and his kind. Never the victim, Magneto considers his uniqueness to be an integral part of his identity. While his intentions are misguided, he nevertheless illustrates that people who are marginalized due to their differences have agency, that is, can push back.



• Treatment of disability as a lacking that requires rehabilitation or healing. Mental illness as a medical category is arguably a myth engineered by psychiatrists, those who are employed to control the mentally ill through medication and behaviour management (Thomas Szasz). People with physical disabilities are often pressured to struggle through rehabilitation, a practice which can be employed for the purpose of 'fixing' people (Henri-Jacques Stiker). In X-Men 3: The Last Stand, a vaccine is developed that can neutralize mutations and the creator of the vaccine regards mutation as a personal tragedy that keeps people from being normal: "Their affliction is nothing more than a disease, a corruption of healthy cellular activity. But I stand here today to tell you that there's hope... I offer a cure" (Senator Warren Worthington

**Professor X,** a man with powerful telepathic abilities, provides for mutants a community where they can escape judgment and develop their abilities. He creates a space for people with disabilities to thrive and maintains his integrity by fighting oppression in peaceful, organized methods of protest. He is the show's moral compass, a leader and father-figure who commands respect. While his physical disability is never highlighted, his wheelchair is somewhat emblematic, an extension and icon of his character.