

The Intouchables Revisited: Shifting Perspectives With our Dynamic Society

By Sarah Caston, PT, DPT

“Not everything that is faced can be changed; but nothing can be changed until it is faced.” —James Baldwin

“For to be free is not merely to cast off one’s chains, but to live in a way that respects and enhances the freedom of others.” —Nelson Mandela

“In recognizing the humanity of our fellow beings, we pay ourselves the highest tribute.” —Thurgood Marshall

In 2016, I wrote a review in *JHR* for the movie “The Intouchables,” which depicts the complex and endearing relationship between Phillippe, a wealthy white man who lives with a high cervical spinal cord injury, and Driss, a Black man from a disadvantaged background, who, through a series of unexpected events, became Phillippe’s primary caregiver. The film portrays the evolution of their relationship from one centered around difference, with a bit of wariness and uncertainty, to one of trustworthiness, mutual respect, and kinship.

When I wrote the initial review, it was a particularly divisive time in the United States. In fact, the day this

piece was published was the day before the 2016 presidential election. Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump were making their final pleas to American voters. Tensions were high and societal discourse fraught over the Clinton email scandal as well as Trump’s ever-escalating volatile rhetoric. It was an interesting juxtaposing place from which I reviewed this heart-warming and complex film, which was written from the lens of promoting collective kindness and the possibility of the goodness of humanity. It provided a welcomed contrast to the contentious social and political environment of the time.

Though well-intended in its purpose, I now view that article, and the film, through a different lens. I now have a deeper recognition and awareness of the complex dynamics portrayed in this movie, which go beyond a traditionally conceptualized “opposite side of the tracks” tale. I have been able to reflect on other aspects of this story, thinking about what people who are often marginalized—or viewed as “untouchable” as the title of the French film denotes, such as Black and disabled individuals—have experienced, and continue to experience. I can never know that reality firsthand; however, by centering the voices of those who have been harmed by unjust systems, we can learn how to widen our view, to combat the ignorance that privilege affords, and become better advocates in our respective spaces.

Isabel Wilkerson, the author of the book, *Caste: The Origins of Our Discontent*, calls attention to the pervasive stigmatization and exclusion of populations considered “untouchable.” Reading her powerful words and reflections deepened my historical knowledge and sharpened my gaze toward root causes of systemic racism, ableism, and health disparities experienced by those who are often marginalized. In an *NPR* article discussing her podcast interview with Terry Gross’s *Fresh Air*, Wilkerson challenges that it is indeed *caste* that perpetuates these issues, rather than solely race, when she describes:

“...[Caste] is the term that is more precise [than race]; it is more comprehensive, and it gets at the underlying infrastructure that often we cannot see, but that is there undergirding much of the inequality and injustices and disparities that we live with in this country¹.”

Wilkerson asserts that caste predates race, and throughout her book, discusses the atrocities of the Nazi regime, the objectification and humiliation of the Dalit caste in India, and the dehumanization of Black people throughout American history. She weaves the foundational threads connecting these illustrations of caste-based systems, which are perpetuated in order to maintain the ladder structure in which certain groups of individuals are forced to the bottom rung, so that others can remain at the top, can remain superior, and retain the positions of power.

Wilkerson builds a compelling argument that Black individuals are in the lowest caste position in Western, US, society, and that systems and structures have been built upon a hierarchy of white supremacy in order to keep groups and individuals unable to ascend the hierarchical societal ladder.

Reading *Caste* and noting Wilkerson’s reference to lower castes as “untouchables” brought about my reconsideration of the film “The Intouchables,” not only as it relates to stereotypes about Disabled and Black individuals, but more broadly, how it depicts relational dynamics and intersectionality with respect to racial and disability identity.

I was specifically reminded of Driss’s story in the film, which reflects a common stereotype: he, a Black man from an impoverished area, is involved with the “wrong crowd,” and is working his way toward a better future. In light of Wilkerson’s work, I viewed this part of his story from a more critical perspective. I found myself increasingly curious about what factors contributed to his, and his family’s, hardships. There is a particular scene in the film where Driss looks, full of emotion, up into the windows of a skyscraper, at his hard-working mother, working the night shift as a janitor. I remembered Wilkerson’s words about how caste systems limit opportunities and societal support for Black people and how this lack of support is cruelly devised into false narratives about lack of self-sufficiency. This illusive notion that one has total control over their circumstances negates the fact that many aspects of our society are built in accordance with, and with goals toward, maintaining hierarchical structures based on race and ability.

The disability community has undertaken its own fight to be recognized in conversations surrounding equity, inclusion, and diversity, and films that depict disabled individuals in a humanistic and non-infantilizing light are important. *The Intouchables* reminds us that life is more than a collection of bodily impairments or lack thereof, and that function devoid of meaning does not lead to a fulfilling life.

It invites us into a space of curiosity, allowing us to question, as scholars have done before, long-held presumptions such as the primacy of independence in rehabilitation, and what it truly means to be autonomous.

What does it mean to go after human *flourishing*, as opposed to physical independence? Whose voices and interests are truly being “centered” in healthcare interactions, and what does it mean for us as rehabilitation practitioners to relinquish some of our power in order to *empower*?

A film like “The Intouchables” helps remind us that a lifeworld can and does exist where richness of relationships and a life’s meaning are not dependent on physical (in)dependence. It is a movie that has the potential to counter other problematic portrayals of individuals with disabilities in the media, ones where happiness and fulfillment can only be found in miraculous physical recoveries, or, in the extreme case of *Me Before You*, in pursuing euthanasia.

I am grateful for spaces such as *JHR*, for encouraging reflection and growth, for promoting critical thinking, and for inviting questions about long-existing structures

and practices in rehabilitation. I am appreciative of the journal’s dynamism and commitment to professional excellence and societal growth. I hope the *JHR* Newsletter will prompt readers to revisit, remember, and rethink.

In our world of overcrowded inboxes, overcluttered minds, and overwhelming news, what a welcome reminder this is to cultivate humble perspectives, challenge preconceived notions and ill-wrought structures, and consider first not the ability, but the *humanity* of others.

References

1. Gross, T. (Host). (2020, Aug 4). Fresh Air. It's More Than Racism: Isabel Wilkerson Explains America's 'Caste' System. [Audio podcast]. WHYY-FM. <https://www.npr.org/2020/08/04/898574852/its-more-than-racism-isabel-wilkerson-explains-america-s-caste-system>

About the Author



Narrative Section editor: Sarah Caston, PT, DPT, is an assistant professor and assistant director of clinical education at Emory University’s Doctor of Physical Therapy Program. Dr. Caston is an alumnus of Emory University’s DPT Program, and received her bachelor’s degree in Rehabilitation Science from the University of Pittsburgh. She serves on the American Council of Academic Physical Therapy’s Consortium for the Humanities, Ethics and Professionalism, and chairs its Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Committee.

As a clinical educator, Dr. Caston weaves a humanities focus and narrative reflections into her teaching of geriatric and neurologic rehabilitation. She has a deep interest in helping students explore their perspectives, and challenge biases, through the incorporation of narrative reflections and humanities-based creative work. In a course co-developed with colleague Dr. Sarah Blanton, *Beyond the Diagnosis: Psychosocial Topics in Rehab Through the Lens of the Humanities*, Dr. Caston promotes self-exploration and professional formation utilizing narrative and engagement in the humanities. She co-directs Emory DPT's Learning Community Program, which promotes student-faculty connections, and directs research on practical methods for improving student well-being.

Dr. Caston's scholarly interests include the intersection of the lived experience of individuals with rehabilitation education and practice, ethics in rehabilitation, and DPT student well-being. She is passionate about social justice, and promotes humanities practices and student self-reflection around the lived experiences of individuals in marginalized populations.