

Editorial: The Disability Experience: New Voices, New Images

by Tom Bucaro

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This special issue of *Reflections* focuses on the experience of "disability" and its recognition as an area of human differences along the axis of ability. Its focus is not on disability as impairment but on recognition of disability as a social distinction. The earliest cultural representations of disability are with sin and evil. Later, the representation of disability is associated with illness and deficit in functions. The latter association, based on a medical model, continues to dominate the representation of disability in the education and training of academics and practitioners. Over recent decades, the cultural shift initiated by people with disabilities has been toward a social construction of disability: a minority group model that has in common with other minority collectives themes of oppression and discrimination. This conceptualization of disability presents new visions for positive identification and opportunities for human actions. Yet, disability as diversity is a cultural transformation and an identification process not fully understood or accepted by the helping profes-

sions.

The narratives in this issue are compelling. They are the voices and images of people with disabilities and not the voices and images presented by outsiders. They are the voices and images of people with disabilities who no longer choose to remain invisible. The narratives cut across a variety of disability experiences and disability-related issues: stories by people with visual, hearing, and mobility impairments; descriptions of the experiences of people with visible, hidden, and invisible disabilities; and accounts of people who became disabled either early, late, or suddenly in life. More compelling, though, than the nuances of differing among the disabilities among our writers, the reader will recognize the many commonalties of the disability experience.

The theme of passage is expressed frequently, indirectly or directly, as our writers recount their "journeys" or "transitions." They describe their transformation toward self-acceptance and the rejection of societal negative devaluation that facilitates a reintegration of positive disability identification,

that ultimately leads to cultural and self-affirmation. Another commonality is that these voices have emerged in the milieu of the worldwide disability rights movement and the Independent Living Center movements that began in the 1970's and reach their highest expression in the United States with the establishment of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) in 1990. It is within these sociopolitical movements, which opposed the culture of oppression, that people with disabilities began to collectively identify as a minority group; these movements are the linchpins of an emerging disability culture. They provide a fertile environment for the transformation of shame associated with disability to a positive disability identity and disability pride. As the narratives demonstrate, cultural self-affirmation linked to the socio-political center often give rise to advocacy conscientiousness on behalf of self and other. Subsequently, those who have been transformed serve as cultural interpreters to others with disabilities and in this way a collective identity and disability culture continues to emerge,

evolve, and expand.

Once we shift our view from a deficiency model of disability, with its negative stereotypes, to a diversity model of disability, we can come to see people with disabilities as a group who share commonalities with each other, distinct from the dominant culture of the non-disabled. While some academics question whether disability is a true culture, there is little question that the community of people with disabilities has cultural dimensions. Some of these dimensions are shared with other minority groups while other dimensions are unique to people with disabilities. Nevertheless, what remains clear is that despite varying degrees of personal struggles, people and families with disabilities share with racial, ethnic, and other minorities the common experiences of social oppression and discrimination that include the underlying devaluation of the cultural experiences related to their differences and the oppression by the dominant culture.

While the whole case for the existence of disability culture cannot be made here, we can briefly discuss its current stage of development as emerging and in flux. Its cultural history, similar to other oppressed groups and perhaps even more so, has been largely hidden and must be discovered and reconstructed from the text and subtext of the literary works and historical documents produced by the dominant culture. Also, like other minority groups, people with disabilities have become increasingly assertive.

They have emerged from the shadows, fresh from hard-won political and cultural victories, to produce art, language, literature, humor, and other cultural products that emanate from the disability experience and that have fortified a growing sense of community among people with disabilities. The narratives in this issue are the product of that cultural process and will become part of its cultural history. These evolving cultural elements as well as other elements, previously hidden, are examined critically under the emerging discipline of Disability Studies. However, again as with other minority groups, it is recognized that there is not cultural unanimity among the broad spectrum of people with disabilities. For example, many persons with disabilities who have successfully assimilated into mainstream society resist identification with disability and are not quick to embrace an evolving disability culture.

The question is whether the helping professions will recognize and align themselves with emerging representations of disability or maintain the status quo. The images of persons with disabilities as social participants challenge long-held assumptions of practitioners. And as the disabled have found their voice, their call for collaborative partnerships with practitioners and their demand for self-determination are just beginning to be heard. In effect, practitioners are "at risk" of exercising acts of oppression and discrimination, even if intended to follow standards of practice or acts of kind-

ness. It is an issue of critical importance for the helping professions as the population becomes aged, as technology expands the prolongation of life, and as people with disabilities gain visibility in the cultural life of the United States and worldwide. The recognition of disability as diversity where it intersects with the helping professions brings us to some new venues on the discourse of multiculturalism.

With the increased presence of diversity in the American culture, the need for social workers and other human service professionals to develop cross-cultural competencies has received widespread attention in the literature. While the Curriculum Policy Statement of the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) recognizes disability along the axis of ability within the curriculum content area of human diversity, the profession has been slow to recognize disability as a diversity issue and a valid minority experience. It is disheartening to find that many of the standard texts used to prepare social work professionals make little reference, if any, to the representation of persons with disabilities as a socio-political and cultural entity. Instead, texts continue to perpetuate existing stereotypes and represent people with disabilities as a population that is universally "at risk." Similarly, conferences designed to promote the understanding and practice with diverse groups rarely include people with disabilities as part of the diversity mosaic.

Therefore, as the social work profession approaches the

21st century, one of the major challenges, as well as one of major opportunities, for social work education is to advance a disability initiative that incorporates a diversity perspective of disability into the curriculum. In 1997, the CSWE Board of Directors established the Commission on Disability and Persons with Disabilities (CDPD). Among its goals are the promotion of new emerging paradigms of disability into the mainstream of social work education and the inclusion of people with disabilities within the social work professional community. It remains to be seen how successful the CDPD will be in reaching these goals, but until they are achieved, the profession will be absent the cultural competency needed to work with the largest minority group in the United States.

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