Unpacking Internalized Ableism: Counselling people with Vision Loss

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Common patterns in the Adjustment process

-adjustment is a process rather than a stage

-there can be a focus on curing or treating the vision loss rather than addressing it

-fear is a prodominent emotion, the world feels unsafe

-social isolation is a common response to the fear

-a sense of hopelessness focuses attention on negatives, especially what can’t be done

-a rejection of anything connected to vision loss, especially using a white cane

-seeking information and learning new skills can help break through the negatives

-meeting other people with vision loss is key

-there may be a change in self identification what does it mean to be someone with vision loss? What term will the person use?

-frustration and anger can occur when experiencing barriers and social stigma

-reactions by family and friends impact how the person reacts

-there can be difficulties around asking for help or receiving help, connected to feeling like a burden or not wanting to admit limitations

Ways to Help

-focus on what the person can do and help problem solve difficult tasks

-connect to the person as a whole and remind them that they are more than their vision loss

-connect them to others with vision loss, social and recreation groups

-explore new activities to replace old ones, try accessible sports such as tandem biking, tethered running etc.

-explore how their identity has changed

-acknowledge and discuss how ableism impacts their lives

Models of Disability

Taken from leadership Development notes, Expanding the Reach, Scarborough women's Centre November 2013

Historical Perceptions of Disability

Religious

In a Western Judea-Christian society, the understanding of what it means to have a disability is grounded in religious references. People with disabilities were viewed as the end result of sin or doing something wrong.

Another view of disability was that people with disabilities were "paying" for the sins of others. People with disabilities were seen as innocent victims.

Basically, if you had a bodily difference (i.e. physical, sensory, visual, Deaf, etc.) you were either seen as evil or pure.

It is important to note that disability is viewed differently in other cultures. It some cultures, the concept of disability does not exist.

From Farm to Factory

As advances in science took hold, so too, did advances in other forms of work. Most people went from the farm to the factory. Changes in work also changed how people saw disability. People with disabilities living on the farm or helping out with a family business (i.e. Cabinet making) were often given tasks that matched their abilities.

Factory work pushed lots of people with disabilities out to the margins because the 'ideal' worker was someone who could work with the machinery and work quickly.

Medical Model

The rise of science and medicine led to a new group professionals. Under this model people with disabilities are seen as broken, incapable of work and completely dependent. Institutions began to pop for those deemed unable to work so that they could be removed from the family and the family could continue to work and support the economy.

Under this model disability is seen as an individual problem that needs to be fixed or cured.

Social Model of Disability

Created around the time of the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960-70s, the social model of disability was a response to the treatment and social isolation of people with disabilities and their families.

Under this model, disability is created when society fails to consider the existence of people with disabilities in the design of buildings, programs and services. Put another way, it is not the inability to walk that prevents a person entering a building, but the existence of stairs that makes a building inaccessible to someone who uses a wheelchair.

Taken from **www.still.my.revolution.tao.ca** Resisting disablism and Building Social Justice

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The Charity Model

The Charity approach to disability viewed as being in the *'best interests'* of disabled people but it does not consider disabled people's experiences and knowledge as necessarily valuable or essential. This approach is about well meaning 'do-gooders' acting on our behalf without us. Because we aren't in control of the process little good, or even harm, is often the result.

In the past decades, people who follow the charity model have not so much tried to define disability as they have tried to redefine it. These attempts to redefine or rebrand disability have largely failed because they have been made by people, while well meaning, who are largely not disabled and who have a negative and paternalistic view of disability.

One example of the rebranding of disability through the charity model is the term handicapped. The word *handicapped* replaced *gimp*, *crip/crippled*, and *lame*. Handicap is an offensive and unacceptable term as it is derived from a gaming term which means to equal out a disadvantage by, for instance, spotting points or playing with one hand tied behind your back. The word handicap implies an inherent disadvantage that undermines the quality of disabled people’s lives. Handicapped later became *differently-abled*, which establishes, by definition, what normal is and that we aren’t it.

Similarly, *retard* was transformed into *slow* and then to *developmentally delayed* or *developmentally disabled*. Again, these terms establish a norm, which is problematic. These terms also embed the concept in them that there is one line of development for people. They imply that people with intellectual disabilities have somehow stalled in their "development" and are fixed at a spot in time where their lives will be forever unfulfilled. They don’t have room for the plethora of meaningful experiences that people with intellectual disabilities undergo.

Challenged is another term adopted by others on our behalf as a way of describing our lives. Where the medical model inserts diagnostic labels that are individualizing and define people’s entire identities, politically correct liberals individualize our oppression by calling us challenged. This label tells us that all obstacles we face are because of our own minds and bodies, not because of social inequities and inaccessibility.

Furthermore, *challenged*, like *developmentally disabled*, *differently-abled*, and *handicapped* does nothing to change our lives, it doesn’t build ramps, or housing; it doesn’t provide interpreters or personal support workers; it doesn’t bring equality or autonomy; and, it doesn’t abolish segregation or discrimination. The attempts by well meaning liberals to establish "politically correct" terms to define disability are just that, attempts to dictate how things change for our benefit. In this case, nothing changes but the label.

The entire charity approach is designed to ensure that no real change ever occurs. It is about people doing good for others, it is not about change, it is not about liberation, it is about the agents of charity - the do-gooders feeling better about themselves and the world they live in.

It brilliantly co-opts the language of resistance talking about "fighting," "resisting," and "beating" disabilities.

Charities, however, identify our disabilities as the things that oppress us, not social barriers, not systemic issues - our bodies, our minds (the things that give us life and make us who we are).

The things to be resisted are those are our disabilities and no fundamental social change should ever occur under this view. This is in itself an oppressive view and why the social model and the radical model have worked to reclaim and redefine disabled people's points of resistance and fight for social justice rather than the elimination of disability.

Rights Model

The rights model is primarily a fight for access to the privileges people would otherwise have had if they were not disabled. A focus on rights is not a struggle for fundamental social change; rather, it strives to make changes within the existing system.

The idea behind disability rights is that:

A human rights approach to disability acknowledges that people with disabilities are rights holders and that social structures and policies restricting or ignoring the rights of people with disabilities often lead to discrimination and exclusion. A human rights perspective requires society, particularly governments, to actively promote the necessary conditions for all individuals to fully realize their rights.

This is the definition of DRPI (Disability Rights Promotion International). According to this group and many other rights groups, "As full citizens with equal rights, people with disabilities are entitled to: access to education, equal rights to parenthood, rights to property ownership, access to courts-of-law, political rights such as the right to vote, equal access to employment"

However, the rights approach does not address fundamental flaws within the system that disabled people are seeking inclusion in. For example, the rights model recognizes the right of disabled people to own private property but does not question fundamental injustices attached to property ownership. Further, it does not necessarily address colonialism which has resulted in much of the property ownership in many parts of the world to be a direct result of racism and theft.

It is important to acknowledge that much of the access and privileges that disabled people have today is a direct result of the people who struggled and continue to struggle for disability rights. Many people have fought very hard for disabled people's inclusion in society and these struggles need to be recognized and celebrated. However, we need to do more than fight for rights within society as it is structured now, we need to fight for social justice for everyone and that means restructuring society.

Radical disability activists acknowledge that we do not control the definition of disability - that it is defined by those with power to their benefit.

Women, queer people, trans people, racialized people, poor people and other marginalized people were all considered disabled at one point in history, largely under the umbrella of feeble-minded and/or degenerate.

Radical disability activists are very critical of certain groups' attempts to get more privilege by defining themselves as other than disabled. Members of the Deaf and psychiatrized communities have attempted to distance themselves from other disabled people by saying essentially *"there is nothing wrong with us. We are a linguistic minority or we think and experience the world differently but we are not disabled. There is nothing wrong with us."*

The radical disability model says there is nothing wrong with *any* of us.

We argue that disability is simply defined as *those who are externally identified as disabled and those who self-identify as disabled.*

To us, disability is not a point of individual or social tragedy but a natural and necessary part of human diversity. The tragedy of disability is not our minds and bodies but oppression, exclusion and marginalization.

We do not need to be cured. We do not need charity. We need respect, equality and access.