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Toward Inclusive Theory: Disability As Social Construction

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The author discusses the three prevailing theoretical frameworks for understanding students with disabilities—the functional limitations framework, the minority group paradigm, and social constructivism—and their related intervention strategies, with special emphasis on disability as a social construct.

Is being handicapped the most salient feature about me? The fact that it might be in the eyes of others made me decide to write this essay. I realized that the way I think about myself may differ considerably from the way others perceive me. And maybe that's what being physically handicapped is all about. (Chan, 1992, p.296)

Introduction

Definitions of what it means to be disabled in America have been framed primarily by "the eyes of others." Much of the research on disability is conducted by persons without disabilities for whom significant contact with persons with disabilities is limited (Fine & Asch, 1988). The word "disability" itself reflects this tendency, since its definition is meaningful primarily in its oppositional relationship to ability, its language offering

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"... a symbolic and linguistic description of how individuals are to be regarded, treated and integrated into society" (Lombana, 1989, p.177). People with disabilities are consistently regarded as different from those without disabilities (Scheer, 1994). Given this, any understanding of the experience of disability is limited.

A new framework for understanding disability is needed to challenge assumptions upon which prevailing definitions exist and to broaden our perspectives on the experiences of those with disabilities. A social constructivist perspective (Gergen, 1985) of disability offers promise for such new understandings because it defines disability not solely as an individual experience or medical condition but as a socially constructed phenomenon that incorporates the experience of those living with disabilities in interaction with their environments.

In spite of the prevalence of disability in society, relatively little is known about the disability experience (Asch & Fine, 1988; Atkinson & Hackett, 1995). The research that has been conducted is inadequate for either a comprehensive understanding of disability or a meaningful interpretation of how the lives of persons with disabilities are affected by them. Atkinson and Hackett (1995) suggested that even though increased attention has been given in recent years to persons with disabilities, interventions have been directed primarily at rehabilitation rather than liberation.

The purpose of this article is to provide a summary of three prevailing theoretical frameworks for understanding students with disabilities: (a) the functional limitations framework, (b) the minority group paradigm, and (c) social constructivism. Implicit in each are suggestions for appropriate interventions with students with disabilities. Particular emphasis will be placed on disability as a socially constructed phenomenon because this enables the student affairs administrator to adopt new perspectives about disability and to reexamine services and programs. To view disability as a socially constructed phenomenon shifts an analysis from one focusing primarily on the disability itself to one recognizing the intersection of individual and societal factors. Exploring disability as social construction encourages inclusive theory-building that "begins with valuing the experiences of those who have been excluded and questioning the assumptions made about all groups" (Anderson & Collins, 1992, p.4). Since a social constructivist understanding of disability can significantly change the way in which student affairs administrators understand students with disabilities, implications for practice will also be examined.

Existing Theoretical Frameworks for Understanding Students with Disabilities

Functional Limitations Framework

To understand students with disabilities from a functional limitations framework is to focus primarily on individuals and their disabling conditions (Hahn, 1991). This framework offers explanations for individual powerlessness and strategies for dealing with limitations. Viewing disability from this framework seems to justify the status quo, keeping students with disabilities in positions of weakness. The limitation is seen as the individual's and becomes central in defining the student (Hahn, 1988).

A functional limitations model assumes that the biological fact of disability is central (Hahn, 1991), governing the student's sense of self, explaining all problems experienced by the student, and rendering the student in need of help and support (Fine & Asch, 1988). These assumptions inform an understanding of the meaning of disability, guide research, mediate interactions with students with disabilities, and influence what are considered to be appropriate interventions. The process of defining and understanding students with disabilities thereby becomes confined and restricted by a narrow model. Adhering to the assumptions of the model keeps attention focused on the student with the disability, while ignoring the environment that exacerbates the condition of disability. This orientation implies that it is the individual student who needs to change rather than the conditions of a "disabling environment" (Hahn, 1988).

Interventions emerging from the functional limitations model focus on rehabilitation and dealing with physical barriers. This focus on limitation obscures differences in disabling conditions, differences in degrees of limitations or impairment, and differences in individual responses to limitations (Fine & Asch, 1988). The functional limitations framework stigmatizes and so isolates, marginalizes, and alienates. From the realization that persons with disabilities were, in fact, being treated as "different" and, as such, shared common experiences with other minority groups, the minority group model emerged.

Minority Group Paradigm

Proponents of the minority group framework for understanding persons with disabilities suggest that one's membership in any minority group produces commonalities of experience among all members (Atkinson & Hackett, 1995; Hahn, 1991). This model focuses on issues of alienation, marginalization, discrimination, and oppression.

Deficit model

This perspective is helpful in adding to a more complex analysis of disability because it acknowledges environmental factors as well as differential power structures, group identification as "different", and discriminatory treatment. With an emphasis on the experiences of marginality and discrimination born and bred in the environment, it is argued that many of the problems encountered by persons with disabilities may best be understood by their membership in a minority group (Fine & Asch, 1988; Scheer, 1994).

This framework suggests that students with disabilities may not be understood fully without considering the consequences of minority group status, privilege, and the disabling environment. Several shortcomings of this model, however, are worth noting. The salience of the model depends upon minority group identification and consciousness, something that, as Hahn (1988) points out, presents great obstacles for persons with disabilities, including difficulties of access as well as opportunities to come together. The tremendous variety of disabling conditions may also serve to act against the development of minority group consciousness.

In addition, the model builds upon the deficit model and in so doing may in fact perpetuate myths and stereotypes of students with disabilities as victims and in need of support. To think of students with disabilities as minorities perpetuates the centrality of the disability and often serves as justification for setting those with disabilities apart from others. Often, such treatment and perceptions are based upon prejudicial notions of what truly constitutes the disability experience (Hahn, 1988).

The minority group model certainly improves upon the restrictiveness of the functional limitations model because it begins to acknowledge the social and psychological consequences of disability. Yet, neither perspective appropriately acknowledges the experience of the student living with the disability or grapples with the complex interaction of factors that have an impact on those with and those without disability. An alternative explanation and framework for understanding students with disabilities is needed.

Social Construction of Disability

To explore disability as a socially constructed phenomenon requires that the analysis be expanded to include both those with disabilities and those without. This perspective depends upon an understanding that much of what is believed about disability results from meanings attached by those who are not disabled and challenges the assumptions upon which those meanings rest. To understand disability as socially constructed is to

celebrate the uniqueness of individual difference while directing attention toward social change and transformation of oppressive structures (Asch & Fine, 1988; Trickett, Watts, & Birman, 1994). To think of disability as a socially constructed phenomenon is to distinguish between the biological fact of disability and the handicapping social environment in which the person with disabilities exists.

Asch (1984) and then Asch and Fine (1988) were the first to reframe disability as a socially constructed phenomenon. The social constructivist perspective contends that one's understanding of the world cannot exist independently of the context within which the individual interacts with the world (Gergen, 1985). In defining the social construction of disability, Asch and Fine (1988) write, "... it is the attitudes and institutions of the non-disabled, even more than the biological characteristics of the disabled, that turn characteristics into handicaps" (p.7). Such a perspective does not discount the existence of either the biological fact of disability or the functional limitation, but the limitation is just that—a limitation (Lombana, 1989). This biological fact cannot be meaningfully understood outside the contexts, relationships, institutions, or situations that define and shape the meaning of disability (Asch & Fine, 1988; Scheer, 1994).

To view disability as socially constructed forces an analysis of the social structures that have pushed students with disabilities to the margins of institutions and created handicaps out of characteristics. The resulting objectification maintains oppressive social structures that create clear distinctions between superiority and inferiority and disability and ability (Collins, 1991). To view disability as socially constructed challenges those previously held notions of the meaning of disability that have served to guide theory and practice, notions less rooted in empirical fact than in a social contract developed primarily by those outside the disability experience. A social constructivist perspective of disability has powerful implications for practice.

Implications for Practice

Designing successful programs and services for students with disabilities requires careful negotiation between meeting the specific needs of students with disabilities and expanding the boundaries of disability. The SPAR model (services, programs, advocacy, research), developed by Jacoby and Girrell, 1981 (as cited in Jacoby, 1993), provides a useful framework for examining implications for practice, in that "The model assumes that Student Affairs professionals—no matter what position they hold in the organizational structure—will work for, with, and on behalf of all groups of students" (Jacoby, 1993, p. 472).

The SPAR model provides a framework for examining the basic functions of a student affairs unit—services, programs, advocacy, and research—from the perspective of particular groups of students. Each of these functions is examined, for example, with students with disabilities in mind, acknowledging the great variety of disabling conditions among students with disabilities. The examples which follow are in no way intended to collapse the experience of disability into a unified whole but rather to suggest how services, programs, advocacy, and research must be conceptualized with students with disabilities at the center of the analysis. In explicating each piece of the model, several questions are posed to assist readers in evaluating services, programs, advocacy, and research at their own institutions. These questions reflect the application of the theoretical framework of social construction to the experiences of students with disabilities.

Services

Jacoby (1993) suggests that student affairs units must evaluate their success in providing services that are appropriate for all students as well as specific to identifiable groups of students. Services for students with disabilities are the responsibility of all units, not only the unit whose particular charge is to provide group-specific services. For example, are career services units equipped to accommodate a senior with hearing loss interested in the job placement service? Are recreational departments offering dance classes for students who use wheelchairs? Are the service counters and bulletin boards in the office of off-campus housing accessible to all students?

Programs

Successful programming creates the opportunity for high quality interactions among student participants (Jacoby, 1993). The implications for students with disabilities are two-fold. First, programming must address the unique needs of students with disabilities and provide opportunities for them to come together as a group. Additionally, programming ought to result in meaningful interactions among all students. For example, are interpreters available at campus programming events? Are extended application deadlines (e.g. admissions or Resident Assistant) possible for those with documented learning disabilities? Are students with disabilities members of committees such as Homecoming? Students with disabilities must be involved in programming for other students who share their experiences, but they must also be integrally involved in general campus wide program planning.

Advocacy

To engage in advocacy on behalf of students with disabilities entails more than simply adding programs to meet their needs (Jacoby, 1993). Advocacy requires that student affairs administrators, regardless of their unit or area of responsibility, learn about the unique and common needs and issues of students with disabilities, raise the level of knowledge of other members of the campus community, and create the conditions for institutional change (Jacoby, 1993). Is someone working with physical plant staff members, for example, to guarantee speedy snow removal on the sidewalks and parking lots? Are questions raised about the low numbers of faculty and administrators with disabilities? Are office renovations designed to be not simply accommodating, as required by law, but truly welcoming to students with a variety of impairments?

Research

Those conducting institutional research must acknowledge that disability is best understood and studied over time, in an historical and cultural context, and as a continually transforming process rather than as a static and individual characteristic (Becker & Arnold, 1986). For example, is a question about disability included as a standard demographic on all surveys? Does institutional research go beyond demographics to assess satisfaction with services and programs of students with disabilities? Are focus groups conducted to gain a qualitative perspective of students' experiences? As individual student affairs units conduct their own assessments and program evaluations, is this student population considered?

Conclusion

To view disability as social construction is to think inclusively by considering the experiences of persons with disabilities and examining the quality of their interaction with the campus environment. Such a perspective acknowledges the power of environmental, structural, and cultural definitions of disability which exert a strong force on those living with disability. Further, a view of disability as socially constructed acknowledges that the experience of disability ultimately includes all persons. Removing the physical, social, and emotional barriers of the disabling environment suggests that "Once people with disabilities are admitted inside the human and moral community, the task becomes one of creating an environment where all humans—including those with impairments—can truly flourish" (Fine & Asch, 1988, p.16). Rethinking disability from a social constructivist perspective will bring more inclusive theory-building, and broaden services, programs, advocacy, and research. Expanding these dimensions of practice will better serve all students.

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Dear Editor:

In his review of *Men and Rape* (NASPA Journal, Fall 1995), Paul Herman endorses the practice but not the theory of the rape prevention workshops for men discussed in the book. As the author of the lead theoretical chapter, I would like to respond to his review.

As far as I can tell, Herman has three major objections to the book. First, he disputes its contention that "all-male workshops are more likely than coed workshops to produce consistently positive effects on men." This is actually a rather modest nuanced claim. Herman acknowledges that the book cites seven studies that support this conclusion. He never questions the methodology of any of those studies. He never cites any other studies that would support any other claim than the one made in the book. In short, he provides absolutely no basis for his criticism.

Second, Herman reports his "confusion" about the scope of the book. He says our book is supposed to be about college students but he is disappointed when "much of the cited literature relates to society as a whole, and American culture in particular." This comment alone is a false and unfair criticism in light of the fact that virtually all of the eighty (80) citations in the literature review by the book's editor (Chapter 1) are on the specific subject of college men. In fact, the overwhelming majority of references in every chapter are about college men, with the exception of my own (Chapter 2), which was *intended* to locate college men and rape in larger, theoretical discourses about masculinity.

Herman then says the scope of the book is too "provincial"; it does not address rape globally, in contemporary Bosnia, for example. The primary focus of this book is "acquaintance rape," widely acknowledged by student affairs professionals to be the most pressing problem of sexual assault on college campuses, not "stranger rape" by soldiers in ethnic warfare. Unfortunately, acquaintance rape on college campuses and stranger rape in warfare do have connections along a global continuum of male supremacy and the devaluation of women. The broader connection was simply not the focus of our book.

Third, and finally, Herman objects to my own conclusion that feminist theory offers the most promise as the theoretical foundation for changing the problematic masculinity at bottom of the instances of rape preventable by any workshop offered to men on a college campus. If Herman disagrees, he should give a reason or at least take a stand on the other possibilities I analyze (the conservative, or the mythopoetic), or suggest his own.

He does show some interest in "genetic and biological differences" between men and women as the basis for a workshop and criticizes my article for "missing" a "biological explanation for masculinity." I do not. In my discussion of the conservative perspective (pp. 24-25), I explicitly discuss "biological imperatives" that "determine male behavior."

In addition, Herman makes some straightforward, factual errors relating to the content of the book that simply do not accurately represent the text. For example, he cites my use of a statistic ("40% to 70% of men never have thoughts of rape") that never appears in my chapter or anywhere else in the entire book for that matter and is not even remotely suggested by anything that does appear.

Yours truly,

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