

Disability Culture and Cultural Competency in Social Work

Marilyn Dupré

Despite recognition of the importance of cultural and social diversity in social work education and practice there is a dearth of social work literature related to disability culture. A review of disability studies literature indicates that the disabled people's movement already affirms and celebrates the existence of disability culture as characterized by several agreed upon assumptions: disability culture is cross-cultural; it emerged out of a disability arts movement and its positive portrayal of disabled people; it is not just a shared experience of oppression but includes art, humour, history, evolving language and beliefs, values and strategies for surviving and thriving. Essentialist concepts of culture, as represented in assimilationist and pluralist social work approaches, provide social workers with the false belief that there are cultural competencies that one can develop that are sufficient to become more culturally sensitive. However, analysis of the critical theory underpinning disability culture demonstrates that an understanding of cultural politics is fundamental to social work education if it is to support the work of the disabled people's movement in demystifying and deconstructing the norms, discourses and practices of dominant culture which are represented as neutral and universal.

Keywords: Cultural Oppression; Counter-hegemony; Cultural Intervention

Introduction

A recent review of American and British disability literature indicates that most members of the disabled people's movement already affirm and celebrate the existence of disability culture as characterized by several generally agreed upon assumptions: disability culture is cross-cultural (Peters, 2000); it emerged out of a disability arts movement and its positive portrayal of disabled people (Barnes and Mercer, 2003); it is not just a shared experience of oppression but includes art, humour, a history, evolving language and symbols, beliefs, values and strategies for surviving and thriving (Gill, 1995); and it is distinguished from mainstream culture because it differentiates between the negative stereotypes of dominant culture and more positive representations of difference (Longmore, 1995).

Correspondence to: Marilyn Dupré, Program Delivery Manager, Child Welfare, Department of Social Development, 200 King Street, Woodstock, New Brunswick E7M 5C6, Canada. Email: Marilyn.Dupre@gnb.ca

Despite recognition of the importance of cultural and social diversity in social work education and practice, there is a dearth of contemporary social work literature related to disability culture. The American social work educators Gilson *et al.* (2002) reviewed disability content in social work curricula and found that disability continues to be examined through a primarily diagnostic lens. Yet, the study of disability culture provides an important focus for examining the dynamics of cultural oppression and how individual, cultural and structural levels of oppression intersect to create 'ableism'. An understanding of disability culture can also provide social workers with important theoretical insights into the hegemonic activities of dominant culture in relation to the oppression of disabled people and other subordinate groups in society. An analysis of disability studies literature in relation to disability culture indicates that it is time for social work education to move beyond identity politics to focus on the critical examination of dominant cultural practices in relation to power.

Social Work Practice Theories Related to Culture

Theories related to social work practice at the cultural level of society generally represent an attempt to overcome oppression through one of three approaches to an emancipatory politics: assimilation through a politics of integration; multiculturalism through a politics of cultural pluralism; and collective resistance through a politics of difference (Mullaly, 2007).

Assimilation Through a Politics of Integration

The dominant discourse on disability within social work has historically been that of an individual/medical model which views the 'problem' of disability as one of individual deficits and limitations (Hiranandani, 2005). Much of clinical social work practice with disabled persons has centred on intervention strategies to either 'fix' or 'normalize' the disabled individual, despite the contributions of early disability scholarship in the social sciences and humanities that theorized the historical, economic and social context of disablement: Blaxter (1976), Finkelstein (1980), Oliver (1986, 1990) and Barton (1989) to name just a few. There have been attempts to introduce a broad range of environmental factors to clinical social work and culture has become increasingly important with social work's adoption of an ecological systems approach (Mackelprang and Salsgiver, 1996). The conceptual framework provided by the ecological perspective, together with ideas from the strengths perspective and empowerment theory (Fong and Furuto, 2001) informs the practice of social workers who work within an assimilationist cultural model.

The American social work educators Caryl Germain and Alex Gitterman are generally accepted within social work academia as the originators of the ecological approach in social work, as explained in their seminal book, *The Life Model of Social Work Practice*, first published in 1980. The authors contend that humankind is generally able to adapt to the technological change and social disorganization associated with living in modern society. However, the price that people pay for negative adaptation is chronic illness, emotional disturbance and impaired social functioning (Germain and Gitterman, 1996).

The authors believe that an ecological perspective helps social workers to assess multiple interrelated and complex issues related to 'person-in-environment' and to change the maladaptive relations between people and their environments. The social worker must come to understand the individual within the context of his or her environment, with the primary emphasis of social work practice focused on helping the individual to cope, adapt and fit within that environmental context (Minou Michilin and Juarez-Marazzo, 2001; Fong and Furuto, 2001). The assistance that social work practitioners provide to clients to increase their personal, interpersonal or political power, along with a focus on developing client strengths, is viewed as a significant strategy for helping people to reclaim greater control over their lives (Germain and Gitterman, 1996; Rothman, 2003).

Dr Dennis Saleebby, Professor Emeritus at the University of Kansas, is widely acknowledged within the social work literature to be a leading proponent of the strengths perspective in social work practice. He contends that the strengths perspective affirms culture as a source of inspiration, positive identity, stability, meaning, comfort, healing and transformation during periods of difficulty:

Individuals impart, receive, or affirm meanings largely through telling and re-telling stories and recounting narratives, the plots often laid out by culture ... Groups who suffer the domination of broader social institutions or their own cultural devices under the dominant culture frequently do not have their stories told or heard ... Certainly one of the characteristics of being oppressed is having one's stories buried under the forces of ignorance and stereotype. (Saleebby, 1996, p. 301)

In an early text co-authored by Saleebby the transcultural perspective of culture is described as a practice framework that recognizes and tolerates cultural differences between providers of service and those they serve. The ultimate goal of the transcultural approach is integration: '... the result of genuine, intense, egalitarian, and dialogic encounters between minority and majority; that all cultures will begin, in important ways, to merge and both will be different over time for the exchange' (Wright *et al.*, 1983, p. 4). Gould (1995) explains that the assimilationist approach to culture in America was an attempt to heal the cultural rifts and social polarization between white and non-white people, between established immigrants and new immigrants, and between American ethnic communities and Third World cultures.

Transcultural thinking is evident in many contemporary social work texts and journal articles. Yan and Wong (2005) argue that cross-cultural social work is a site where a client and social worker from differing cultures negotiate and communicate to co-create new meanings and relationships. Diller (2007) describes cultural competence in social work practice as the ability to effectively provide services cross-culturally through such practice skills as: awareness and acceptance of difference; knowledge of the client's culture; ability to adapt skills to accommodate cultural differences; and understanding the dynamics of difference which could lead to miscommunication or misinterpretation. Therefore, an assimilationist approach to disability and disability culture would still focus on strategies of 'normalization' but would also include the identification and affirmation of individual strengths, as well as the need for accommodation for difference, especially in relation to communication.

Multiculturalism Through a Politics of Cultural Pluralism

Cultural pluralism is similar to the transcultural approach in that it is based on an ecological framework of examining person-in-environment interactions but, unlike the transcultural approach, it includes a focus on the common adaptive behaviours and experiences derived from membership in particular cultural contexts. A review of American social work literature related to multicultural social work practice, conducted by Logan (2003), found that the profession's cultural work began in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries with the arrival of immigrant families in the United States. She contends that two divergent schools of thought emerged from working with poor immigrant families: the assimilationist approach employed by the Charity Organization Society and the pluralist approach which was utilized by social workers within the Settlement House Movement. The Charity Organization Society espoused the belief that immigrant families could be helped by being taught moral ways of living that were consistent with the values of the dominant white, middle-class culture, while the Settlement House workers valued cultures and encouraged the continuation of immigrant traditions. The strong influence of psychiatric theory in the 1920s and the tendency to focus on the intrapsychic aspects of human problems led the profession of social work to become more concerned with the causes of problems 'within the person' rather than as symptoms caused by the environment (Kim, 1995). However, emphasis on cultural pluralism resurged within social work academia during the 1960s and 1970s as a result of the civil rights and ethnic pride movements (Logan, 2003).

The cultural identification of the community of disabled people as a minority group has only recently been acknowledged as part of cultural diversity addressed within social work practice. In a pluralist model of social work practice disabled people are viewed as a group of people in society who share certain attributes and characteristics (Rothman, 2003). Disabled people are considered a minority group and, like other minority groups in society, they are viewed as sharing a minority experience of prejudice, stigma, discrimination and devaluation of cultural norms, with the concomitant pressure to assimilate into the majority culture (Olkin, 1999; Hanjorgiris *et al.*, 2004). Unlike racial and ethnic groups, persons with disabilities have not had centuries of collective identity and history to aid them in rejecting stereotypes and in overcoming discrimination (Mackelprang and Salsgiver, 1996). Social work practice within a multicultural framework focuses on improving accessibility for disabled people and on political advocacy for civil rights (Rothman, 2003).

Collective Resistance Through a Politics of Difference

The Canadian social work theorist and activist Bob Mullaly (2010) argues that the ecological approach remains the dominant perspective within many schools of social work in North America, despite the fact that it is not a theory and does not have any predictive or explanatory capabilities. He believes that an ecological approach to social work practice does not try to change the essential nature of the social system but deals with individuals and environmental influences within the system, such as the family

and subculture, ignoring differentials of power and influence, as well as the broader structural forces contributing to inequality (Mullaly, 2007). He contends that social workers need to adopt a change perspective in which society is viewed as comprising inherently opposing groups with respect to interests, values and expectations: 'The conflict or change perspective is strongly identified with critical theory, which attributes social problems to social structures, processes, and practices that favour certain groups in society and oppress others along lines of class, race, gender, age, and so on' (Mullaly, 2010, p. 14).

Mullaly and other social work theorists with a critical theory perspective believe that discrimination operates at three distinct but interconnected levels in society; personal, cultural and structural (Thompson, 1993, 2003; Mullaly, 2002, 2007). An understanding of the cultural level is necessary to both contextualize the personal level and to show its limitations as an explanation of discrimination and oppression (Thompson, 2003).

Oppression at the personal level intersects with the cultural level when members of oppressed groups are defined by dominant groups in ways that devalue, objectify and stereotype them as deviant or inferior (Thompson, 1993; Mullaly, 2002). Oppression at the cultural level consists of those values, norms and shared patterns of thinking and acting, that taken together endorse a belief in a superior culture (Thompson, 1993; Mullaly, 2007). When the dominant group in society reinforces its own position by measuring other groups according to dominant norms, which are the dominant group's own norms, it is referred to as cultural imperialism (Mullaly, 2002). Oppression at the structural level occurs when 'social divisions, practices, and processes, along with social institutions, laws, policies, and the economic and political systems, all work together to benefit the dominant group at the expense of subordinate groups' (Mullaly, 2010, p. 127). Therefore, a transformative social work practice must seek to locate problems within a wider cultural and social analysis which examines the broader context of how the personal, cultural and structural levels of oppression interact (Mullaly, 2007).

To overcome cultural imperialism, culturally oppressed groups must define their own identity and assert a positive sense of group difference (Mullaly, 2002). Mullaly supports the adoption of a 'politics of difference' as elaborated by American social theorist and feminist Iris Marion Young (1990a) as a means for overcoming oppression. Group differences are viewed as positive and desired rather than as a liability or disadvantage. Young (1990a) explains that a lack of recognition of difference only serves to perpetuate cultural imperialism by allowing norms expressing the point of view and experience of privileged groups to appear universal and neutral; and against this neutral humanist ideal only the oppressed group becomes marked by particularity, as Other. Essentialist categorizations are avoided by recognizing that individuals may be affiliated with many different groups and by understanding that oppressed people are seldom oppressed along one dimension (Mullaly, 2002). Differences between groups do not mean that they are different in every respect because they may share overlapping experiences and common goals (Mullaly, 2007). Group autonomy is seen as a valuable vehicle for empowerment and for providing a group-specific perspective, but does not exclude the possibility of establishing coalitions for combating shared forms of oppression.

Mullaly (2002) believes that anti-oppressive social work practice at the cultural level of society must work to undermine cultural imperialism through understanding and supporting an approach that incorporates cultural politics. In his most recent work, *Challenging Oppression and Confronting Privilege* (2010), Mullaly devotes a chapter to oppression at the cultural level in which he argues that any attempt at practising anti-oppressive social work must incorporate the concept of culture, informed by the research and literature from critical theory perspectives of culture. Mullaly contends that culture has historically been the 'poor cousin' in social work theory and practice and he believes that cultural studies, as an activity of critical theory, would serve to challenge mainstream culture and would promote an understanding of culture as a site for resistance and change.

Theories of Disability Culture

An analysis of the major theories of disability culture will provide key concepts of theory related to disability and will allow for comparison of these concepts, as articulated by disability activists and theorists, with the three approaches to cultures predominant in social work practice. The exact form of the relationship between culture and society has attracted much theoretical debate within the disabled people's movement (Barnes and Mercer, 2001). Disability theorists argue that culture has served to create and maintain the exclusion of disabled people through negative imagery, stigmatizing language, and adherence to normative standards of appearance and behaviours (Tregaskis, 2002). However, many activists within the disabled people's movement argue that the concept of disability culture serves an important purpose in establishing disabled people as subjects and active agents of transformation, decentring the dominant discourse of able-bodied cultural hegemony (Peters, 2000).

In recent years, disabled people have come to view cultural revaluation as central to their political struggle (Riddell and Watson, 2003). Within the disabled peoples' movement and disability studies it is generally accepted that there are three ways of valuing and promoting disability culture (Peters, 2000; Albrecht *et al.*, 2006): culture as historical/linguistic; culture as socio/political; and culture as personal/aesthetic.

Culture as Historical/Linguistic

The interpretation of culture as historical/linguistic is linked to traditional anthropological concepts of culture as 'depicted' (art and poetry) or 'received' (through a common language, historical lineage or social community), rather than an enacted dynamic process (Peters, 2000). The historical lineage of disability culture has been traced textually through several books and publications such as the oft-cited texts *The Last Civil Rights Movement* by Canadian disability activist and historian Diane Driedger (1989); *The New Disability History; American Perspectives* by Paul K. Longmore and Lauri Umansky (2004); *Disability Politics: Understanding Our Past, Changing Our Future* by British disability activists Jane Campbell and Mike Oliver (1996); and David L. Braddock and Susan L. Parish (2001) have traced the institutional history of disability in an article titled 'An institutional history of disability'. These authors and others have

observed that the historical examination of disability, based on medical pathology, often represents disabled people as 'passive' instead of active participants in the making of their own history. History from the point of view of disabled people directs the attention of the reader to areas that traditional historical texts often leave out, such as the cultural, social and political experiences of disabled people outside of a medical setting (Longmore and Umansky, 2004).

Peters (2000) believes that the historical/linguistic notions of disability culture only derive meaning when analysed within the context of power relations and the politics of difference— notions that are inherent within a postmodern view of culture. The development of a vibrant disability arts movement, for example, is important for confronting the negative depictions of disability in mainstream art and for fostering representations that reflect the rich variety of experiences of different disabled people (Finkelstein and Morrison, 1993; Campbell and Oliver, 1996). Disability arts encompasses several reinforcing dimensions; first, it provides disabled people with access to mainstream artistic production; second, it includes impairment-focused art that explores the experience of living with impairment; and third, it offers a critical response to the experience of marginalization (Barnes and Mercer, 2001).

While disabling imagery has been the focus of sociological studies in Britain, a poststructural analysis of disability representation is more evident in American approaches (Barnes and Mercer, 2001). The American approach stresses linguistic and textual analysis, and the link between corporeal diversity, unequal status and power, and cultural meanings. For example, American poststructural feminist Rosemarie Garland-Thomson (1997, 1999) analyses the way that disability is portrayed in American culture, particularly in literary texts, by deconstructing the binary set of normal/abnormal associated with modernist narratives of disability. She believes that cultural work involves challenging stories about disability and then re-narrating disability as an integral part of human experience and history. Garland-Thomson (2004) has also examined how the development of photography in 1839 enabled the body to be depicted in new ways but images of disabled people remained ghettoized in medical text books. She argues that all representations have social and political consequences.

Culture as Social/Political

Socio/political approaches to disability culture shift the view of disability as a medical problem to a view of disability as a limitation produced by the complex interaction between individual difference and the social environment (Gill *et al.*, 2003). Variants of this bio-social political perspective of disability include the social model in the United Kingdom and the minority group model in the United States. The British perspective has its roots in Marxist materialism and has taken inspiration from the British cultural studies approach associated with the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at the University of Birmingham (Barnes and Mercer, 2001). The American perspective draws heavily on American functionalism and deviance theory and explains the construction of the problem of disability as an outcome of the modernization of society (Barnes, 1997; Ravaud and Stiker, 2001).

The social model of disability—United Kingdom

A key turning point in moving away from an individual/medical approach to disability occurred in 1974 when the Union of Physically Impaired Against Segregation (UPIAS), an organization of disabled people in Britain, introduced a definition of disability which made an important distinction between impairment and disability, wherein disability was described as;

... the disadvantage or restriction of activity caused by contemporary social organization which take little or no account of people who have physical impairments and thus excludes them from participation in the mainstream of social activities. (UPIAS, 1976, cited in Barnes, 1997, pp. 7–8)

Finkelstein (2001) credits British sociologist Mike Oliver with developing a theory for what later became known as the social model of disability. In his seminal book, *The Politics of Disablement*, Oliver (1990) explains that his goal in developing a social model of disability was to demonstrate that disability, as a category, can only be understood within a framework which suggests that it is culturally produced and socially structured. Given that there was no adequate theory of disability at that time, Oliver found it necessary to draw on the work of earlier classical social theorists, primarily Comte, Weber and Marx, to develop a framework for his social model of disability (Oliver, 1990). In his analysis, Oliver argues that it was under capitalism that disability came to be pathologized, when disabled people could not meet the demands of individual wage labour and so became controlled through exclusion. He contends that intellectual discourse in capitalist society is constrained by an ideology of individualism and by cultural images of disabled people as less than human. In order to become more human, the disabled person is expected to undergo medical treatment, rehabilitation and psychotherapy. The issue of adjustment became the focus of professional intervention and served to reinforce ideological and cultural constructions of disability rooting them in practice, ignoring issues of stigma and discrimination.

Campbell and Oliver (1996) acknowledge that the disability movement in Britain incorporates both revolutionary and reformist approaches and that some of its critics find the social model too simplistic in its oversight of the effects of impairment and diversity. As early as 1987, British sociologist and disability theorist Paul Abberley (1997) expressed his concern with the ambiguous way that the term 'oppression' was being used by members of the disabled people's movement, treating it as a monolithic concept instead of analysing its specificity in relation to disabled people. Disability activist and theorist Tom Shakespeare (1997) has also identified several weaknesses in the social model: it generally neglects questions of culture, representation and meaning; it ignores the individual experience of impairment; and it is patriarchal, ignoring feminist analyses of disability. However, a founding member of the UPIAS, Vic Finkelstein (2001) asserts that the social model of disability is useful as a tool for gaining insight into the way that society disables people. Similarly, disability activist and educator Colin Barnes (2004) believes that the social perspective of disability does not deny the importance of individual-based interventions but draws attention to their limitations in furthering empowerment and inclusion for disabled people in a society constructed for non-disabled people, by non-disabled people.

The minority group model of disability—North America

Until the 1970s the disability rights movement in the United States was a loosely structured amalgam of grass-roots organizations (Barnes and Mercer, 2003). However, the disability movement matured with the development of the independent living concept introduced through the advocacy of Ed Roberts, a person with quadriplegia, who broke down educational barriers for disabled people when he challenged systemic and physical barriers to enter the University of California in Berkeley, in 1972. The independent living perspective views disabled people, not as patients or clients, but as active and responsible consumers. Independent living proponents reject traditional treatment approaches as offensive and disenfranchising and demand control over their own lives (Mackelprang and Salsgiver, 1996).

In order to combat oppression, the disability movement in the United States called for legal protection from discrimination and fashioned a new idea in American civil rights theory: the concept of equal access. Longmore (2003) explains that, where traditional civil rights theory permitted differential treatment of minorities as only a temporary measure needed to achieve parity, the disability rights ideology claimed equal access and reasonable accommodations as legitimately permanent differential treatment because they are necessary for disabled persons to achieve and maintain equal access. The concept of access has been extended beyond physical modifications to include equal opportunity guaranteed in law: the *American Disabilities Act* (1990) is considered to be a landmark piece of legislation (Swain *et al.*, 2003).

Similar to the British social model of disability, the American minority model views people with disabilities as hindered, not by their intrinsic differences, but by society's response to those differences. However, unlike the British approach, the American approach views disability as a policy-linked phenomenon in which disability is determined primarily by social practices (Gill *et al.*, 2003). Longmore (1995) provides several examples of how this marginalization takes shape; health care financing policies force disabled people into institutions and nursing homes rather than funding independent living programmes; and income maintenance and public insurance policies include 'disincentives' rather than penalize disabled adults for trying to work. In his book *The Disability Business: Rehabilitation in America*, Gary L. Albrecht (1992) argues that disabled people are marginalized because it serves the economic interests of professions and businesses who sell over-priced products, medications and services to disabled people.

In his seminal work titled *Physical Disability and Social Policy*, Canadian policy analyst Jerome Bickenbach (1993) explains that the social scientific roots of the American socio-political model of disablement can be traced to rehabilitation, a therapeutic response to impairment that is sensitive to the person-in-environment view, and to Talcott Parson's theory of deviance. He contends that disability theorists who have applied deviance theory to disablement make use of the 'labeling paradigm', a social psychological version of deviance theory that stresses the importance of social categorization in the creation of social relationships and self-perception (Bickenbach, 1993). According to Australian social workers Jakubowicz and Meekosha (2002) this perspective of disability includes the interactionist approaches of Erving Goffman

(1963) and Erving Zola (1991), the former stressing the institutional dynamics of creating dependent and disabled roles, while the latter explores the social psychological dimensions of identity creation. The insights of Goffman and Zola were later adapted by Canadian Wolf Wolfensberger (1983, cited in Jakubowicz and Meekosha, 2002) who proposed that disabled people might survive outside of institutions if they learned how to behave in ways that minimized the challenge that their behaviour presents to non-disabled people—a process he called ‘social valorization’.

Culture as Personal/Aesthetic

Culture as personal/aesthetic recognizes that, through personal interpretations of life experience, an individual creates a cultural identity of ‘disabled’ (Peters, 2000). Culture as personal/aesthetic fits within a poststructural view of culture that ties symbolic forms (disability) to concrete social events (the lived experiences of disabled people). Relationships between cultural representations of bodies and people’s experiences are fundamental to understanding the conditions that shape the lives of people with physical disabilities and differences in Western society (Zitzelberger, 2005).

Corker and Shakespeare (2002) believe that the work of American social theorist Iris Marion Young examines the processes of embodied subjectivity in oppression. The aesthetic scaling of bodies is viewed as central to the construction of difference and underpins oppression (Young, 1990b). In her essay titled ‘Throwing like a girl’, Young (1990b) takes issue with positivist, male claims that bodily comportment and movement are biologically differentiated for males and females. Young argues that differences in body comportment and motility have their source in the particular situation of women as conditioned by sexist oppression, and as a consequence, women are physically handicapped: ‘Insofar as we live out our existence in accordance with the definition that patriarchal culture assigned to us, we are physically inhibited, confined, positioned and objectified’ (Young, 1990b, p. 153).

Garland-Thomson believes that the ‘self’ materializes in response to an embodied engagement with its environment:

The disabled body is a body whose variations or transformations have rendered it out of sync with its environment, both the physical and the attitudinal environments. In other words, the body becomes disabled when it is incongruent both in space and in the milieu of expectations. (Garland-Thomson, 2006, p. 267)

She found that her work on identity formation has complicated Foucault’s notion of the disciplinary gaze to theorize what she refers to as the ‘stare which produces disability identity’ (Garland-Thomson, 2006, p. 168). For Garland-Thomson identity categories cut across and redefine each other, pressuring both the terms ‘woman’ and ‘disabled’. This process is exemplified in a recent Canadian study that explored the relationships between Western contemporary cultural representations of bodies and the experiences of a group of women born with physical disabilities and other differences (Zitzelberger, 2005). The findings of the study indicate that women’s experiences of visibility and invisibility were the consequence of a narrow range of normative standards of ‘acceptable’ bodies.

The participants in the Canadian research study spoke of many strategies that they developed in order to minimize their disabilities, including avoiding social places and gatherings, moving their bodies infrequently so as not to attract attention, and concealing parts of their bodies from view (Zitzelberger, 2005). In negotiating disclosure some women chose not to reveal their bodily needs and limits, or they minimized their need for accommodation. Zitzelberger (2005) found that the surveillance of environments, assessments of risk, identification of possible options and actions were common themes across the women's stories. However, through their lived knowledge of imposed and negotiated (in)visibility, participants moved towards transforming the value and meanings of their bodies for themselves. In various ways and times, all of the women rejected the ways that they were viewed through hegemonic cultural discourses about disability and difference. Most women described being better able to resist imposed subject positions after exposure to alternative discourses such as those offered by feminist, disability or deaf culture (Zitzelberger, 2005).

Summary

A review of the three approaches to disability culture proposed by Peters (2000)—historical/linguistic, socio/political and personal/aesthetic—indicates that disability culture is counter-hegemonic in the way that it deconstructs the dominant cultural discourse that serves to segregate and categorize disabled people as Other. Disability activists and theorists have also deconstructed the way that disabled people have been depicted in history, literature, art and in the entertainment industry. In doing so they not only bring existing normative sub-texts to light but write alternative perspectives which incorporate the lived experiences of disabled people as active agents in culture, rather than passive and dependent receivers of cultural messages and meanings. It is evident that social work practice at the cultural level must recognize, complement and support disability culture as a political project of the disabled people's movement.

The Contributions of Theory to Understanding Culture

The American social and cultural theorist Ben Agger (1998) contends that the field of cultural studies can be divided into two major theoretical approaches that each attempt to explain the nature of society; a conformist perspective which attempts to account for the world 'as it is', and a critical version which can be traced to the political analyses and ideas of the Frankfurt School. Conformist cultural studies, underpinned by the structural-functionalist analysis of American social theorist Talcott Parsons, stresses the common sharing of values and beliefs (collective consciousness) and claims to be apolitical because 'personal betterment', rather than large-scale change, can be achieved by complying with social norms (Agger, 1991). In comparison, critical cultural studies emphasize that culture is conflict over meaning, over how to assign value to human existence, expression and experience, while hegemonic culture, as described by Parsons, attempts to define culture from the top down, in terms of the system's need for legitimation and preservation.

Agger believes that culture is not just laid on people from above but is transacted between consumers and producers: 'Cultural studies recognizes that receivers are inherently empowered in the sense that they inevitably participate in the constitution of cultural meanings . . . To this extent, then culture can be remade' (Agger, 1992, p. 8). According to Agger, this insight into the transacted nature of culture and its potential for cultural politics has opened the door to the notion of cultural studies as cultural intervention. He believes that cultural studies builds on various perspectives within a broad range of critical theory by: directly engaging with the political functions of culture; changing the way that we read, hear, see and write about the cultural world; developing a public vernacular that rejects technical and academic jargon; retains theoreticity while at the same time initiating public discourse; and deconstructing the realm of the popular in order to transform it (Agger, 1992).

Discussion

Assimilation through a politics of integration is concerned with preserving and maintaining the overall unity and harmony of society and can be described as having assumptions in common with a conformist approach to culture, as described by Agger (1992). The assimilationist approach advocates that minority cultures engage in a cultural dialogue with other cultures in order to resolve issues of difference. This cultural dialogue is anticipated to lead to accommodation being made by all parties, resulting in the development of societal harmony. However, the notion that social unity can be preserved through cultural communication and dialogue is premised on the assumption that there is really no dominant culture in society and that members of minority cultural groups would be prepared to give up their own group specificity in the interests of the majority. Issues and problems related to difference are viewed as problems of miscommunication rather than due to an imbalance of power. Assimilation through a politics of integration does not hold much transformative potential for disability culture when cultural imperialism, a result of the normative standards and discourses set by dominant culture, plays a significant role in the oppression of disabled people.

Multiculturalism through pluralism views culture as a political arena in which minority groups compete and advocate for recognition and resources. Again, pluralism is viewed by Agger (1992) and others as a conformist approach to culture because groups compete for recognition and resources *within* current economic, social and political systems, thereby preserving the status quo. Cultural diversity is celebrated and difference is viewed as a source of pride but power differentials between groups in society, particularly between dominant and subordinate groups, are not acknowledged or addressed. The minority group approach to disability culture has been criticized by disability theorists and activists for not recognizing that all minority groups are not oppressed in the same way, at the same time, for the same reasons and to the same degree. Disability theorists with postmodern, poststructural and feminist perspectives have rejected the minority model of disability because of its reification of the negative images of disability held by the dominant culture. Disability theorists advocating a materialist perspective argue that, by focusing on policy and legislative reform,

pluralism fails to address the need for institutional and structural change that would ameliorate economic and political inequality.

A politics of difference approach is clearly based on a critical theory perspective supporting a belief in cultural intervention. A politics of difference approach supports the self-organization of disabled people as a vehicle for developing a group-specific voice, language and perspective from which to challenge prevailing institutions, but does not preclude the possibility of working with others in combating common forms of oppression. Socio-political forms of culture, such as the social model of disability in Britain and the minority model of disability in North America, provide opportunities for disabled people to discuss experiences of oppression. They also provide a forum for maintaining disability history and acting as sites for activities of resistance. However, both approaches have been criticized as failing to account for diversity and other differences. A politics of difference recognizes that the boundaries of groups are relational, fluid, ambiguous and permeable. This relational understanding of group difference would encourage groups to develop their own identity rather than assume essentialist definitions imposed by the dominant culture.

Conclusion

It has already been established that social work remains entrenched in a view of disability as a problem or as a condition based on individual defects and functional limitations, despite its oppressive consequences for disabled people. Traditional, essentialist concepts of culture, such as those represented in assimilationist and pluralist social work approaches, provide social workers with the false assumption that there are cultural competencies that one can develop by becoming more aware of and sensitive to cultural norms and differences. In order to engage with disability culture it is essential that social work education includes examination of culture, not only as a vehicle for recognizing and celebrating ethnicity and difference, but as a site for critical analysis, consciousness-raising and transformation. Course work on critical cultural studies must form part of the curriculum of social work education if social work practice is to address the oppression of disabled people, and others, in any meaningful way.

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