Multiple Dis[L]abling Conditions

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When the original call for papers went out, I asked for contributions on research or theory on the situation of people who have more than one disability or label, and if possible more than one intersecting oppression. For example, issues facing Deaf-blind people of color, or people with psychiatric labels who use wheelchairs or have learning disabilities. My aim was to get as broad a set of articles as possible and to represent some of the issues left out of mainstream writing because of "complexity" or minority status. Partly due to my own interests and partly due to ongoing debate/discussion on a disability list serve, I especially looked for papers which either used or critiqued the social model as it is used for people with multiple disabilities. I was surprised to learn that fewer people than I had anticipated were writing on this topic. It seems that there remains considerable stigma attached to working in the margins of disability studies.

The first area of work on, from or about the margins comes from a woman who I am proud to say, has influenced my own thinking for over a decade. Maria Barile tackles the issue of multiple minorities and the disability community in Quebec, Canada. One of her specific contributions to this topic is to bring in issues of immigration status, language and education as factors in addition to gender, disability and race. Since much of the recent academic debate and dialogue has been about the role of language (words and images) used to depict people with disabilities, this contribution refreshes the topic by framing the issues also in terms of linguistic minority status. It also serves to challenge the social model by asking how communities that are subject to limitations/oppression at the hand of the majority, turn around and impose their limitations on sub-groups or specific members of their own communities. Putting our own house in order are we?

Also from Canada, Tim Epp brings the voices of people labeled with various types of developmental disabilities to a discussion that is usually "about them, but without them." Contentious in terms of description, definition and identifications, these self-advocates share their perspectives on who is and is not disabled, and what it means to be disabled. Their perceptions of the negotiability of disability may mirror the general public more than might be expected. Politically/grammatically correct or not, their words stand on their own merit. While the political and medical establishments attempt to narrowly define and categorize who disabled people are, the individual members and collectivities may have permeable boundaries of disability. This paper is particularly important because it looks at the lives of men with more than one type of disability from both their individual perspectives and their self-defined peer group. More ethnographic research using non-invasive participatory methods like those used in this project are long overdue.

From the United States, two activists and organizers from the Disabled Women's Alliance have collaborated to address an under recognized minority among minorities. This paper by Corbett O'Toole and Vicky D'aoust does not reveal the demographic makeup of the population but delineates an intersection issue around competency. In the context of fitness to parent, these authors discuss the situation of disabled lesbian mothers (also known as lesbians with disabilities who are mothers or mothers who are lesbian women with disabilities). They contest the classic argument of rolelessness while recognizing the significance of role models and access to information. They open up a can of worms that rejects homosexuality as a mental illness and calls to question other labels given to women.

The last contributor represents one type of experience that most closely matches the original call for submissions. The paper is more of a commentary than a traditional article but it speaks to the core of multiple conditions. It also addresses the unpredictability and evolving, progressing, improving nature of life with disabilities. In sign language, when you become more acculturated to the Deaf community you sign that your "deafness" has improved (dominant hand moving from lower on the other hand upwards toward the shoulder). When you lose your hear-

ing (or other physical abilities) the sign is "de-proved" with the dominant hand sliding from the shoulder or mid-arm down towards the finger tips. Which sign you use reveals a great deal about your value system and where you are in your journey. The situation of the author as a deafened woman who develops mobility and vision disabilities and subsequently/consequently also develops depression is told in first person narration and resonates with genuinity. A freelance writer who is also a university student, Elizabeth Thompson's prose is a welcome conclusion to this symposium on the theme of multiple disabling or labeling situations.

Although all the contributions deal with the issue of intersecting and overlapping identities, oppression and definitions, the objective of dealing with this theme was to look inward at our own diversity. Rather than always comparing disabled with non-disabled, this type of disability against that, men with women, Native born with immigrant, or older adult with youth, there is real value in recognizing that there is as much difference and breadth of experience within our communities as there is between our official members and outcasts. That the different center which disability studies, Deaf studies, or cultural studies uses to measure from, to create our communities also has margins is not news at all. By inverting much of the dominant paradigm (including the so called medical model), we are also at risk of replicating essentialism and of relegating more people to even more margins by rigidly determining who properly deserves to be at our center. While I do not pretend to offer a change to the concentric structure nor remove the need for self-definition, this issue does provide a look into a multitude of situations which are not bounded exclusively by a duality of disability (or not).