

Multiple Oppression and the Disabled People's Movement

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The hegemonic discourse is an established concept of 'normality'. In Western society this is defined as being 'able-bodied/minded', white, male, heterosexual, young and financially secure. Consequently, disabled people are rendered Other ('abnormal' and inferior) to non-disabled people (Shakespeare, 1994c), Black people to white (Miles, 1989) and women to men (de Beauvoir, 1949). Thus, those who deviate from the established norm in more than one way - for example, disabled Black people - are rendered multiply Other (Vernon, 19964).

The social model of disability, which locates the problem of limitations experienced by people with impairments in society, rather than with impaired individuals (UPIAS, 1976; Oliver, 1990), has led to increasing research documenting the extent of disadvantage experienced by disabled people both socially and economically (Barnes, 1991 b). The experience of disablism has been compared to the experience of racism and sexism (Abberlev, 1987; Baxter, 1989). More recently, questions have been raised about disabled people who experience racism (Begum, 1992b; 1994a, Confederation of Indian Organisations, 1984; Sharma and Love, 1991; Stuart, 1992; 1994), sexism (Fine and Asch, 1988, Hanna and Rogovsky, 1991; Lloyd, 1992; Lonsdale, 1990; Morris, 1989; 1991; 1996), heterosexism (Corbett, 1994; Hearn, 1988a; 1988b; 1991) and ageism (MacFarlane, 1994; Zarb and Oliver, 1993).

It has been argued that disabled Black people experience a 'double disadvantage', that of being Black in a racist and disabled in a disablist society (Confederation of Indian Organisations, 1984). Similarly, disabled gay men and lesbians have talked of experiencing 'dual oppression' (Hearn, 1988a; 1988b; 1991). Hearn reported that her

lesbianism is negated on account of her being rendered asexual because of her impairment - which is a common experience of many disabled people whatever their sexuality (Shakespeare et al., 1996). Corbett (1994) argues that disabled gay men and lesbians experience a form of 'double invisibility' because they feel that 'I am invisible in the lesbian and gay community as a disabled person, as lesbians and gays are in the straight community and I feel I am invisible as a lesbian in the disability community' (p. 355). MacFarlane (1994) states: 'becoming an older person is one thing, but becoming an older disabled person, especially, a woman, is quite another issue'.

Recently disabled Black people have applied the concept of 'simultaneous oppression' to their own position, rightly arguing that previous analyses of their experience, which were additive, have been inadequate (Begum, 1994; Stuart, 1993). Simultaneous oppression, in this instance, refers to the fact that disabled Black people's realities are shaped by racist and disablist structures at the same time. Stuart (1993, p. 99) assumes the primacy of racism in the experience of disabled Black people when he concludes that their experience is 'distinct' from that of white disabled people. However, racism is neither more nor less prominent than disablism in the experience of disabled Black people (Vernon, 1996b).

There are important similarities as well as differences in the experience of all disabled people regardless of 'race', gender, sexuality, age and class. Henderson (1992) describes the position of Black women as follows:

Through the multiple voices that enunciate her complex subjectivity the black woman not only speaks familiarly in the discourse of Others but as Other she is in a contestorial dialogue with the hegemonic dominant and subdominant or ambiguously non-hegemonic discourses. As such, black women enter into testimonial discourse with black men as blacks, with white women as women, and with black women as black women. At the same time, they enter into a competitive discourse with black men as women, with white women as blacks, and with white men as black women.

Similarly, disabled Black people struggle altogether with disabled white people against disablism while they also struggle against the racism of white disabled people and as Black Other, they struggle altogether with

Black non-disabled people against racism while they also struggle against the disablism of Black people. The same is true of disabled women's and gay men's and lesbians' experience in that they, too, struggle altogether with other disabled people against disablism while they also struggle against the sexism and heterosexism of other disabled people as, indeed, they do in mainstream society which is a commonality they also share with non-disabled women, gay men and lesbians, older people and those from the working class. In other words the reality of being rendered a multiple Other results in shared alliances as well as oppositional interests between different groups of Others.

A fundamental dilemma rooted in oppression is that there are very few pure oppressors or pure victims. Even those who are themselves oppressed often consciously and unconsciously engage in the oppression of others who deviate from the established norm in a different way from them. Hill-Collins (1990), writing in the American context of Black women's experience, captures this reality succinctly for all oppressed groups when she uses the term 'bothstand conceptual stance' to refer to an analysis of a situation in which

all groups possess varying amounts of penalty and privilege in one historically created system. In this system, for example, white women are penalised by their gender but privileged by their race. Depending on the context, an individual may be an oppressor, a member of an oppressed group, or simultaneously oppressor and oppressed. (p. 225)

The same is also true of disability, age and sexuality (Vernon, 1997a). Thus those who are a multiple Other are also frequently an Other within an Other (Vernon, 1996d).

Furthermore the experience of simultaneous oppression is not unique to disabled Black people. Disabled women also have to contend with the simultaneity of disability and gender stereotypes (Fine and Asch, 1988; Lloyd, 1992; Lonsdale, 1990; Morris, 1991). Similarly, disabled gay men and lesbians, older people and those from the working class all experience the simultaneity of disablism and heterosexism and/or ageism and/or classism. However, the concept 'simultaneous oppression' is inadequate in explaining the day-to-day reality of those who are rendered a multiple Other as it overlooks the complex and often variable interaction between different forms of

social oppression (Vernon, 1997a). Disability, 'race', gender, sexuality, age and class are not invariably experienced at the same time on a daily basis.

Oppression is rife in all human encounters (Brittan and Maynard, 1984). Hence the stigma (Goffman, 1968b) of being impaired and Black and/or female and/or gay and/or older and/or working-class interacts in variable and complex ways in shaping people's daily experience so that they do not only experience the simultaneity of institutional discrimination prevalent in our society against all oppressed groups. We live in a society which is implicitly hierarchical with one dominant group and several subdominant groups who define 'normality' according to their own interests so that there are degrees of 'normality' within one established norm (Hill-Collins, 1990). For example, being heterosexual is 'normal' as opposed to being gay and consequently the privilege of being heterosexual applies to all - men and women, white and Black, non-disabled and disabled people, etc. The same is also true of disability, 'race', gender, age and class. Thus disabled Black people, women, gay men and lesbians, older people and those from the working class (as well as non-disabled people with multiple stigmatized identities), all experience oppression singularly, multiply and simultaneously depending on the context (Vernon, 1996a; 1996d; 1997a). For example, when a disabled Black person is in the company of non-disabled Black people, s/he may experience disablism but not racism. Similarly, when s/he is in the company of white disabled people, s/he may experience racism but not disablism. And, in the labour market, s/he may be refused a job because of the perceived stigma of impairment or 'race' or both.

Therefore the experience of disabled women, Black people, gay men and lesbians, older people and those from the working class is beyond simple parallels. It must not be assumed that, for example, disabled Black people's experience is one of racism plus disablism or that disabled women's experience is sexism plus disablism. Often a combination of two or more stigmatized identities can exacerbate the experience of oppression so that it is more than disablism and sexism and/or racism and/or heterosexism put together (Vernon, 1997b).

Hanna and Rogovsky (1991) talk of disabled women experiencing a form of 'double handicap plus factor' on account of their being female in a patriarchal society, being disabled in a disablist society and being disabled females. As Lonsdale (1990, p. 83) has commented:

women (like men) want to confirm that it is the society which disables and oppresses. But for the women, the discussion is not confined to the modes of economic and social discrimination identified by disabled men. Disabled women are concerned to explore questions of sexuality, and sexual identity to challenge stereotypical images of child bearing and motherhood. Women are simultaneously expected to be sexual play things, responsive, caring and good mothers, physical disability represents a threat to these expectations and roles.

Thus impairment, which is a precondition (although not an inevitable one) of disability, settles upon anyone, but the effect on any individual is very largely modified, minimized or exacerbated by who that person is in terms of their 'race', gender, sexuality, age and class.

Multiple oppression refers to the fact that the effects of being attributed several stigmatized identities are often multiplied (exacerbated) and they can be experienced simultaneously and singularly depending on the context. It also takes account of the fact that the experience of disability or any other form of oppression may be modified by the presence of some privileged identities (for example, being of higher social class status or male).

Disabled people's movement under attack?

In recent years there has been a number of polemical writings expressing a general dissatisfaction that the differing experiences of disabled women (Lloyd, 1992; Morris, 1991; 1996) and disabled Black people (Hill, 1994b; Stuart, 1993) are overlooked by social model theorists because of an overwhelming desire to proclaim commonality in the experience of disablement. For example, Morris (1996) has commented:

the experience of disabled women has been largely absent from feminism's concerns and within the disabled people's movement has tended to be tagged on as a special interest ... Our encounters with both groups have often made us feel powerless for we have either been treated as invisible or our experiences have been defined for us. (p. 1)

Campbell and Oliver (1996) assert that the disabled people's movement has not so much ignored these issues out of a deliberate attempt to marginalize the experience of any one group. Rather it has been a 'pragmatic decision' to concentrate on an issue which has been so completely overlooked by other social movements, - namely, how society disables people who have impairments. This may, indeed, be the case. However, it is also true, as Morris (1991, p. 178) points out, that 'Disabled people and their organizations are no more exempt from racism, sexism and heterosexism than non-disabled people and their organizations ... both women and ethnic minorities are distinctly under-represented and issues around racism, sexism and sexuality have tended to be avoided.'

Similar critiques also exist with regard to other social movements, particularly the feminist movement (Adams, 1994; Bhavnani and Coulson, 1986; Carby, 1982). Barnes (1996b) has responded to the criticisms made of the disabled people's movement by asserting that

We live in a society centred around patriarchy, inequality and elitism, and it is inevitable that these traits should be present in our own organizations. But in my experience the British disabled people's movement has done far more than most to address these issues ... the movement has, in fact, been dominated by women ... women have held and continue to hold key posts in most of the organizations up and down the country. (p. 56)

However, the real concern is not whether the disabled people's movement has enough numbers of disabled women or Black people in its organizations. Although, if they are grossly under-represented in proportion to their representation in the surrounding community, then that should also be a legitimate cause for concern. It is the fact that in all the numerous discussions and textbooks on disability, issues of 'race', gender, class, sexuality and age have been either omitted as irrelevant to disabled people's lives or added on as an optional extra.

Hill (1994) argues that disabled Black people should 'keep faith with the Black voluntary sector' rather than with the disabled people's movement. However, this is far from satisfactory (Vernon, 1996b). The assertion that pragmatism dictates a need to concentrate on one oppression at a time is also prevalent in the Black community where the sole emphasis is on overcoming racism, as Macdonald's (1991) experi-

ence of his family's reaction demonstrates: 'to fight for the rights of black people is one thing; to fight for the rights of disabled people is something else, there is not enough time and energy to fight two different wars.' Such attitudes present a real dilemma for those who are rendered a multiple Other because, if you cannot be sure that the other Xs, Ys or Zs are going to accept or understand the extra dimension of your additional identity as a V or a W, which aspect of your identity do you prioritize and which do you leave out? The experience of those who are subjected to several forms of oppression cannot be compartmentalized as though they are quite distinct and separate from one another.

Barnes (1996, cited by Campbell and Oliver, 1996) has commented:

The politics of disablement is about far more than disabled people; it is about challenging oppression in all its forms. Indeed, impairment is not something which is peculiar to a small section of the population it is fundamental to the human experience. Disability - defined by the disabled people's movement as the social oppression of people with impairments - on the other hand, is not. Like racism, sexism, heterosexism and all other forms of social oppression it is a human creation. It is impossible, therefore, to confront one type of oppression without confronting them all and, of course, the cultural values that created and sustain them.

This is indeed true. The politics of eradicating any oppression must take into account the whole oppressive nature of society and challenge all forms of social oppression, not least because of the mutual supporting interaction between different ideologies of oppression (Miles, 1989; F. Williams, 1995), but also because individuals are seldom affected by only one form of oppression.

However, the reality is rather different in that the politics of disability has only ever focused on disablement (the oppression of people with impairments). This is not unique to the disabled people's movement. The fundamental problem is that each oppressed group is really focusing only on a single system of oppression, the nearest to its heart, believing it to be the primary cause of all human suffering. An example is the feminist analysis of patriarchy seeing men's domination of women as the primary oppression and Black people seeing racism as the

primary oppression etc. (King, 1988); therefore, overlooking the significant feature of human oppression which is the interlocking of the different ideologies of oppression (Hill-Collins, 1990), especially because individuals seldom fall into one neat category (for example, disabled women, Black middle-class men).

The experience of multiple oppression is treated as though it is an issue which concerns only a minority of disabled people. However, the majority of disabled people inevitably consists of disabled Black people, women, gay men and lesbians, older people and those from the working class, all of whom experience the negative effects of being rendered a multiple Other in consequence of deviating from the established norm in several ways. Consequently they are rejected for several reasons and from several quarters including those with whom they share some commonality (Vernon, 1996d). For example, Dragonsani Renteria, a deaf lesbian from the Hispanic community, has succinctly captured this reality in her poem 'Rejection' (1993, p. 38).

Thus, whilst disability may be the only aspect of disabled white heterosexual men's experience of oppression, the same cannot be said of disabled Black people, women, gay men and lesbians, older people and those from the working class. They can point to no single source for their oppression. For them the potential for discrimination is greater in all situations because of the increased likelihood of one or another aspect of their stigmatized identity being an 'undesired differentness' (Goffman, 1968). Their experience is commonly characterized by multiple rejections, discriminations and fragmentation of their identity even within the equality movements, including the disabled people's movement.

Despite some obvious differences between the experience of disabled Black people and white people, as well as between disabled women and men, etc., there is one critical similarity in the experience of all disabled people arising from the stigma of impairment which often overrides all other boundaries of 'race', gender, sexuality, class and age (Vernon, 1996d).

Because of this, the social model of disability has significance for all disabled people despite the fact that for many disabled people it does not account for the whole of their experience. However, the fault does not lie with the social model of disability, which is an excellent framework for ultimately eradicating the oppression of people who have impairments and, as such, must remain non-negotiable. Rather the

problem lies in how the social model is being applied. That is, if the ensuing discussion does not take account of the fact that for the majority of disabled people their experience of oppression is shaped by additional dimensions of their lives, then the application of that methodology needs to be examined, for it represents only a partial picture. For example, if disabled people achieve full civil rights (enshrined in an anti-discrimination legislation which the disabled people's movement is tirelessly campaigning for), we will no longer be barred from entering public buildings, travelling on public transport, denied a job or educational opportunities on the basis of our impairment as we are now. But those of us who are Black, female, gay, etc. will continue to be denied jobs and experience (or live under a constant threat of experiencing) verbal and physical abuse.

There is an underlying assumption which is that the other experiences of disabled people such as racism, sexism and heterosexism are taken care of by other social movements. This would be true. Except that disabled people, because of the stigma of being impaired, are also excluded from the movements of 'race', gender and sexuality. Therefore it is all the more important that the disabled people's movement should not exclude or marginalize the experience of disabled people who are a multiple Other. Furthermore it is all the more important that the experience of disabled Black people, women, gay men and lesbians, older people and those from the working class is fully integrated to take account of the fact that the experience of disability is often exacerbated by the interaction of other forms of oppressions. The politics of eradicating disability, therefore, must take into account the whole oppressive structure of our society and be careful to challenge all forms of oppression wherever it is found. It is not enough merely to acknowledge that, because inequality is rife in society at large, it is inevitable that disabled people will have absorbed these practices too. To do so is to condone and perpetuate all forms of inequality. As Read (1988) points out, in a society that is riddled with oppression there is no neutral ground.

Further reading

Begum, N., Hill, Nl. and Stevens, A. (eds) (1994) *Reflections: The Views of Black Disabled People on their Lives and Community Care*. London: CCETSW.

- Hearn, K. (1991) Disabled lesbians and gays are here to stay, in T. Kaufmann and P. Lincoln (eds) *High Risk Lives: Lesbian and Gay Politics After the Clause*. Bridport: Prism Press.
- MacFarlane, A. (1994) On becoming an older disabled woman, *Disability and Society*, vol. 9, no. 2.
- Stuart, O. (1993) Double oppression: an appropriate starting point?, in J. Swain, V. Finkelstein, S. French and M. Oliver (eds) *Disabling Barriers - Enabling Environments*. London: Sage and Open University Press.

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Still Out in the Cold: People with Learning Difficulties and the Social Model of Disability

Anne Louise Chappell

During the last three decades people with learning difficulties have travelled a long way, yet no distance at all. Thirty years ago many people with learning difficulties were neglected in isolated long-stay hospitals. Now they are neglected by the social model of disability which ought to promise them so much in terms of its analysis of their experiences and its strategies for change. This chapter seeks to examine the position of people with learning difficulties within the social model and the reasons for the continuing marginalization of learning difficulty.

For several years the apparently progressive potential of the normalization principle dominated the learning difficulty agenda. Public questioning and criticism of normalization emerged only at the end of the 1980s and early 1990s (see Brown and Smith, 1989; Baxter et al, 1990; Bayley, 1991; Chappell, 1992; 1994a). This critical scrutiny of normalization and challenges to its dominance over community care debates should be regarded as positive steps for people with learning difficulties. Furthermore the emergence of the social model of disability means that there exists a theoretical tool which could assist people with learning difficulties, not just in a struggle for better services (the primary concern of normalization) but for full economic, social and political inclusion in society.

The promise of the social model

However, it is necessary to examine the implications of the social model of disability for people with learning difficulties. There are important