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Disabled Traveller Identity and the Affirmation Model
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In this paper we want to begin to raise awareness of the experiences, culture and identity of disabled Travellers. We will then consider whether the affirmation model, a theoretical tool recently developed within Disability Studies, has anything to offer an enhanced understanding of the issues emerging. In exploring the particular issues and concerns for disabled Travellers, the focus will be on racism, ableism and access to culturally appropriate service provision. Traveller identity and disability will be explored partly through my own experience as a disabled Traveller. While sharing my ethnicity with the general Irish population, I am also part of an indigenous separate ethnic minority group.

Racism and discrimination towards Travellers is endemic. Prejudice is experienced at many levels of Irish society, including institutional, environmental, attitudinal, legislative and individual responses to Traveller identity. The settled disabled community in Ireland has also oppressed Travellers, displaying ethnocentric positions with regard to identity politics. For example, Irish Sign Language had a sign for Travellers which meant 'dirt'.

An example of racism regarding service provision culminates in ableism and disablism. When first assessed for a powered wheel chair, service providers made pejorative remarks that my family might melt the power chair down to sell as scrap. Such

prejudicial attitudes clearly restrict access to, and engagement with, community services and resources for disabled Travellers.

Typically I have found the preference of service providers is to encourage disabled Travellers and their families to move into standard accommodation. This experience is oppressive as moving away from your own community should not be a requirement in order to access services. Where disabled Travellers have no choice but to move into standard housing or residential services to meet their access needs this puts them in an extremely vulnerable position with severed connections from close family, friends, supports and social networks, leading to isolation. This phenomena of removing individuals from their community can also fracture rather than affirm their Traveller identity.

There has been a long history of mutual suspicion, hostility and prejudice between Traveller and settled communities. Racism makes access to services difficult for disabled Travellers. The engagement, if any, can be difficult for both parties. Service providers may refuse to enter a site. Experience of prejudice can often mean services are not easily trusted and providers need to be sensitive to attitudinal barriers towards Traveller families in their area. In Ireland Traveller-led Primary Healthcare projects have proved valuable for promoting disability support because someone from the Traveller community can offer culturally informed support and training to service providers. The added value of peer support and advocacy has had a positive effect within the community.

In Ireland, education levels are very low with only about half of Traveller adults having completed at least primary school education (Pavee Point, 2010). Racism and poor practice by educational service providers has made it very difficult for Travellers to participate and attain academic achievement. While education is highly valued and sought after within the community, Traveller youngsters with impairments, regardless of their academic capacity, will invariably be sent to special schools. This low expectation of the child is internal and external – internal within the family and the community and external from state educators and service providers who don't acknowledge Traveller ethnicity. In addition, Traveller parents find it difficult to engage with service provision and therefore do not make demands on mainstream educational services for their child.

The experience of disabled Travellers is one of marginalisation and often isolation. Having to make a choice to assimilate into the larger dominant settled culture in order to access services would seem racist and outdated. There are very few opportunities for members of the Traveller community to work in service provision so the gap between knowledge and capacity deepens. Cultural diversity is about celebrating who you are, and what you are. Traveller pride or esteem is not often put on a par with concepts of power and privilege in the gamut of identity politics. Responses to disability within these communities require systemic forms of positive affirmation.

The affirmation model is a recent development in Disability Studies and draws on insights generated by the Disability Arts Movement and the values of disability pride. It builds on the understanding developed within the social model that disability

is an oppressive social relationship rather than an individual problem – ‘something imposed on top of our impairments by the way we are unnecessarily isolated and excluded from society’ (UPIAS, 1976) - and challenges assumptions and expectations embedded within the personal tragedy model. The personal tragedy model is materialised in endless cultural representations of impairment as deficit, something to be suffered and endured or triumphed over.

The affirmation model defines impairment in terms of difference and disability in terms of role. Impairment is identified as:

Physical, sensory, cognitive and emotional difference, divergent from culturally valued norms of embodiment, to be expected and respected on its own terms in a diverse society

Disability here is:

A personal and social role which simultaneously invalidates the subject position of people with impairments and validates the subject position of those identified as normal

(Cameron, 2011)

Lennard Davis has pointed out that ‘just as conceptualisations of race, class and gender shape the lives of those who are not black, poor or female, so the concept of disability regulates the bodies of those who are ‘normal’’ (Davis, 1995:12). In other words, far from being a natural quality or characteristic, normalcy is dependent on measuring itself against those it has excluded. Normalcy needs abnormalcy in order to recognise

itself. We would argue that disabled Travellers find themselves caught up in the shackles of many different forms of oppression. Their 'abnormality' as disabled and Travellers is used to validate the identities of the non-disabled, settled majority: 'We know we're normal, because we're neither Travellers nor disabled; both are beneath us'. Their 'abnormality' as Travellers is used to validate the identities of the settled majority of disabled people: 'We know we're disabled, but at least we're not Travellers. We know that we are devalued by others, but at least we are more normal than they are.' Their 'abnormality' as disabled is used to validate the identities of the majority of non-disabled Travellers: 'We know we're Travellers, but at least we're not disabled. We know that we are devalued by others, but at least we are more normal than they are.' It's unsurprising that many disabled Travellers experience high levels of internalised oppression.

Normality is an oppressive construct which requires people to learn to want to become the kind of people society requires them to be. As Brett Farmer expresses it:

each subject internalises ideological conventions and imperatives, and then unconsciously uses these as regulatory yardsticks with which to measure and modify social identity and comportment (Farmer, 2003[b]:36).

Normality involves people in constant self-evaluation by measuring themselves against others. Disabled Travellers bear the ontological cost of the relative security of identity of those by whom they are judged.

The affirmation model has emerged from the Disability Arts Movement as disabled people have sought to affirm their own

experiences and identities in the face of a disabling culture. What is required is on-going research, cultural activism and advocacy among disabled Travellers so that the insights offered by this model can play a part in addressing and ending the depths of oppression brought to light.

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