Critical Social Work

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Challenging 'ableism' and teaching about disability in a social work classroom: A training module for generalist social workers working with people disabled by the social environment

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Abstract

Social work programs in Canada teach emerging generalist practitioners about the consequences of oppression in the lives of the clients they work with. More emphasis within social work education could be placed on practical ways of contextualizing forms of oppression as each relates specifically to practice. The following provides a description of the oppression of 'ableism', and offers an applied training module to help prepare generalist social workers (i.e. current students or direct practitioners) to work with issues of disability as they emerge in their direct practice with clients. The training module helps to facilitate learning specific to the leading theoretical discussions and the social context of disability within society. Through these discussions students might then become more aware of their role as practitioners in challenging the oppression of 'ableism', rather than maintain outdated modes of service delivery and intervention with those people disabled by the social environment.

KEYWORDS: Social work, ableism, disability, training, education

Introduction

The concept of disability has become common use in discussions of oppression and diversity within social work curriculum. Disability is recognized as an issue of discrimination that results in inequality at a social and individual level. There are omissions, though, within the literature that would help social work practitioners conceptualize appropriate methods of practice

with people disabled by the social environment. As a corrective, the following offers a framework for a diversity training module that is intended to help undergraduate generalist social work students and direct service practitioners to think about the issue of disability in relation to current social and theoretical contexts. Disability issues related to the physical, developmental, learning, and mental health aspects of people are present amongst all populations and age groups. Therefore, even if a practitioner is not working within a disability-specific agency, they should expect to encounter disability issues – both visible and invisible – amongst their clientele.

Initially, a theoretical context of the concept of disability, and in particular the experiences within Canada, is provided. We draw on firsthand accounts within the literature to show some common themes identified by people disabled by the social environment. The intention is to make connections between theories of disability and how each relates specifically to real-life situations. We find it useful to make these points at the outset, because when understanding oppression we need to go to the source of where that oppression occurs. Not doing so results in policy platforms, social theories, and service delivery frameworks that attempt inclusivity, but by the language used (Bolt, 2005) and the outcomes experienced (van Daalen-Smith, 2007) in many ways help to create and/or maintain a social system of dependency, degradation, and disempowerment (Wachsler, 2007); essentially, further marginalizing people from being fully engaged in many, if not all, aspects of society. It becomes critical for a profession like social work to understand the connection between theories and practical experiences to effectively challenge societal oppression through our direct work with clients; whether that work is individually focused or directed at a macro level.

A key assumption of this training module is that we need to challenge perceptions to effectively teach practitioners about oppression generally and disability specifically. To elaborate, here is a scenario of questions to consider: When walking through a doorway with someone directly behind you do you keep the door open for them? Now what do you think when you do that? We are talking here about being mindful; thinking that happens implicitly in the moment. Mindfulness in social work practice is a concept that has been linked to reflective practice and can impact how and why we work with people (Hick, 2008; Marash & Phillips, 2008; McFadden, 2008; Mishna & Bogo, 2007). Now, in your mind, put that person in a wheelchair. Now what do you think? Are your feelings and thoughts about opening the door for someone using a wheelchair different than for someone who is not? The way that we interact with the concept of disability, like other points of diversity such as race, gender, sexual orientation, age, etcetera, is very much a thought process guided by perception. Our assumption is that to effectively engage undergraduate students or direct practitioners in understanding oppression we need to consider in further detail how our society, and we as individuals, have come to these various thought processes.

As a beginning point, the literature review investigates the many concepts related to disability and provides a contextual background of why people have come to this particular thought process. Rooting the issue of ‘ableism’ within the present context of disability can help practitioners to then break down their own assumptions and thoughts about disability and base their thinking, instead, on the present social movement of disability issues.

Literature Review

The primary intention of this training module is to teach undergraduate students about the concept of ‘ableism’ and how to be reflective of disability related issues within their own practice. The training module could also be used in continuing educational settings for social workers or in direct service settings – the lead author has used it in the latter.

Ableism has not been adequately explored or investigated within academic literature, nor has it been emphasized extensively within education (Wolbring, 2008). For example, a recent book publication on disability and social policy in Canada does not consider ‘ableism’ in any of the edited chapters (see McColl & Jongbloed, 2006). Even though it is conceptually absent from many research agendas, ableism should be considered in parallel to terms like racism, sexism, heterosexism, ageism, etcetera (Miller, Parker, & Gillinson, 2004). Ableism refers to the oppression of people in society that become marginalized based on their abilities (Wachsler, 2007). At the root of this dialogue exists a set of ‘normalized’ ideas about the abilities of people, and when one does not have those abilities they become stigmatized and degraded when they intersect with the social realm. Discussions of the meaning of ‘disability’ offer insight into why this is the case.

Defining disability, Oliver (1983) offers a definition based on a distinction between impairment (i.e. ‘individual limitation’) and disability (i.e. ‘socially imposed restriction’) (p.50). Essentially meaning, as Finkelstein (1981) suggests, people who are considered to not be disabled would be disabled if our surrounding environment (physical and social) was not designed to meet their needs (as cited in Lordan, 2000, p.52). As a result, some have articulated the need to challenge and change our environments to meet the needs of people with impairments (French, 1983, as cited in Lordan, 2000, p.52). We agree with these fundamental points, but would reconsider the use of the term impairment, and instead use language which recognizes the unique diversity and range of abilities inherent to all individuals. With this change we are forced to consider our own roles as professionals and social actors in stigmatizing people disabled by our social environment and controlling the way they experience the social environment through our direct service work; a key aspect of critical social work. As a result, in its entirety, this training module is intended as an exercise in critical social work practice.

One further point to elaborate, before discussing these concepts in relation to the Canadian context specifically, relates to the use of language throughout this article. To describe a group of people that are disabled by the social environment, the term ‘disabled people’ tends to be the most recent nomenclature utilized within academic disciplines. There is great conceptual and linguistic debate that prefers the use of person first language (i.e. person with disability), but after a review of the literature this seems to be waning for a multitude of reasons – many having to do with issues related to empowerment, individualization, and the categorization being made by people who self-identify as being disabled. There is a distinction also with language between European and North American case examples. The language itself is overly problematic, but agreeing that ‘disability’ is a social construct created as people intersect with their external environment provides a different conceptualization of the idea ‘disabled’ person. Being disabled should say something more about our social environment than the person categorized this way. Person first language does not support this type of rationalization; instead, it promotes an overly

individualistic perspective of 'disability'. As a result of this distinction we have chosen to use the term disabled people to refer to that group of people who are disabled by our social environment.

In Canada during the late 1980s a shift began to occur from an individualist model to a socio-political model of understanding disability (Bickenbach, 1993; Jongbloed & Crichton, 1990). Jongbloed and Crichton (1990) have illustrated how some policy relating to transportation, recreation, and shelter had been revamped to meet the requirements of this new model of conceptualization, while other policy and program areas, specifically employment and income support, still had remained individualistic – a condition that still persists (Jongbloed, 2006). As an example of this individualistic framework, at the federal government level, the Office of Disability Issues (a branch organization of Human Resources and Skills Development Canada) signs agreements with and provides funding to provincial governments through the Multilateral Framework for Labour Market Agreements for Persons with Disabilities (Human Resources and Skills Development Canada, 2010). The provincial government of Alberta, for example, then provides services through the Disability Related Employment Supports program, with a primary focus on workplace, job search, educational, and assistive technology supports (Government of Alberta, 2010); all of which are still rooted in supporting the individual without acknowledgment of how the social and economic environment create disability (similar conclusions have been made about policy in the United Kingdom, see for example Roulstone, 2000).

In contrast, a socio-political model of understanding disability focuses on altering the social, political, or economic environment, rather than changing individual behaviours or functioning (Jongbloed, 2006). The focus of this model has been on equality and promoting human rights for disabled people (Bickenbach, 1993; Lordan, 2000). There are many examples of this model in recent Canadian history. One example is the disallowance of discrimination based on a person's ability being included in the Canada Human Rights Act (1977) and the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms (1982). This was accomplished through the lobbying efforts of the presently named organization, The Council of Canadians with Disabilities, and the former, Committee on the Disabled and the Handicapped (Graham, Swift, & Delaney, 2008). However, as recent as 2005, fifty percent of all complaints to the Canadian Human Rights Commission had identified disability as the reason for which a person was discriminated against (Human Resources and Social Development Canada, 2006). What this number represents can be construed in multiple ways. What it signifies, though, is that policy areas are not sufficient to challenge people's thinking about disability. Specifically, these policy proscriptions often miss how and why people experience success and failure in the various aspects of life.

As a corrective, an abridged theoretical model has developed in recent years. Following post-modern theory, a socio-constructionist approach combined with the socio-political model has sought to incorporate the lived experiences of people that are disabled by our social environment into a social understanding of disability (for example: Goodwin, Krohn, & Kuhnle, 2004). These studies offer insight into how people that are disabled by our social environment adjust to the negative social situations they experience. These insights could greatly assist policy analysts, service delivery systems and personnel, and the wider social community. As an example of this research, Green, Davis, Karshmer, Marsh, and Straight (2005) found that people disabled by the social environment find creative means by/with which to deal with the stigma

that is present in their lives. Also, a recent study conducted in the United Kingdom demonstrated that ‘learning-disabled’ people tend to have positive self-esteem, but found negativity in their relationships with other people (Thomson & McKenzie, 2005). Studies like this suggest that methods of intervention need to be undertaken that challenge the way in which people are stigmatized within the social environment, and more importantly, by other people. This is a theme that was captured in a digital story that was created as a supplemental learning tool for this specific training module.

Other research has found that some people disabled by the social environment experience deprivation and hardships within multiple aspects of their lives (Parish, Magana, & Cassiman, 2008). Some literature describes these hardships in relation to the situation of internalized ‘ableism’ (Kumari-Campbell, 2008). This theme is not well explored empirically or conceptually within academic literature and is a significant omission to our understanding of the experiences of people disabled by the social environment. Like Kumar-Campbell’s (2008) study, others have also found that the quality considered disabling was not the primary source of their hardship. Instead, the way a mix of abilities intersected with societal structures (like seeking employment and negative public perception) resulted in the negative experience (Jones, Hardiman, & Carpenter, 2007; Shier, Graham, & Jones, 2009; Woodcock & Tregaskis, 2008).

Overall, research conducted on the lived experiences of disability challenges us to rethink and renegotiate our role as social workers with those people that are disabled by factors in our social environment. Greater consistency in service delivery methods and interpretations is required of social work educators in training practitioners in anti-oppressive practice with those that are disabled by our social environment. At present, the literature on disability related service delivery varies in intention and focus. For example, it has been described by some that the role of the helping professional in relation to disability is to help a client accept their disability and make necessary accommodations (Megivern, 2002). Likewise, other literature focuses on best methods of intervention when working with disabled people to make those necessary accommodations (Strock & Keller, 2007).

Quality of life tends to be the focus of all this literature. Further research investigation is necessary to determine the inconsistencies in definitions of quality of life as understood by people disabled by the social environment and those that are not. The ‘rehabilitation field’ within disability services is a fundamental example of these issues with service delivery. Rehabilitation is about ‘normalization’ and is very much rooted in the individualist framework of relating to disability. A fundamental point intuitively identified by Wachslar (2007) describes this situation and provides an alternative perspective to understanding social service delivery for people disabled by the social environment. She points out that a person’s quality of life is not determined by their ability to walk, or to hear, or to see. Support services in many ways simply attempt to improve quality of life by maneuvering around the barriers enacted on people disabled by the social environment. She eloquently states:

PWD’s [Persons with disabilities] must be seen for who we are: Regular people, neither pathetic poster children nor superheroes “overcoming” the unimaginable. And regular people need regular things: transportation, be it bus or wheelchair; help around the house, be it from their kids or personal assistant; information, be it gleaned from print or

sign language or Braille; relief from pain, be it an aspirin or a prescription for morphine; and a decent standard of living, be it from a job or a government check. When all people are provided with such necessities, they will be assured the opportunity for a good quality of life. This is what PWDs deserve and require – tangible assistance that provides freedom, independence, and control over our lives as disabled people, not adulation, pity, or encouragement to focus on a cure that will make us nondisabled [emphasis added] (Wachsler, 2007, p.14).

Like Wachsler (2007), others have articulated the need to move away from these ‘ableist’ definitions of service delivery. Rummery (2006), for example, looks at the role of disabled people in defining their service delivery in relation to government controlled funding arrangements. Rooted in these ideas are challenges to the role of the disabled person in these relationships; moving from the passive receiver of care and medical services, to an active participant in defining that service delivery model. Likewise, Gilson and Depoy (2002) found, after analyzing disability content within social work education, the same limitations. Education needs to also be transformed such that it considers the disabling qualities of our social environment. Literature describing service delivery for people disabled by the social environment, if not focusing on the individualistic aspects of disability, tends to focus on the socio-political model, emphasizing the socio-constructionist approach less.

We asked ourselves, in what direction we should go from here? A lot of these issues have been brought forward within the disability social movement. Social movements simply refer to those large scale movements where people rally behind a particular identity to enact changes within society (Boyce, Krogh, & Boyce, 2006; Scott, 1990). Many have described who is part of this particular movement (see for example: Oliver, 1990; Prince, 2006), and what comes out of these definitions is a notion of a ‘disability community’ within Canada (Prince, 2006). Many of these discussions have limitations on who belongs and what role each person or group should and could undertake. Although this movement is a necessary component to understand the context of disability within Canada, it is also necessary to demonstrate to society the multiple ways that disability touches people’s lives and to promote improved reflective practices within this profession around issues related to ‘ableism’. In fact, the success of many movements has been based on the concept of experiential affinity. Relating this concept to the profession, we are simply referring to those shared experiences that bring about commitment in the work that we do. As a result, the training module provides two other insightful stories of the impact of the way people think about disability on people who do not self-identify as being disabled by our social environment. For one, the person was affected based on their personal relationships, and the other their professional relationships. Through this process practitioners are then able to reflect on their own experiences with disability and connect it to the present context of disability as it exists in society.

A further model developing within the literature and worth mentioning is ‘critical disability theory’. The ontology of critical disability theory focuses primarily on power relationships between government and people (in this case, those people disabled by the social environment) (Pothier & Devlin, 2006; Tremain, 2005). As a conceptual model it criticizes social models of understanding disability (see Tremain, 2005), but within the model some emphasis is placed on a combination of socio-political and socio-constructionist approaches to explain the

context of disability (see Pothier & Devlin, 2006); similarly to that which was described above. These discussions, though, remain primarily conceptual, with minimal emphasis on how to move forward. Instead, the model presented here follows from post-modern traditions; looking beyond the political dynamics between people and government. In fact, there is more to social models of disability than what critical disability theorists allow. One of the fundamental omissions is the consideration of the role of disabled people in society and that of third sector social service organizations. While critical disability theory fixates on the act of realizing how we as professionals contribute to social inequality and maintain systems of oppression through our work, post-modern theory, instead, allows us to move beyond that and begin to realize the deconstructive process of reflection and move forward from there (Gergen, 1991; Harvey, 1989; Peters, 2009). While epistemologically this training module is an exercise in critical theory, it supports a reconceptualization of those socio-political and socio-cultural factors in our social environment which promote or hinder active participation of all people; therefore, making connections of oppression to the wider social context and not just to relationships of power and inequality that exist in our political and economic realms.

Disability Training Module

The purpose of this training module is to provide instructors (whether teaching undergraduate social work students or in a continuing educational setting) with an informative, effective, and brief means of teaching about disability based oppression by using exercises that challenge perceptions and promote mindfulness. As training intended for undergraduate social work students, generalist social work practitioners, and specialized human service personnel working in the disability social services sector, this module presents the two main approaches to disability work that practitioners will encounter in the field, and promotes one of them as the preferred approach for social workers. The module makes use of stories, activities, and group discussions to help the trainees gain an understanding of the situation of people disabled by the social environment, and the way that they can approach their practice with clients experiencing disability related issues.

The facilitation of this Training Module is supported by a Training PowerPoint presentation, supplemental materials (a digital story and two other written stories), and a specific set of guidelines (all of which is accessible by contacting the corresponding author). The goals and exercises of this training module are the primary focus of this article as they provide insight into those aspects of disability and 'ableism' that need to be considered to effectively engage student learning in an applied approach. Generally, the goal of the training module is to inform and contextualize ideas of disability for future social work practitioners. Specifically, and based on the literature described above, the goals are to provide future social workers with an understanding of:

- Section 1: Theoretical Frameworks
 - *The theoretical approaches to disability work*
- Section 2: The Context of Disability
 - *The experiences of people disabled by our social environment*
- Section 3: Implications for Practice

- *The ways in which practitioners can effectively diminish the social element of disability for their clients*

These goals are conveyed to trainees through individual sections, each including: an overview of the goal via the Training PowerPoint slides, to be taught by the facilitator, drawing from the goal overviews provided, experiential learning exercises, and group discussion based on debriefing questions.

Section 1 – Theoretical Frameworks

Two main theoretical models exist around the idea of ‘disability’. Each of these frameworks leads to a particular approach which future and current social workers must be aware of. The first theoretical framework is the individualist model of disability. This model is defined by the perspective that a person is disabled because whatever impairment they possess limits the way they live their life and their ability to function as fully as their ‘able-bodied’ counterparts. In this model, disability is seen to be a condition which a person must endure, and try and overcome, if possible. This perspective is in line with a medical view of disability, and social workers in the health field are often educated to take a treatment approach to disability by viewing their work through a curative lens. In other words, disability is a deficit which must be, as much as possible, fixed. The second theoretical model is the abridged socio-political and socio-constructionist model of disability. This model is defined by the belief that although people have certain impairments, it is the inflexible structures, systems, and attitudes in society which effectively disable people.

According to the socio-political and socio-constructionist model, approaches to deconstruct disability should focus on equality and promoting human rights, within the perspective of inherent value of the person and human diversity. More specifically, this model advocates the need to change the social, political, and economic environments in any way which makes them universally accessible. Essentially, the approach is that disability does not reside in the person, but in their environment – however, when an inflexible or inaccessible environment inhibits that person, they become disabled. Similarly, ableism refers to the views of society which see disabled people as somehow insufficient based on their abilities, resulting in marginalization.

Current literature and practice in the field of disability recommends social workers taking a socio-constructionist approach, and accordingly, so does this training module. As future or currently practicing social workers, the participants will need to have a working knowledge of the individualist model of disability and the medical approach. However, as professionals compelled to engage in systemic and anti-oppressive practice, the socio-constructionist model should be the social work practitioner’s primary perspective when working with disability issues or clients disabled by the social environment. The exercises and debrief questions for this section (see Box 1) were designed to engage students to think about how their perception of disability has been formed and how this has implications for the type of, and reasons for, service to disabled people. The following section builds off of these theoretical frameworks to understand the context of disability within our social environment.

Box 1 – Experiential learning and debrief to understand theoretical frameworks

Experiential Learning Exercise

Preparation: In-Class, ensure that each group has a piece of paper and pen, with one person writing down group member contributions.

Ask participants to get into small groups of three-to-four. Instruct them to have one piece of paper per group and to do the following exercise:

Exercise:

Make two columns on a sheet of paper. Put “treatment/research for cure” as the heading in the left-hand column. Put “activism for access/equal rights” as the heading in the right-hand column. Now engage in a research/review exercise listing all of the academic literature, news articles, public service announcements, ads, posters, special events and other publicity you can find from the past 12 months, putting them under one heading or another.

Debrief Questions

Pose the following questions. Note the possible probing answers for the facilitator to suggest below each question in italics. The facilitator can choose to circulate amongst the small groups and use these to stimulate conversation where necessary.

- 1) Discuss in small groups:
 - a. Which heading has more items under it? Why is that?
 - *Discuss the role of the media in defining perception*
 - *Neo-liberal social welfare and social policy impact how we think about issues of diversity/difference*
 - *Individualism within society roots problems in people*
- 2) Discuss in small groups:
 - a. What are some other stereotypes about people disabled by the social environment? Make a list.
 - *Think about personal perceptions*
 - *Think about societal perceptions*
 - *What are some positive thoughts (i.e. beliefs about resiliency, struggle, overcoming adversity and hardship etc.)*
 - *What are some negative thoughts (i.e. judgments about intelligence, weaknesses, incapacabilities, etc.)*
 - b. Notice how many of them contradict each other.
- 3) Discuss as a large group:
 - a. What images does the public have for disability rights?
 - b. What images for ableism?
 - *Have students discuss specifically how disability images are defined in popular media.*
 - *Note with students that what has been demonstrated is that these discussions and models only describe their experience with disability, and say nothing about the experiences of the people disabled by the social environment.*

Section 2 – The Context of Disability

The overall goal of this section is to convey the experiences of disabled persons in society based on a socio-constructionist model of understanding disability. The context of disability, when examined from a socio-constructionist framework, includes the interactions disabled people have with their physical and social environments and the interactions they have with other people. We have captured these ideas under the categories: ‘Disabling Environments’ and ‘Disability Community’. Each has been broken down into subcategories which help to conceptualize different aspects of the context of disability. For the category ‘Disabling Environments’ we considered the physical (i.e. ‘Universal Design’) and social environment (i.e. ‘Lived Experiences’) as defining features of the context of disability. For the category ‘Disability Community’ the training module focuses on the disability social movement and experiential affinity to disability.

Universal Design. A primary consideration to fully understand the context of disability relates to how people interact with their external environment, and in particular, the physical realm. The purpose of universal design is “to simplify life for everyone by making products, communications, and the built environment more usable by as many people as possible” (Centre for Universal Design, 2008). The experiential learning exercise and debrief questions (see Box 2.1) are intended to help students understand how our physical environment creates disability.

Box 2.1 Spotting universal design

Experiential Learning Exercise

Preparation: Review pictures of examples of good or bad universal design (include things like structures, accessibility, or objects). Notice that in each picture there are multiple facets to consider that might have an impact on varying types of disability, and that while an object may have good universal design for one type of disability, it may have an inaccessible design for another. Be sure to explain this to the class before beginning the activity.

Exercise:

In the Training PowerPoint, refer to the series of slides titled “Good Universal Design? Why or Why Not?” These slides depict a series of objects which are designed in ways that diminish their accessibility for some people. Alternatively, you can collect your own images. View these pictures with the class and discuss the accessibility – or ‘goodness of universal design’ – of each in turn.

Debrief Questions

After viewing and discussing each picture in turn, pose the following questions and discuss in a large group format:

- 1) Name other objects which are not universally designed, which were not shown in the Training PowerPoint (or collected by the facilitator).
- 2) What are some objects in society which often have good universal design?
- 3) What factors within our social and economic systems hinder the creation of adequate universal designs?

Lived Experience. While the previous section demonstrates how the physical environment creates disability, it is important to demonstrate how the social environment likewise creates disability. This is achieved through the presentation of the lived experiences of people disabled by the social environment. It is necessary to remember that the lived experiences of disabled people need to be conveyed in a way which helps the practitioner understand, while at the same time in a way which preserves the dignity of people and does not promote pity.

A useful way to do this is by having people disabled by the social environment convey their experiences through their own stories and voices. To achieve this outcome, digital storytelling was used. Digital storytelling is a way for individuals to tell and sensitize others to their stories, but by having full ownership of the story and being in primary control of the creation and dissemination of the story. For more information, the training module facilitator should visit the Centre for Digital Storytelling at: <http://www.storycenter.org/>. This training module utilizes a digital story that was intentionally created to demonstrate ‘ableism’, but is based on the life experience of one of the authors (Box 2.2 provides a description of this story and is available upon request from the lead author). The probing questions (also in Box 2.2) seek to relate the lived experience content with the theoretical models utilized to understand disability.

Box 2.2 Digital Story: “Apologizing”

Experiential Learning Exercise –

Preparation: Video Projector and “Apologizing” Video.

Play the DVD, “Apologizing” (5 Min.) – The digital story is about the experience of one of the authors with a speech related disability. The story uncovers how the author was disabled by expectations within our social environment and the consequent psycho-social implications.

Debrief Questions

Allow the class to debrief about their perceptions of the feelings expressed by the author of the digital story. Further, as a large group, promote discussion around:

- 1) What could the school, teachers, family, or peers have done to improve the life experience?
- 2) What was the role of these people in creating disability?
- 3) Within the video there are themes of resiliency and personal struggle – If he was not disabled by the expectations for fluency imposed from society, would these themes be as significant?
- 4) Related to the previous question, how do your own personal thoughts and perception of disability impact your reaction to this video? How do those reactions relate to the individualist and socio-constructionist models of understanding disability presented earlier?

Experiential Affinity. In the same spirit as the ‘Lived Experience’ section, experiential affinity helps the participants to better understand the social context of disability. In particular, students are given the opportunity to understand the context from different perspectives. The concept of experiential affinity argues that as practitioners share the experience of disability they will be more mindful of and committed to addressing issues of ableism in their lives and their

practice. The training module provides two narratives – one discussing the implications of disability from a professional standpoint and the other from a personal standpoint. Each of the authors identifies as a person not disabled by the social environment, but demonstrate how disability still impacts their lives (see Box 2.3).

Box 2.3 Narrative Stories

Experiential Learning Exercise #1 – Narrative Stories

Preparation: Before class, make enough copies of the stories in Narrative Story A (A Wife's Story) and Narrative Story B (A Worker's Story) for each participant

Narrative story A – Discusses the idea of disability from the perspective of a spouse whose partner was becoming blind.

Narrative story B – Discusses the idea of disability from the perspective of a social worker working in shelter for people experiencing homelessness.

Exercise:

Distribute the two stories to each participant (Narrative Stories A & B), and give approximately five minutes for them to be read. This can be done individually or as a group with one person reading aloud. Have the participants split into small groups and discuss the following questions about each story for 10-15 minutes. If time does not permit, divide the class into two and have each group discuss one of the stories. Have each small group choose one spokesperson to present the points raised by their small group to the large group.

Debrief Questions (Small Groups):

Narrative Story A – A Wife's Story

- 1) What was this person's experience with disability?
- 2) How did it impact their life?
- 3) What factors within the environment have the greatest impact on this person?
- 4) What changes could the employer, or society, make to lessen the negative impact of this experience for this couple? The husband? The wife?
- 5) What is positive about the story with regards to acceptance of the disability?

Narrative Story B – A Worker's Story

- 1) What was this person's experience with disability?
- 2) How did it impact their life?
- 3) What factors within the environment have the greatest impact on this person?
- 4) What key messages is this story trying to convey?
- 5) How does it inform conventional thoughts about the worker-client relationship?

General Discussion after group presentations – Stories A and B

- 1) How are these two stories connected?
- 2) What issues related to disability are reoccurring? (i.e. How does disability impact the same or differently in each story and in relation to the story presented in the digital story earlier?)

Disability Social Movement. The previous category described the context of disability from the perspective of people not disabled by the social environment yet who have been affected by disability in some way. The disability social movement adds further to our understanding of the social context of disability. It refers to the rallying of many people behind the cause of disability, with the goal of dismantling disabling environments in society and ableist attitudes and practices. Often, the notion of a ‘disability community’ emerges to describe those involved in the disability social movement; including, disabled people, friends and family members, service organizations, local and national lobby groups, and just general allies to the movement. This module seeks to familiarize participants with this topic by informing them of local efforts within the disability social movement (see Box 2.4). Participants can then discuss the notion of disability social movement and community within their own area(s), and how they have/can interact with this movement.

Box 2.4 Community as a movement

Experiential Learning Exercise

Preparation: Review web sites in your local community for organizations involved in the Disability Social Movement and bring in pages and links for these sites.

Exercise:

In small groups, refer to the series of slides titled “Disability Social Movement” (which outlines the description in the literature review section above), and review the web pages distributed by the facilitator (come prepared with websites for local disability social movement groups). Discuss and answer the following questions in small groups.

Debrief Questions

Each small group should discuss the following questions and prepare answers to share with the large group:

- 1) What are your impressions about your local disability related social movement?
- 2) Are you involved in the Social Disability Movement in your area? If yes, how? If not, how could you be?

Section 3 – Implications for Practice

The previous categories facilitated the development of an understanding of the theoretical frameworks helping to conceptualize disability and its present context. This learning is necessary for practitioners to demonstrate effective anti-oppressive practice that is informed by the experiences of people disabled by the social environment and follows the trajectory of the disability social movement. Whether practitioners are a part of these macro-level structural changes in society or seeking effective means of working with clients, these foundations are necessary to understand the concept of ableism and its social impact. The goal of this section is for participants to understand ways in which they can effectively diminish the social element of disability for their clients. At this point in the workshop, it should be clear that even if participants will not work directly in disability services in their social work practice they will

inevitably encounter disability issues in their work. Therefore, it is important to make links between the theory and context of disability already discussed to practical ways of integrating a socio-constructionist disability approach; the two experiential learning (see Box 3) exercises for this section seek to make these connections.

Box 3 Narrative stories, brainstorming and reflection

Experiential Learning Exercise #1 – Practice Brainstorming

Preparation: Have the participants make small groups based on areas of work/interest. Have them discuss the following questions:

- 1) Is the issue of disability overtly addressed in your work?
 - a. If yes, how? What model – Individualist or Socio-Constructionist?
 - b. If not, what are ways that the Socio-Constructionist approach can be applied to your area of work/interest?
- 2) What are some of the challenges in applying a Socio-Constructionist approach to your area of work/interest? How might you overcome these?

Experiential Learning Exercise #2 – Self-Reflection

Preparation: Each participant will need a piece of paper and a writing utensil. Have them answer the following questions. Time-permitting, allow participants to share their answers with the large group should they desire.

- 1) Have you had personal experience with disability? For yourself? Someone you know?
 - a. If yes, how has this experience of disability affected you?
- 2) What perspectives did you hold about disability before this training module? Have your perspectives changed? If yes, how? If not, why not?

Conclusion

The role that social workers undertake within social movements, that seek to end varying forms of oppression, is directly determined (at least in part) by the professional education that they receive (Andrews & Reisch, 2002; Keefe, Lane, & Swarts, 2006; Thompson, 2002; Whitmore & Wilson, 1999). This training module is an educational tool that was created to help practitioners understand the oppression of ‘ableism’ and their role within the disability social movement. This specific movement is not new and consists of multiple aspects (Barnartt, 2007); nevertheless, through effective education tools that teach the theoretical and contextual aspects of oppression, social workers can develop an awareness of how to engage more effectively in anti-oppressive practice.

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