Pride & Prejudice: Canadian ambivalence toward inclusion

Inaugural Colloquium at the Centre for Inclusion and Citizenship
School of Social Work
University of British Columbia
October 8, 2009
A few questions

- What do you think most Canadians think about disability and people living with disabilities?
- What, when and how do you think about disability and issues of social inclusion?
Some themes

- Prevailing sentiment by Canadians on disability and social inclusion is ambivalence
- Mixture of positive and negative attitudes and beliefs, and respectful and discriminatory behaviours
- Ongoing symbolic and material marginalization of people with disabilities from mainstream society and the Canadian state
- Suggests need for “cultural work”
What is disability?

- Bio–medical conditions, functional restrictions, and impairments
- Personal misfortunes, bad luck, and tragedy
- Objects of pity and charity and/or fear and dread
- Phenomenon that many people believe affects only a small minority
- Legal concepts in Canadian constitution, legislation, regulations, and court decisions
- Formal administrative categories in program design and delivery
- Historically layered and fragmented policy field of programs
- Research areas across various disciplines and professions
- Market sector for business activities and transactions
- Social construct of cultural, societal, and economic factors and relationships
- Issues of social oppression, power and political will
- Community movement of actors, service groups and coalitions
A disability policy agenda

Old Approaches

- Recipients
  - Passive income support
- Dependence
  - Government responsibility
  - Labelled as unemployable
  - Disincentives to leave income assistance
  - Insufficient employment supports
  - Program-centred approach
  - Insufficient portability of benefits
  - Multiple access requirements

New Aspirations

- Participants
  - Active measures to promote employment and provide income support
  - Independence
  - Shared responsibility
  - Work skills identified
  - Incentives to seek employment and support volunteering
  - Opportunities to develop skills
  - Person-centred approach
  - Portable benefits and services
  - Integrated access requirements
Findings from focus groups

- Disabilities and disability-related issues not ‘top-of-mind awareness’ for most participants

- Tendency to think of ‘disability’ in terms of visible and physical limitations, especially by people with little contact with persons with disabilities

- Agreement that people with visible disabilities experience discrimination in schools, workplaces, and in social settings

- Belief, in general, there has been important progress in accepting people with physical disabilities into various spheres of mainstream community life

- Belief that funding and support is likely insufficient to help people with disabilities live with comfort and dignity

- Belief that families should be the first resource for people with disabilities, along with provincial health care systems and non-profit agencies
Reactions to someone with an obvious disability: national survey 2004
(percentages, n =1,843)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reaction</th>
<th>Often</th>
<th>Occasionally</th>
<th>Rarely</th>
<th>Never</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Admiring</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sorry</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Awkward</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indifferent</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Afraid</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## Most important role in helping disabled participate fully in society

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Families of the persons with the disability</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Voluntary organizations</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disabled persons themselves</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Governments</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religious organizations</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More than one is most important</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don’t know</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Primary solutions to tackle discrimination and further inclusion

1. **Personal awareness**: (62%) education efforts and general information campaigns to shift public attitudes and to bolster self-confidence of disabled people.

2. **Community acceptance**: (30%) better integration in schools, accessible facilities, improved employment opportunities.

3. **Government action**: (9%) enhanced or new programs, laws, services and benefits.
Some assessments

“Good will on the part of some individuals has not led to the changes in political and social thought necessary to create legislation establishing accessible environments for all Canadians. Continuity in ideas and practices continues to weigh heavily upon the present, stalling significant changes.”

(Tremblay, Campbell, and Hudson 2005: 114)
Implications and challenges

- Relatively few Canadians view disability as an economic issue of employment or as a social issue of citizenship
- Tendency to think of disability in terms of visible physical handicaps
- Public awareness and knowledge of actual supports to persons with disabilities is low
- If Canadian public does not readily think about disability in terms of human rights, a serious test faces the disability community and allied social groups
Inclusion as recognition

“Our identity is partly shaped by recognition or its absence, often by the misrecognition of others, and so a person or group of people can suffer real damage, real distortion, if the people around them mirror back to them a confining or demeaning or contemptible picture of themselves.”

(Taylor 1992: 25)
Cultural work: recognition, relationships, and respect

- Deconstructing dominant image of disabled as sick, deficient, other
- “Outing” ableism and ideologies of normalcy
- Pluralizing the image with diverse realities of disablements, including intellectual and episodic along with physical impairments
- Connecting differences in relation to power relations and systems of inequalities
- “Coming out” with disabilities
- This work must take place in schools, workplaces, mass media, politics...
In the words of a disability activist

“We are helping to awaken humanity to the reality that all people are flawed and yet beautiful, and each one limited in his or her unique way and yet powerful.”

Jim Derksen
Thank you

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