

Indications of Disability Culture in Magazines Marketed to the Disability Community

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Introduction

A sense of unity among persons with disabilities has become more prominent in recent years (Scotch, 1993, p. 238), and has gained momentum since enactment of the Americans with Disabilities Act in 1990. Some individuals and organizations in the disability community now maintain that the unique aspects of the disability experience are foundations of a disability culture. However, the dimensions of that culture continue to be debated; this report provides some data for that debate.

Identification of disability as a determining factor for membership in a distinct culture has developed out of a background including philosophies and experiences of the deaf community, which has a history of describing itself as a unique culture, and self-determination drives such as the Independent Living movement founded in Berkley as an alternative to institutionalized care of persons with disabilities. In addition, disability culture as a separate minority phenomena finds some theoretical foundations in the oppression theories of the late Paulo Freire.

Brannon (1995) and Brown (1995) suggest one of the first formal discussions of the concept occurred at the 1984 conference of the Association on Handicapped Student Service Programs in Post-Secondary Education. In a *Disability Rag* article, Johnson (1987) expanded the discussion by quoting psychologist Carol Gill, who outlined her view of the parameters of a disability subculture. In the fall, 1995, edition of *Disability Studies Quarterly* devoted to the subject of disability culture, Gill delineates her vision of the functions, values and elements of the culture (pp. 16-19). Currently the Institute on Disability Culture in Las Cruces, New Mexico, "specializes in exploring the history, ideology, and diverse expressions of our culture," and co-founder Steven Brown notes, "We share a common history of oppression and a common bond of resilience. We generate art, music, literature and other expressions of our lives, our culture, infused from our experience of disability." (Brown, 1997)

On the other hand, Scotch (1990) notes "it may be more accurate to characterize people with disabilities as members of a social category rather than as an identifiable social or political group" (p. 239). Irvin (1997) observes that women, blacks, gays and lesbians have united behind their group status, whereas people with disabilities have not. "All of these people have their own pride movements. We barely do," she comments (p. 3).

Thus the aspects of an identifiable, unique disability culture continue to evolve. The study reported here sought to evaluate mass media subject matter that could be construed as indicators of the culture. The investigation employed a content analysis of selected magazines that seek as their readership people with disabilities.

Survey of literature

Exploration to identify the boundaries of a culture of disability is made difficult at a fundamental level because borders are ill-defined around even the term "culture." Sociologists Applebaum

and Chambliss (1995) define culture as “all the beliefs, behaviors and products common to members of a particular group” (p. 54), and include language, goods made and consumed, membership in organizations and tools and technology as elements of a culture.

Henslin (1995) emphasizes the arbitrary nature of culture, and observes that larger cultures break into subcultures. “Each subculture has a distinctive way of looking at life,” he says (p. 44), and he notes for example that ethnic groups may form subcultures that “pride themselves on how they differ from the dominant culture” (p. 44). In addition, he observes that countercultures form values in opposition to the dominant culture, and may constitute a perceived threat to the dominant group.

Friere (1970, 1985) developed a body of theory that examined subcultures and their relationship to dominant groups. In his studies of the interactions of dominant cultures with indigenous cultures, he observed educational and political action which he defined as “cultural invasion.” He urged an alternative approach which emphasizes dialogue and synthesis of cultural groups:

It is not our role to speak to the people about our own view of the world, nor to attempt to impose that view on them, but rather to dialogue with the people about their view and ours. We must realize that their view of the world...reflects their situation in the world. Often, educators and politicians speak and are not understood because their language is not attuned to the concrete situation of the men they address. (p. 85)

Disability rights advocates have adopted Freire’s education theories because they legitimize and empower the experiences of individuals in dominated groups. Notes Giroux (1985),

Friere argues for a notion of cultural power that takes as its starting point the social and historical particularities, the problems, the sufferings, visions, acts of resistance, that constitute the cultural forms of subordinate groups. . . This means making these experiences in their public and private forms the object of debate and confirmation. (p. xxi)

Among people described as having disabilities, the deaf and people with hearing impairment have established a firm foundation for status as a distinct culture. Carver (1991) is unequivocal in defining a separation between the hearing and the deaf characterized by, among other elements, American Sign Language (ASL). This clear separation of experience, he says, establishes a Deaf culture (signified by a capital D). “In order to begin to understand such things, the person must live in this culture and speak the language of this culture,” he notes. (p. 1)

Carver further distinguishes Deaf Culture from hearing systems in ways that recall Friere’s concepts of a dominant group’s fear of the dominated: “Many are feeling threatened by the rise of deaf culture,” he observes. (p.2)

Padden and Humphries (1988) further refine the concept of Deaf Culture as they examine life experience with Deaf as a central point, not from the medical condition of absence or loss of hearing. They observe that Deaf Culture already has its basis in both a system of unique language (ASL) and in the “unique pattern of cultural transmission” via both families and residential schools for the deaf.

However, Padden and Humphries also impose limits within Deaf Culture. They note differences between the experience of those with congenital hearing loss, those whose hearing became impaired later in life, and those with partial hearing impairment, or the “hard of hearing,” offering an ideological split between those who “think hearing,” i.e. those who prefer to “think and act like a hearing person” (p. 53) and those for whom Deaf is a central position, not the absence of a preferred position. In this view, “‘disabled’ is a label that historically has not belonged to Deaf people,” they note. (p. 44)

Modern disability activism shares a similar outlook, according to Oliver (1996), who observes that the “growing disability movement has turned away from the professionally dominated top down solutions provided by able-bodied experts.” (p. 123) He sees in the modern disability movement a “collective empowerment” illustrated by new models of disability, as well as “development of a disability culture and the public affirmation of this through the disability arts movement.” (p. 152) Such cultural expression, he says, “provide(s) a challenge to the stigmatization of difference in its insistence that disability is a cause for celebration.”(p. 157)

Robertson (1994) discusses a movement away from the medical model of disability toward the sociopolitical model, with its members constituting a distinct minority group. “This emerging culture is marked by the development of arts and literature reflecting the disability experience, and by a unique set of values” including pride and independence, she says. (p. 5)

Method

Most magazines must serve their readership in order to survive. They provide this service by offering content that appeals to a specific audience segment; content which has no relationship to the life experience of the audience would be useless. Therefore the content selected for publication by magazine editors must be a good representation of the subject matter that comprises the culture- or subculture-served by the publication.

This study examined the content of three magazines: *Accent on Living*, *Mainstream* and *Paraplegia News*. These magazines were chosen because they publish content that is aimed toward a general broad audience of people with disabilities. Nelson (1996) says *Paraplegia News* “has a circulation of almost 30,000 and serves anyone with a mobility requirement” (p. 6), while “*Mainstream and Accent on Living* have aimed at active, interested general audiences who may have some disability, but whose lives are not defined by that disability” (p. 13). Alternatively, publications such as *Exceptional Parent*, *Disabled Outdoors Magazine*, or *Computer Disability News* were not chosen because of their narrow subject matter focus.

To identify the content of the publications, the study followed a methodology adopted by Westfall (1994), who seeks patterns in magazine content by examining, among other aspects, the mix and range of subjects in magazines. According to Westfall, the subjects--or topic categories--need not be “textbook-approved categories,” but may be devised to fit the magazine under study. Within a broad range, therefore, subject matter in magazines serving even the same general audience can vary considerably from magazine to magazine.

Predominant subject matter covered in the magazines examined for this study was determined by charting their content, as suggested by Westfall. Westfall recommends review of at least two issues of magazines to be analyzed; this study reviewed three issues of each magazine, selected from different seasons across several recent years. The unit of analysis was the story or article, which was defined as a text unit of at least one paragraph that included its own headline. The number of stories identified in each category was counted, totaled and charted as indicated in Figures 1-3. Because the analysis was conducted by only one person (the author), intercoder reliability measures were inapplicable.

Results

One advantage of Westfall’s magazine content methodology is that it allows for wide variation in subject range, rather than forcing conformity to pre-defined subject areas. Although Nelson (1996) observes that the magazines analyzed here all have general audiences, Westfall notes “all magazines have things they will and will not do” (p. 71). This analysis showed considerable difference in frequently visited subjects, and subjects not included, in each of the three publications. (See Figs. 1-3)

Figure 1

Paraplegia News content

Subject matter by number of stories

Source: January, March, June 1996 issues

Edit./Advcy	***** (5)
Medical	**** (4)
Tech./Equip	***** (32)
Profile	***** (9)
Hlth/Fitness	***** (8)
Events/news	***** (35)
Travel	***** (14)
Sport/Rec	***** (32)
Legis/gov't	***** (25)
Resrch	***** (8)
Obit	*** (3)
PR/Assn	***** (15)
History	**** (4)
Accom./Hsng	***** (9)
Educ	*(1)
Employmnt	** (2)

Paraplegia News is the largest (and oldest) of the three magazines reviewed, with an average of about 100 pages in each issue analyzed. A total of 206 individual stories fell into 16 subject categories, with the greatest number in the "events and news," with 35 stories, followed closely by "technology and equipment" and "sports/recreation" with 32 each. Other significant categories were "Legislation/ Government information" with 25, and "Public relations/ association news" with 15.

Figure 2.

Accent on Living content

Subject matter by number of stories

Source: Summer, 1991; Spring, 1992; Winter 1993 issues

1st Person	***** (7)
Career/Employ.	** (2)
Edit./Advocy	***** (5)
News	***** (11)
Accomdtn.	** (2)
Sport/Rec.	***** (5)
Self-imprv.	***** (7)
Govt./Soc Srv.	*** (3)
Hlth/Med.	***** (7)
Profiles	***** (14)
Prod./Equip.	***** / ***** (62)

A total of 125 articles were reviewed in *Accent on Living*. Nelson (1996) notes this magazine was founded in 1956 “to provide a means for disabled people to find out about products that were available but hard to find” (p. 9), and that background is reflected in the high number of articles (62) in the subject area “Products/equipment.” Other significant numbers of articles were in the subject areas “Profiles” of individuals (14 stories), “News” (11), “First person” testimonials, “Health/safety/medical” and “Self improvement” (7 each).

Mainstream was the smallest of the three publications in number of pages, with about 36 pages per issue in the samples examined, and as a result the total number of articles, 55, is lower than the other publications. The category with the greatest number of items was “News,” with 10 articles, followed closely by “Editorial/advocacy” articles (9), and articles on “Accommodations/Housing” (8).

Of equal interest in these publications is the type of subjects given least priority. Among the *Paraplegia News* issues analyzed, only one article was on education, and only two covered employment matters; *Accent on Living* published only two articles each on the subjects career training/ employment and accommodations/housing; *Mainstream* included only one article on health, two on careers and two on courts/litigation.

Discussion and conclusions

Scholars have suggested the concept “culture” includes material aspects such as “products shared by a group,” including tools and technology (Applebaum and Chambliss, 1995; p. 54) and non-material aspects such as language, beliefs and shared organizations. Results of this study suggest that, at least in magazines of general

Figure 3.
Mainstream content
Subject matter by number of stories
Source: April, 1996; October, 1996; November, 1996 issues

Edit./Advocacy	***** (9)
Courts	** (2)
Travel	*** (3)
Legis./Gov't	**** (4)
Technology	*** (3)
Education	**** (4)
Accom./Hsng	***** (8)
News	***** (10)
Sports	**** (4)
Career/EmPLY	** (2)
Media Covrg	***** (5)
Health Care	* (1)

circulation in the disability community, subjects discussed and given priority confirm the existence of a disability culture and help define it.

The dominance in these magazines of articles on products and technology in the lifestyle of the person with a disability provides one strong indicator. Robertson (1994) includes independence

among the shared values in disability culture, and observes that “adaptive equipment enable(s) a broader sphere of activity, such that one is not ‘confined to a wheelchair’ but ‘uses a wheelchair’ instead.” (p. 7) Therefore the predominance of this subject area in the magazines sampled, especially *Paraplegia News* and *Accent on Living*, is notable.

Two of the three magazines, *Accent on Living* and *Mainstream*, emphasize editorials or advocacy content, and *Paraplegia News* includes five articles of this type. These are not activist publications like *Disability Rag* (now *Ragged Edge*), so their editorial “calls to action” cement a group consciousness and a shared value system, or what sociologist Henslin (1995) calls “a distinct way of looking at life” (p. 44).

In addition, all three publications support event information and other news that draws the readership together. *Paraplegia News*, as reflected by its name and its mission as the official publication of the Paralyzed Veterans of America, emphasizes event information and closely follows legislation of interest to its audience through a regular “Government Relations” column. *Mainstream* also seeks to serve as a community bulletin board through its “News and Commentary” monthly column.

Content of these three publications also illustrates specialized lifestyle aspects and interests for the person with a disability. Articles on sport and recreation topics such as wheelchair basketball, marathons, and accessible travel destinations are featured in all three publications (notably so in *Paraplegia News*), and information about lifestyle and self-improvement are among the more prominent in *Mainstream* and *Accent on Living*.

Of equal importance in this study are subject categories not emphasized or absent. In the three publications analyzed here, health care and disability as a medical condition, as well as government and/or social services, are topics visited extremely infrequently. The absence of these topic areas indicates the cultural importance of independence and pride, and de-emphasizes reliance on medical or social/governmental “assistance.” Pro-active legislation and litigation, on the other hand, is emphasized in *Mainstream* and *Paraplegia News*, further refuting in these publications the social pathology/economic model defined by Clogston (1994).

In total, the subject-matter priorities in this small sample of magazines aimed at persons with disabilities provides evidence of several generally accepted prerequisites of a unique culture. These are tools and technology useful for the person with a disability; a largely shared value system in support of the individual with a disability; and an emphasis on events and information that promote interaction within the disability community and a subsequent empowerment through collective action.

Because this study examined a small sample of publications, future research using larger samples might reveal stronger evidence of a unique “disability culture.” As technology advances, review of other media might prove fruitful as well. In addition, the disability studies field needs some work on definitions. “Disability Culture” is a fairly new concept, and both qualitative and quantitative research that establishes more firm parameters will be fundamental to further examination of this topic.

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