

Coming Out as a Person with a Disability

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I have often made the parallel of coming out as a person with a disability with that of coming out as gay or lesbian.

Because of the paucity of scholarly work in the area of sexuality and disability from a non-reproductive model, I am always drawing on the experiences of other groups such as gay, lesbian, bi, and transgendered (GLBT), and feminist perspectives to help formulate my thinking. First consider the following three theories on coming out and homosexual identity formation.

Cass (1994) looks at identity as a cognitive construct. He describes the process through the stages of homosexual identity formation as characterized by increasing acceptance of the label homosexual as descriptive of self; development of a positive attitude towards this self-identity; a growing desire to disclose the existence of this identity to both homosexual and non homosexual; increasingly more personalized and frequent social contacts with homosexuals. Cass's 6 stage model goes as follows: 1) Identity Confusion; 2) Identity Comparison; 3) Identity Tolerance; 4) Identity Acceptance; 5) Identity Pride; 6) Identity Synthesis.

Likewise, Dank (1971) adds "probably most persons who eventually identify themselves as homosexuals require a change in the meaning of the cognitive category homosexual before they can place themselves in the category. The meaning of the category must change." Dank stresses the role of knowledge in the process of coming out. "The change of self-identity in homosexual is intimately related to the access of knowledge and information concerning homosexuals and homosexuality."

Finally, George and Behrendt (1987) condense coming out into the following three stages: 1) acknowledgment of one's own self as homosexual; 2) acknowledging homosexuality to other homosexual people and building a support system; 3) sharing the knowledge of one's homosexuality with relatives, heterosexual friends, co-workers, and employers.

Now put this in the context of coming out as a person with a disability. This should work whether the disability is visible as in my SCI or invisible. As a newly injured male with a SCI I dove head first into a world I was not familiar with except for internalized notions of disability I acquired as an able-bodied young man in America. I experienced identity confusion. I was a quadriplegic but I felt like I was not like those Other people with disabilities. The meaning of the cognitive category of disability I learned prior to my disability did not allow me to accept myself as part of that population. I first identified with other men with SCI that were role models for me (mostly other guys who were working, in competitive sports, or had girlfriends). I could only compare myself with other men with like disabilities. SCI gatherings became a very comfortable place for me. I could tolerate my identity as someone with a SCI. I would still avoid other people with disabilities in public places like the mall.

It was not until I found myself at a meeting from a local independent living center and was moved deeply by the expression of sexual concerns of another young man, my age, who had CP and great difficulty with verbal communication that I began to feel a common bond. He had a different disability but expressed the same feelings of sexual isolation I experienced and could not express despite having no difficulties with my speech.

From that point on I made a better effort to connect with others who had disabilities outside the SCI community. My access to knowledge and information about people with all types of disabilities was growing. Through meeting others with disabilities I learned that the internalized notion of people with disabilities I picked up primarily from the media and lack of access to other kids with disabilities was not what people with disabilities were like at all. I came to accept, take pride, and synthesize my disability identity over time. I stopped trying to pretend I was an AB and wearing myself out. I began using my chair that was far more functional and freeing for me than the walking I can manage on crutches. And I found a new family of friends with disabilities I can feel at home with.

References

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