

### Introduction

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The destructive impact of social devaluation on self-concept is a prominent theme in the minority psychology and sociology literatures and has been addressed with respect to disability in such early works as Goffman's (1963) *Stigma* and Wright's (1960) *Physical Disability: A Psychological Approach*. Unfortunately, the affirmative response to that dilemma - the process of constructing a positive self in defiance of social devaluation - has not been examined as systematically in people with disabilities as it has been in other minority groups. We may be on the threshold of redressing that neglect as disability researchers and advocates express increasing interest in the process of positive disability identity development.

Two decades ago, Anspach (1979) analyzed efforts of persons with physical and psychiatric disabilities to combat social oppression by subverting stereotypes and reconstructing images through social activism. Referring to this process as "identity politics," the author drew parallels to strategies in the Black and gay liberation movements. Like the activism of other minority people who rejected being evaluated according to dominant cultural standards, Anspach noted, "The politicization of the disabled represents an attempt to wrest definitional control of identity from 'normals'" (p. 768). Anspach called for research to validate this analysis. Almost a decade later, Hahn (1985) observed, "One of the most important problems facing the political struggle of people with disabilities is the necessity of developing a positive sense of identity" (p. 310).

In the U.S., disability historian Paul Longmore (1995) has noted that the 1990s reflect a historically significant expansion of curiosity within the disability activist community regarding questions of self-definition, which he refers to as the "second phase" of the disability rights movement. As Priestley, Corker and Watson point out in this issue, British disability studies scholars have endeavored over the past decade to apply a social model framework to identity research, to acknowledge the importance of the disability political movement in collective identity formation, and to develop conceptual and empirical identity projects from a disability perspective rather than from a traditional social science foundation.

The investigation of disability identity calls for a multi-layered approach that we associate with disability studies at its best. The informal writings and spontaneously told stories of persons with disabilities are naturally rich mines of data to examine. Research studies that are carefully designed to capture the variety and context of identity trajectories, that preserve the perspectives of people with disabilities, that attend to individual and collective identity processes, and that acknowledge the social, cultural and political aspects of self definition represent another primary data source. Both domains of information are represented in this issue.

Three articles (Killackey; Morrissey; Tepper) are thoughtful personal accounts of identity quests. The other three articles (Weeber; Priestley, Corker, and Watson; Hirsch) are reports of qualitative research on disability identity development, one sensitively focusing on adults, another capturing the often neglected viewpoints of children with disabilities, and the third exploring disability identity from an oral historical perspective.

The richness and commonality of themes in these articles is compelling: isolation and longing for acceptance, the role of political engagement in initiating the formation of disability identity, the emancipatory impact of re-claiming and re-defining disability, relational barriers to self-acceptance, clashing of views and values between the worlds of disability and nondisability, and the near spiritual dimensions of self-integration and integration into the disability community/family.

As guest co-editors with longstanding personal and intellectual interests in disability iden-

tivity issues, we find these articles both corroborative and provocative. They echo themes emerging in our own work but they also highlight significant gaps in our knowledge. For example, one of us (Gill, 1997) has written about forms of self and group integration underlying disability identity.

Certainly themes of integration are salient in this issue of *DSQ*. We have little information, however, about how identity patterns vary among different disability subcommunities nor about how disabled persons from additional minority communities (defined by race/ethnicity, gender or sexual identity) organize their multiple group affiliations and intersecting identities. Such questions will be the focus of a research project just initiated by one co-editor (Gill) to develop a model of disability identity formation with a particular emphasis on intersecting minority identities.

The formation of disability identity among different disability groups is a primary interest of this *DSQ* issue's other co-editor (Hertz), who is interested in understanding why and how people with some kinds of disabilities may formulate disability identity more readily than do others. To explain this variation, Hertz suggests two categories of factors, and, interestingly, the reader will see these interwoven throughout the writings in this issue.

One category of factors sheds light on the personal motivation to develop disability identity, while the other bears upon the processes through which disability identity is formed. The motivation to develop disability identity may vary among people with different disabilities in response to a hierarchy of stigmatization and the resulting internalized oppression, a topic central to Killackey and to Priestley, Corker, and Watson. It may also vary in relation to the ease with which people can 'pass' as nondisabled, as discussed by Morrissey, Tepper, and Weeber.

The process of identity formation among some disability groups may be hampered because their impairments complicate social intercourse, as observed by Tepper, and because attempts are not always made to address these complications through reasonable accommodation. Social intercourse and subsequent disability community, or sometimes, according to Hirsch, an 'imagined' community that is induced by isolation and segregation, are generally regarded by these authors and other observers as fundamental to identity development.

An anecdote that contrasts two groups, people who are deaf with people who chronically stutter, may help illuminate the impact of key factors on identity formation. Hertz attended a premiere of a film that follows two fictionalized romantic relationships between hearing and Deaf African-American persons. After the film, there was a question and answer period with the makers of the film who had seated themselves on the stage. This group included the starring deaf actress, who was communicating with great freedom and openness through an interpreter with the hearing people in the audience. A question was asked of the scriptwriter, and the film director explained that the scriptwriter was not one of the group on stage for a reason that would become readily apparent.

At that point the scriptwriter came up from the audience, seated himself on stage, and gave his answer, clearly stuttering. Hertz then, from the audience, self-identified as a person who stutters and offered the comment that people who stutter need to be heard and should have a story to tell as do deaf persons. The scriptwriter replied with the acknowledgment that he does stutter and that he wishes in the future to be more open about his stuttering.

The deaf actress willingly took part in a panel with other film makers about their film on Deafness; however, the screenwriter who stutters was hesitant to participate. Both stuttering and deafness are likely to be very exposed when communicating on a theater stage, but the scriptwriter, even once on stage, acknowledged his own stuttering only after Hertz self-identified.

He did not appear to understand, at least at first, the importance of people who stutter or who have other disabilities participating in the venues and arenas where their impairments will become most apparent. He did not readily make the connection between the attitudinal barriers and discriminatory practices encountered by deaf people and those facing people who stutter.

People who are deaf may have more support for open disclosure than people who stutter. The former are likely to benefit from stronger fellowship among themselves, and, in fact, the actress in the anecdote may derive support, implicit or explicit, from a Deaf arts community. In contrast,

people who stutter are relatively constrained in key factors of identity formation, including fellowship, and historically have been much less positive about stuttering than deaf persons have been about deafness. As a whole, as exemplified by the scriptwriter in the case above, people who stutter still have a long way to go in the development of an affirming identity.

This anecdote provides one example of the complexities in formation and acknowledgment of disability identity and the differential rate of disability identity development across groups. These are matters discussed by the writers throughout this *DSQ* issue.

In honor of the fruitful relationship between disability research and activism that many of us envision - particularly, the power of that complementary relationship to deepen our understanding of the disability experience - we present this collection of personal and scholarly writing on disability identity. We hope it will contribute to the establishment of a useful disability identity literature, stimulate further conceptual and empirical work on this topic, and support continuing efforts by persons with disabilities to document and understand their experience and their place in society.

## References

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