

**DERBYSHIRE COALITION OF DISABLED PEOPLE
DERBYSHIRE CENTRE FOR INTEGRATED LIVING**

CENTRAL TRAINING RESOURCE

**DISABILITY ISSUES RESOURCE NOTES:
"Power, Oppression and Disability"**

Ken Davis, DCDP, February 1993

POWER, OPPRESSION AND DISABILITY

SO HOW ARE DISABLED PEOPLE OPPRESSED?

Most people, when they imagine a particular part of society as oppressed, have a vision of a group of people - usually a minority group - which has no rights, let alone privileges, that is despised and/or hated by those which oppress them, who know that they are equal in all respects except wealth or power to their oppressors, but are just not accepted as such by their oppressors. Looking at it from the point of view of the oppressors, we find that they think that this state of affairs is very reasonable, that this particular group has those qualities which means that it thoroughly deserves to be oppressed, if not eradicated all together.

So how does this fit in with disabled people?

There is an alternative form of oppression, all the more insidious because it is recognised neither by the oppressors, **or the oppressed**. It is not hostile, but based on the perceived inferiority of the oppressed group which is accepted by the majority of people on both sides.

DISABILITY/APARTHEID?

- In South Africa, there are signs saying 'Black entrance' and signs saying 'White entrance'.
- In-Britain, there are signs saying 'Disabled Access'.

- In South Africa, there are signs saying 'Whites only'.
- In Britain, there are buildings with no ramps and no lifts.

- In South Africa, there are buses for whites only, and buses for blacks only.
- In Britain, there is public transport for able bodied people, and special transport for disabled people.

- In South Africa, white children go to all-white schools where they get a good education so that they can go to a good university and get a good job. Black children to schools where they get a suitable education to be maids and do other menial jobs.

- In Britain, able bodied children go to 'normal' schools, and disabled children go to special schools. Able-bodied children go to school to get an education and a job. Disabled children go to school to give them something to do apart from physiotherapy.
- In South Africa, white people live in salubrious houses in -towns and cities. Black people live in shanty towns on the outskirts of towns and cities.
- In Britain, most able-bodied people live where they want to, and usually live how they want to. Disabled people often have to live in residential 'homes' and long stay hospitals.
- In South Africa, the majority of whites despise and fear blacks.
- In ' Britain, most able-bodied people are very sorry for 'The Disabled'.
- In South Africa, 'white people think that black people have everything they need or deserve.
- In Britain, able-bodied people think that disabled people have everything that they need.
- In South Africa, white people think it is a good thing that black people are segregated.
- In Britain, able-bodied people don't know that disabled people are segregated.
- **In South Africa, Black People are demanding their rights.**
- **In Britain, Disabled People are demanding their rights.**

DEPENDENCY VS INDEPENDENCE

The justification for the oppression of disabled people - which is rarely seen as oppression by either side – is the perceived dependence of disabled people on able bodied people.

So let's look at this 'dependence'.

Why are disabled people dependent on able bodied people?

Disabled People often have no jobs, because they can 't do them because of their impairments.

-If work was organised differently, particularly with today's technology, then we would be able to work. Then we wouldn't be dependent on Social Security, or charity handouts.

Disabled People need specialised equipment

Disabled People need other people to do the things they cannot physically carry out for themselves....

Aha - so this is dependency is it?

So what about this sort of dependency... ?

An able bodied women is washing her hands. She is dependent on aids - wash basin, taps, plumbing, reservoirs, water purifying system etc. She is dependent on people - administrators, planners, engineers, plumbers-etc who could all go on strike and cause her water to be cut off. It is

in the nature of human beings to be dependant on other human beings. But we don't call able bodied people dependent because they are dependant on people and things to have a wash, so why should we call disabled people dependent because they need someone else extra to turn the tap on for them? Or how about this ... ?

An astronaut is walking on the moon. He is ABLE to do this but is nonetheless totally dependant on technology and human help. If either of these fail, he is disabled or will even die⁴ But in no way can the fault be put upon the workings of his body.

(Both examples courtesy of Vic Finkelstein – 'Attitudes and Disabled People')

The difference is that the things able bodied people rely on are called 'progress', whereas the things which disabled people rely on are called 'special needs'

But while people are focusing on disabled people's bodies² as the source of all their problems; then they fail to see either the **disabling** or the **enabling** effects of society', and consequently do not recognise their own dependency.

Independency is held out as an ideal, which disabled people fail to live up to supposedly because of their bodies. Whereas able bodied people do (miraculously) live up to it, because of theirs.

And having held it out as an ideal, able-bodied society does its best to prevent disabled people achieving it – segregated living, special education, lack of work etc, involving people in the rigmarole of a 'special' benefits system and charity handouts. And through all these runs the hand of able bodied power and control.

But this ideal is held by able bodied people and by disabled people.

There is contempt involved in this - on both sides.

When disabled people are praised for being independent, what they're really being praised for is not being a nuisance to able-bods.

Independence is about the right to make choices. It does not mean that if we can do something, however difficult, and however time consuming it might be, that we must do it at all costs. By insisting that we can actually do this even if it takes hours of effort, is actually undervaluing ourselves, saying, we aren't worth a few minutes of someone's time to do something for us.

So when someone says in horrified fascination "she can't do a thing for herself", so what? To start off with its a lie, she can think for herself, think that that sort of voyeurism is obscene, decide on how she is going to live her life, on who she is going to live it with etc, and decide on all the minutiae of her day to day existence.

Anyone would think it is the disabled person who is exploiting the able-bod. But how?

Disabled people have shares in society - its our society, too.

Everyone has rights - the right to food, shelter, work, choices - of an acceptable standard.

And if disabled people need extra support to put these rights into action, then they should have it. Full stop. No argument. An 'Animal Farm' - "all animals are equal, but some are more equal than others" - situation is just not acceptable.

Disabled People do not have fewer rights than able-bodied people.

Of course, if the husband or wife or friend or lover of a disabled person has to bear the brunt of all the extra effort involved, then that is exploitation. But it is not exploitation by disabled people; it is exploitation by a society which disables people and then expects their friends to perform a rescue service and - threatens disabled people with incarceration in institutions if they don't.

THE WHEELCHAIR COMMUNITY

Vic Finkelstein wrote a cartoon series for 'Link' to illustrate that it is the environment and other people's attitudes that create disability, and not people's bodies as is popularly supposed.

In this story, disabled people have been banished to their own village. Since everyone uses wheelchairs, the physical environment is designed with this in mind - lower ceilings and door frames, wider aisles in shops etc. All the doctors use wheelchairs and the dentists and the teachers and the factory workers. So do the shop workers and the car mechanics and the butchers and bakers-. Everyone uses wheelchairs until some 'able- bodied' people join the community. These people are always covered with bruises from banging their heads on the low ceilings and even lower door frames. They all have bad backs from being bent double-all-the time. They get very tired because they have to stand up all the time because they don't come complete with their own seats. A whole profession grows around the problem of the able bodied disabled. The 'professionals' design special aids for them - supports to keep them bent over at right angles so as not be bang their heads, free crash helmets etc. Because they are bent over double people can only see the top of their head and cannot communicate with them easily. They look different, so other people think they are very strange and are very embarrassed by them and very sorry for them. So they don't get jobs and become impoverished, which means they become even more segregated from their society - they become disabled. But it is the environment coupled with the attitudes of the wheelchair users, not their bodies, that has made them disabled.

'VERY CROSSROADS' can be purchased on VHS cassette from Central Independent Television PLC, Central House, Broad Street, Birmingham, B1 2JP

POWER OF LIVING

Exploitation?

If a particular group of people are exploited, then another group of people **must** be gaining from this exploitation, either directly or indirectly; financially, or in other perhaps less measurable Ways.

Given the prevailing view of disability as a personal tragedy, it is difficult to see how disabled people can possibly be exploited. Indeed it appears that the opposite is true. Do not (some)able-bodied give up vast amounts of time to help alleviate the plight of disabled people? And do not most able-bodied people contribute to maintaining the lives of disabled people by their taxes, rates and charitable contributions.

How can disabled people be exploited? Since they (supposedly) work at a lower 'rate' than able bodied people, it's difficult to see how their work can be treated as slave labour. Slaves, after all, worked long and hard for nothing more than what it took to keep them alive and able to work. In factories and other work places, those who cannot maintain a particular output tend not to find themselves remaining in employment for very long.

If you work for such and such a time to produce goods which are worth so much money; for this you are paid by the hour and the time that you spend producing, converted into cash is less than the value of the thing produced; if the spare cash is then collected by someone else, then your labour is being exploited by this other person. How does this happen? Usually, the other person is able to do this because they own the equipment the goods are produced on or with, and they own this purely through being in the right place at the right time.

But disabled people often don't have jobs, and if they do, surely they're not exploited more than other workers - less in fact, since disabled people often work in sheltered workshops?

A 'Same Difference' Factsheet shows that Remploy (one of the more infamous strings of sheltered workshops) pays its workers, however skilled, rather less than a Council office cleaner. In addition, it runs a bonus scheme which actively discriminates against people with more severe impairments.

Leaving sheltered workshops aside (if only we could), since disabled people, if employed, are usually among the lowest paid workers, and low paid workers are usually exploited, then disabled people are exploited too. This, however is not the main issue.

Disabled people, as a class can't so easily be exploited through their physical labour. But there is another type of exploitation. This happens when part of whatever it is, is taken, away and used for example, the earth being exploited for coal, diamonds etc.

This is, in effect, what happens to disabled people.

Just as oil is taken from the earth to provide fuel, and make plastics, disabled people have provided the fuel for the careers of millions of able-bods, all concerned with taking care of disabled people. As oil is a commodity owned by the richest people in the world, so are the lives of disabled people 'owned' by doctors and social workers and psychologists and counsellors and people who work in residential homes and physiotherapists, among others.

(The resource notes were illustrated by a collection of job advertisements that all appeared on one edition of 'The Guardian'.

In spite of all the jobs being concerned with disabled people, not one of them suggests that actually being disabled would even improve someone's ability to do the job - much less be an essential requirement for the job.

An entire industry has arisen around the perceived needs of disabled people.

Most of this industry looks at disability as an individual problem and therefore fails to adequately tackle the problems of oppression and discrimination. The only way that these are going to be solved is by disabled people themselves being involved in their own services. Disabled people are still going to need a lot of these people, what is necessary is that they act in a support role, not as 'the one who knows best'.

THE POWER OVER LIFE AND DEATH

Abortion - Oppression even before birth

During January and February 1988, David Alton MP attempted to get a Private Members Bill through parliament, reducing the legal age limit from conception at which someone could be aborted from **28 weeks to 18 weeks**.

Much of the outcry was that if this bill became law, impaired foetuses would not be detected in time and mothers would be forced to bear handicapped babies. (This is the polite term: words like 'monstrously deformed', 'hideously deformed' etc were bandied around).

There was talk among some people of making exceptions should the foetuses prove to be impaired. David Alton himself was quoted as saying that he would be prepared to exempt some conditions such as spina bifida or multiple sclerosis (?) and would regard Down's Syndrome as a borderline case. (Guardian, 29.1.88).

Whatever your personal views on abortion, it is still obvious that statements like these are giving rights to able bodied foetuses that are not being given to potentially disabled babies.

"Mr Alton said he would contemplate the introduction at committee stage of exclusion from the time limit in cases of likely severe handicap. 'Given that 92% of late abortions involve healthy children it would still be a worthwhile Bill' " (Guardian 23.1.88)

So before we are even born, able bodied professionals are exercising power over us. Before we are born it is decided that our lives will be at least unsatisfactory, and probably dismal. Instead of trying to make our lives better once we are here, they try and solve the problem by eliminating us.

And what about those of us who have not been aborted or who have become disabled in later life? Every time it is said that babies who are going to be disabled should be aborted, they are saying that our lives are so miserable that it would be better if we were dead.

And just as a matter of interest, what line do they draw between babies with a slight impairment and babies with severe impairments? Anything less than perfection? How many documentaries have you seen describing new tests to show whether unborn babies have 'handicapping

conditions'? Have you ever seen a documentary where abortion was not assumed to be the obvious, if not the only answer, if these tests showed that the baby **wasn't** going to be able bodied.

Some people really do feel that exceptions should be made for fetuses which have impairments. Others are **using** disabled people as a way of getting what they want. Disabled babies are considered to be a horror that no-one should have to put up with. There are many, many reasons why women might want or need late abortions, but it is socially acceptable to say that it would be best if disabled babies were not born, whereas it is apparently less acceptable to say that women should have total control over their bodies. It's using disability as a threat - 'look what might happen to you if you support this bill! The argument is unacceptable in the first place, and it is extremely offensive to us that disabled people should be used as pawns in the argument between able-bodied people. (Abortion is **not** just an able-bodied concern, but arguments like these are.) First society disables us, then it uses this disability to justify genocide.

Hand in hand with the right to have abortions is the right **not** to have abortions. Yet pressure is frequently put on mothers of disabled fetuses to have abortions, in the same way that Black mothers are 'encouraged' to have abortions. Parents are informed that it's better for the baby that it should not live! And better for the family too. In contrast, disabled mothers are told that it is better for the (presumably) able bodied baby to not live than to have to live with a disabled mother.

So why do people want to abort impaired fetuses? Judy Hunt argues on behalf of UPIAS that people assume their child will be unemployable and dependant. Firstly, these assumptions are mistaken anyway as things stand, and any truth in the assumptions arises from the structuring of society and not from the impairments that people may have.

If a woman decides to abort a disabled foetus, it may be because she genuinely thinks its best for the baby, or because she doesn't want the extra hardship of having to bring up a disabled child. We come full circle. Disability is caused by society not catering for people who have impairments. Because of this, parents of disabled children can't face bringing them up and have abortions or 'let them die', or put them in an institution instead. This leads to a total undervaluing of disabled people, which perpetuates society not catering for disabled people, and so on and so on.

Economic arguments have been used in favour of aborting impaired fetuses.

'A further 400 handicapped babies, possibly more, will be born each year if Mr David Alton's bill to lower the abortion time limit is approved, scientists report. They say most of the children will suffer from spina bifida, and the cost of caring for the survivors will be more than 124 million' (London School of Hygiene quoted in the Guardian, 31.12.87).

This assumes that disabled people are passive spenders of other peoples taxes, and does not consider that there is no real reason why disabled people should not work, earn and contribute in the normal way. Of course, there are far more disabled people unemployed than is at all necessary, but it is society that prevents them from working, **not** having spina bifida.

Furthermore, it is a denial of people's rights to benefits and services, and a denial of people's rights to participate in society, whatever their ability to contribute financially.

If the needs of disabled people and their families were met it would not be long before babies ceased to be, aborted simply because they were going to have impairments. There would be no such thing as disabled people, and no-one would ever talk about handicapped fetuses.

Further information:

Abortion and the Alton Bill. Winvisible
Link Information Sheet production number 8377

Letting babies die

"On June 28, 1980, John Pearson was born with Down's Syndrome in Derby. Dr Leonard Arthur, the senior consultant paediatrician at the hospital, examined the baby in the presence of his parents and noted "parents do not wish it to survive. Nursing care only". He prescribed care and sedation, and the child died 69 hours after he was born, of 'bronchopneumonia due to consequences of Down's Syndrome'. The police were informed by a member of the organisation Life, and on February 2nd 1981 Dr. Arthur was charged with murder. He denied the charge.

(Ann Shearer, 'Everybody 's Ethics --what future for handicapped babies?' CMH)

The charge was later changed to 'attempted murder'. He was acquitted.

Shearer lists a number of pseudo 'reasons' for letting babies die:

(1) 'Its better for the family'

This assumes that families will be torn apart by the stress of bringing up a severely disabled child. Leaving aside the numbers of families that say they have been brought together and grown stronger **because** of their child, we can ask the question 'what causes this stress?'

Is the stress caused by the actuality of the child or is it caused by lack of support and lack of resources? A society which does not cater for the needs of all its members inevitably causes stress on those who have to compensate for this.

Parents of disabled children have the right to expect extra support in bringing up their child: all too often this is lacking.

(2) 'It's better for the child...'

Who says? Couples who decide to 'let their babies die' do so on the advice or suggestion of their doctors, who are only experts on bodies, not on people; and on popular stereotypes of what the lives of disabled people are like. Again, it may be thought that the child would be better dead than living its entire life in an institution. But institutions are what society has for people with impairments; it is not an integral part of having an impairment. It is the same attitude that says the lives of disabled people are not worth living, as the attitude that does its best to ensure that disabled people's lives are not worth living.

(3) 'It's better for society...'

More economic arguments The Journal of the Society of Community Medicine was delighted with the acquittal of Dr Arthur, on economic grounds. It claimed that the cost of keep one 'subnormal' child for its entire life would

"Deprive several hundred adults of procedures to relieve their pain and restore them to useful and productive activity."

Other discussion papers were asking 'how much dependency can a society sustain' (quoted in Shearer). In other words, society cannot afford to keep people who are not economically viable.

There are several things to be said here:

If 'disability professionals' didn't earn so much, it wouldn't cost so much to support people for their entire lives (see previous section). The reason why disabled people have more expenses has got a great deal to do with the way that society and the environment has been structured, and less to do with their impairments. Most disabled people will be able to contribute more, should society be structured to let them. And so on.

The most important argument however is this. Do we live to make money, or make money to live. In the concentration camps, people were allowed to live until they could no longer work and then they were gassed if they hadn't died already. Are we really happy with the idea of a society that is only willing to benefit productive people? Is the view that there is a finite amount of resources for people's needs, and that these resources only go to the one's who most 'deserve' it?

(4) 'They're not really human anyway'

Oh really?

Some people are pro Alton's 18 week bill because they think that as women would discover that their baby had an impairment too late for an abortion, they would be forced to give birth to it (to have their bodies requisitioned?) and society would be forced to consider disabled people, who would then cease to be disabled.

Maybe. On the other hand this may lead to an increase in 'euthanasia' – babies not given the medical treatment they need, sometimes not even fed.

Paradoxically, what may happen is that even more women will have abortions, just on the suspicion that the baby might have an impairment. This will be entirely on the doctor's recommendation, giving them even more power, over life and death.

POWER OVER THE BODY

Medicine

People are always-saying how grateful they are to all the wonderful NHS staff who have done such wonderful things for them. Yes, OK, but hang on a minute. OK, often doctors do perform miracles, but often they don't, and quite often they make things worse.

Doctors are professionals. They have trained long and hard and do not like having their judgements questioned. OK, so none of us do.

But the point is that doctors are only experts on bodies and not on the inhabitants of those bodies. So they often turn us into our bodies – since they are only interested in our impairments, that's what they turn us into!

Furthermore, they only know about the body in general; we know about our bodies specifically. They know how it works (or doesn't), We know how it is.

Most of us might not understand the science behind the treatment of our bodies but we can understand 'if we do this, that's the way your body will be'.

We may not understand the theory behind the risks of a procedure, but we can understand 'if we do this there's a 50% chance of this, or a 3 to one chance of that'.

But the way the system stands (always allowing for exceptions) doctors are the sole judges of the condition of our bodies, and have total control over treatment. Because doctors are trained to put right bits which have gone wrong instead of treating the whole person, they are more likely to assume that an irreparable inability in one area must mean the whole person is helpless.

So they expect that their patients should take a passive and ignorant role towards their 'problem'. and let the doctor cure them. After all, the doctor has the specialist knowledge. This in itself causes dependence. Because they-'know' best, they reduce your belief you can sort your self out, therefore reduce your motivation to do so and then produce someone to sort out your lack of motivation.

We do not dispute the professions medical knowledge.

But we demand the right to consultation, and that our personal knowledge of our own bodies be taken into account.

Sterilisation – 'voluntary' or enforced?

Disability can be inherited. So what?

If a women is advised that her child may inherit her impairment, and therefore she shouldn't have children, she is in effect being told it would be better if she was not born herself.

Yet all too often it is suggested to disabled women that they should be sterilized. See 'Voices from the Shadows', Gwyneth Ferguson Matthews)

To add insult to injury, disabled parents are often threatened with loss of custody.

The case. of Heather and Tony King (both wheelchair users) was published in 'Disability Now'. When Heather was 5 months pregnant, Avon Social Services suggested taking the baby into care because they believed she wouldn't be able to look after it properly.

Sometimes this actually happens - particularly when the parent(s) have learning difficulties.

In July 1987, Mrs Mandy Morgan was told a week before her baby was born that it would be taken into care. The Morgans fought the case and lost.

Young women with learning difficulties are often the subject of court cases where their parents, guardians, and other, not entirely disinterested, able bodied carers want them to be sterilized for 'their own good'.

In March 1987 the case of 'Jeanette' came to court. Jeanette was a 'sexually mature' women of 17, with severe learning difficulties. The judge ruled that she should be sterilized in her own best interests.

All too often, the judges rule in favour of the parents, and these young women find themselves on the receiving end of a fairly major and probably unnecessary operation.

So is sterilization really necessary?

The reasons given are: that other forms of contraception are impracticable; that they may be sexually exploited; that a pregnancy would be too terrible to contemplate. All motives seemingly for the good of the women concerned.

So let's look at these motives closely. It is difficult to see how sterilization makes one iota of difference to sexual exploitation. If this were the case, it wouldn't only be seen as an answer for women with learning difficulties, but for all women. And anyway, since women are sexually exploited by men, why is it women who must always pay the price to end it?

Contraception is impracticable? People with learning difficulties have all kinds of abilities and absolutely should not be lumped together as 'The Mentally Handicapped'. Some women with learning difficulties will be able to learn to use other methods of contraception, and some won't.

The women who can't use other forms of contraception: should they be sterilised? What for? If they have severe learning difficulties, the chances are they aren't going to be left on their own anyway. So why can't someone else remind them? Isn't sterilization for the convenience of the carers, instead of the convenience of women with learning difficulties?

If they're worried about sexual exploitation, why don't they do something to prevent it? Is it really too much trouble to help with contraceptives? Is it rape that they're really concerned with. And if so, are women with learning difficulties more at risk than other women? Surely not. If they are unable to protect themselves, then some-one else should be responsible for protecting them, and it is difficult to see how sterilization could help.

Is it just possible that disabled women are sterilized so they don't produce any more nasty disabled people - in the same way that many black women are pressured into sterilization; and in the same way that the contraceptive pill was first tried on Puerto Rican women; and in the same way that the controversial Depo Provera is still being given to women in third world countries?

All examples published in 'Abortion and the Alton Bill' . Winvisible.