

BORDER CROSSING AND THE CULTURAL/POLITICAL CONTEXT ON BUILDING COMMUNITIES AMONG SCHOLARS IN SOCIOLOGY AND DISABILITY STUDIES

**(Paper Presented at the Hull Conference on Sociology and Disability December 5
1995)**

Susan Peters and Robert Chimedza

INTRODUCTION

The timing for this conference and the theme it embraces are at heart a recognition of an urgent need to develop a sense of community - not only among scholars of Disability Studies, but cross-nationally among diverse cultural groups of disabled people with various political and social reform agendas. This need was expressed through the written products and debate of our previous conference in 1994. At that time, a majority of conference participants either explicitly or implicitly recognized the issues of power, hegemony, and the interconnectedness of research, policy and practice in Disability Studies. Underlying these issues, is the need for a sense of place within the discipline, as well as within society.

Barriers to developing a community exist in a level of distrust for ideologies and points of view that might reveal an innate and culturally in-bred sense of difference among ourselves, and thus threaten to drive us apart. While Susan benefited from the lively debates regarding Disability Studies at the previous conference, she nevertheless came away with a sense that our differences - ideologically, politically and personally - had descended upon us like a fog. As a group, we tend to hold on to our differences as cultural markers, while repudiating those who would separate us as the Other. We argue that we should not be treated differently in economic, political, and social contexts, and yet we advance a political and scholarly agenda based on the values of the right to be different. This tension among culture, identity and difference has led us down a road of separatism and has replaced the hegemony of the dominant culture with the hegemony of disabled people who basically substitute one master narrative for another, suppressing differences with our own hegemonic form of 'liberatory' narratives.

The basic contradictions and tensions involved in this search for identity and place, beg the question, "How can we build a community which is open to contingency, difference and self-reflection, but still allows us to engage in a hegemonic project that reconstructs public attitude towards disability through the politics of solidarity?"

The quest for community comes at a time in our history when borders are breaking down in cultural identities. In the United States, the definitions of "black" and "white" are being forcefully challenged as "politically and social constructed categories" (Giroux, 1994). At a recent conference Susan attended (Society for Disability Studies) - a woman of colour in the audience challenged the speaker to define "black" as the speaker's

subjects of research. She pointed out that most "blacks" in the United States have mixed heritage: Native American Indian, Mexican, West Indian, White.

These borders of race are being crossed as well with class, gender and ethnicity in the popular culture as well as in the academy. Sociology of Disability Studies would do well to take note of these representations in border crossing. Multiple identities are held in common across borders that include disability as well. As a disabled person, Susan is also a scholar, a political activist, a teacher, a single head of household, a mother to a menagerie of animals, a Christian, a sibling within a large family, a wheelchair athlete. At the same time, she defines herself in terms of being a woman, middle-class, and white. As a black Zimbabwean, Robert also defines himself as a scholar, a teacher, a political activist, a father, a husband and a Christian.

Each of our identities takes precedence in time, locale, and in interaction with different individuals. The juggling act involved in managing these diverse identities is awe-ful. We long for a sense of personal identity, while at the same time realise our need for community. What we suggest in this paper is that we are not alone and that the energy we consume in managing these multiple identities constitutes a politics of representation that can be reproduced in economies of scale, cross-nationally and universally.

It seems useful, therefore, to look closely at the Zimbabwean people's struggle for place and identity in a society that has traditionally marginalized disabled people. In our search for identity and place, the example of the Zimbabwean struggle for independence - not only in society at large but for people with disabilities - illuminates the process of community building.

We have chosen the Zimbabwean example specifically as a case that on the surface might seem quite different and not particularly comparable to European and American experiences; e.g. it is a developing country with a majority black population, a history of colonization and oppression not experienced by a majority of democratic nations in recent memory. However, a critical analysis of the Zimbabwean experience, we hope, will begin to uncover some universal relations between identity and difference cross-culturally. From this analysis, we can then propose some external philosophical reflectors useful in building a community of scholars in Disability Studies.

THE ZIMBABWEAN EXPERIENCE

Paradoxically, institutionalization of people with disabilities in Zimbabwe spawned the disability rights movement, just as colonization sowed the seeds of liberation and independence for the country as a whole. The primary means of institutionalization of people with disabilities was through missionary schools. These schools were almost all residential and students were often too far away from home to be able to return more than once or twice a year. Isolated from their families and geographically removed from societal interaction, young people with disabilities formed a support system of their own. They developed strong ties with each other.

One of the strongest felt needs was socialization. Alexander Phiri, the current President of the National Council of Disabled Persons in Zimbabwe (NCDPZ), remembers an incident which was "the last straw" for him at the Jairos Jiri Institution for the Disabled in Nguboyenja. He says, "I remember being clouted hard for talking to a woman at two o'clock in the afternoon". No recreational or entertainment facilities were offered at Nguboyenja. It was through realization of their boredom that a group of the Nguboyenja "inmates" as they called themselves, decided that "enough was enough". They held discussions among themselves and decided to start an entertainment club under the name of Kubatsirana/Ncedanani (which means to help each other) and it would organize excursions to places of interest outside the institution. These excursions provided an opportunity for the members to discuss their fate freely. Collectively, they felt that if given the chance, they could manage their own affairs better than their patrons.

Then, in 1973, on one inspiring occasion, Mr. Jairos Jiri (the 'patron saint' of people with disabilities in Zimbabwe) gave a speech in which he told them that "Amazingly, overseas, far away from here, disabled people are running their own affairs". Despite a limited knowledge of the outside world, the group then drafted a scanty constitution and founded an organization called the Council for the Welfare of the Disabled. The reaction of patrons was predictable. The inmates were viewed as troublesome and ungrateful. Some even "mistook this new organization as a political front for a liberation movement" (Disability Rights Up, 1994).

Despite the opposition from patrons, the organization was registered in 1975 and immediately after took up a country-wide membership drive centered in the urban areas as rural areas were considered inaccessible because of the war situation. Members contributed money from their own pockets. Then in 1982, they had enough money to build headquarters in Bulawayo and were able to build a long awaited club house which offered a social climate ideal for enjoyment. They called it Freedom House, and today it still serves a critical socialization purpose, providing daily meals and a place to congregate informally.

To date, the organization, under the new name of NCDPZ has earned national attention for fighting strongly for disabled people's rights. The inmates of Nguboyenja are today's self-proclaimed revolutionaries: Alexander Phiri, Joshua Malinga, Livion Nyathi, and Albert Sibanda to name a few.

In 1994, NCDPZ held its Second National Congress in which the preeminence of building community first developed in institutions, was still evident in several respects. First, the venue of Victoria Falls was chosen after realizing that most disabled people in Zimbabwe do not have the opportunity to enjoy the holiday resorts in the country. In announcing the Congress, the Executive Director, Ranga Mupindu, observed: "It is therefore hoped that besides serious business that will be taking place there, participants will take time to enjoy their own heritage".

Second, membership drives had by this time expanded to the rural areas and each of the fifty-five districts in Zimbabwe had a branch office of NCDPZ. Delegates to the

conference were democratically chosen at the grass roots level - two from each branch office (one disabled man and one disabled woman) - regardless of population presentation.

Third, social issues retained prominence in the focus and resolutions of the Congress: inheritance laws and abortion issues for women, developing youth projects and clubs, and AIDS education.

Political roles did not, however, take a back seat. Serious discussions of the impact on disabled people of ESAP (Economic Structural Adjustment Program imposed by IMF and the World Bank) and government retrenchment policies received ample attention at the week-long Congress. The President of the country, His Excellency The Honorable Comrade Robert Mugabe, and several cabinet ministers attended and met face-to-face with a sea of delegates who had planned carefully orchestrated personal testimonials to bring home the plight of disabled people. Government officials, faced with personal hardships (selected by the Assembly to represent collective problems) caved in under pressure and a platform of resolutions was officially implemented by government officials on-the-spot. One of the most highly publicized resolutions which was televised nationally involved the decision to include a disabled woman chosen by the delegates, Lizzie Mamvura, to join the Zimbabwean women's national delegation to the International Conference on Population and Development held recently in Cairo.

Enthusiasm and optimism for these successful political efforts reached a high pitch as we celebrated collectively in a culminating social event in which the drama group, Sedalala gave a performance dramatizing the plight and hope of disabled people through the medium of music and dance. President Mugabe was visibly moved, as were the majority of delegates.

This roseate picture of solidarity built on socialization and community however, is not without its problems. Deaf interpreters were insufficient to meet deaf people's needs at the Congress. NCDPZ has come under heavy criticism for not representing all disabled people, most noticeably the deaf. Blind, physically disabled, and developmentally disabled have enjoyed "fair and equitable" treatment in comparison to deaf people in Zimbabwe. Their voices were silent at the Congress for the most part, for a number of historical and political reasons which we discuss next in some depth because of their marginalised status cross-culturally - not only within society, but within the disability community.

The Situation of Deaf People in Zimbabwe

Deaf people grow up in a hearing world within a hearing system dominated by hearing people, including the educational systems (Nowell & Marshall, 1994). First and foremost, deaf people face a language and communication barrier. The controversy about communication methodology, that is, what method of communication to use in school programs for deaf children existed since the first recorded positions on educational approaches for deaf children in Europe around the beginning of the seventeenth century.

The two basic ongoing controversies are often referred to as "oralism" and "manualism". The oral approach argues that since deaf people live in hearing communities they should learn to speak orally and to understand speech through the use of residual hearing and speech reading. Manualism opposes this position by taking the stand that Sign Language as the natural language of deaf people should be used to teach them. Although the education situation of deaf people parallels other disability groups - institutionalization in residential schools - European missionaries brought a tradition of oralism. Since the establishment of the first schools for the deaf in Zimbabwe at Pamushana and Loreto missions in 1947, oralism was the only official method of communication taught until 1990. Today, most of the teachers in schools for the deaf still do not have a command of Sign Language. In addition, English has been the official language of Zimbabwe since the early days of colonization, so that deaf students were taught orally in their "second" language.

As with other disability groups, being housed together did create a climate where deaf people developed bonds of togetherness cemented by using a sign language that they developed naturally out of the need to talk among themselves. New students learnt this Sign Language from their peers. In 1989, a national research committee was established to put together a Zimbabwean Sign Language dictionary drawn from the various Sign Language dialects in the country. However, the research team's work was slowed by inconclusive negotiations with ASSOD (Association of the Deaf) which felt that it is the deaf people's prerogative right to take a lead in such research.

Second, deaf people's coming together as a political community also had its origins in the need for socialization and sense of community. In a personal interview with John Zimondi, current Chair of Working Hands Deaf Cooperative, he related the following story that is representative of most deaf people in Zimbabwe. He has forced to discontinue schooling at Grade 7 level. During colonial Rhodesia there was no secondary education for the deaf in Zimbabwe. He was sent home to the rural areas to look after and herd the family's cattle. Discontented, he returned to Harare and found work in a bakery for two years. During that time, he sought out other deaf people and they formed a Sports Club. They found land in Highfield, a high density area outside Harare, and a coach to teach them football. Again, this provided opportunities to discuss their plight and with logistical assistance from the National Council for the Hard of Hearing they formed an organization, ASSOD. They attempted to manage their own affairs and approached Emerald Hill School for the Deaf for assistance to use it as ASSOD's operating base but were turned down.

They meanwhile, began organizing at the grass roots level, meeting in homes to discuss issues and strategies. However, they never were able to coordinate their efforts as NCDPZ was able to do but they have done a lot of considering that ASSOD is a young organization (founded in 1987). Unfortunately many deaf people left ASSOD discontented by the leadership style. Some of them formed a cooperative, Working Hands Deaf Cooperative which is an informal industry that makes things for sale such as art paintings, window frames, door frames, irrigation pipes, clothes, etc. Not only is WADC a financial resource for these unemployed deaf young people, it also gives them a

platform to meet as a subculture, to socialize and to fight for their rights. The split in the deaf community though, has overtones and implications negative to the strength of the deaf people in Zimbabwe as a political force. In addition, it makes their negotiating position with the government and other organizations rather weak.

However, through conscientization in these organizations most deaf people no longer see their hearing loss as a handicap. They see it as a characteristic that makes them different from the mainstream society in many ways. They see themselves as a subculture and they wish to be understood in that context. We argue that many people (including scholars in Sociology and Disability Studies) are oblivious of this fact and that the problems inherent with deaf people are not limited to language and communication only but to the whole fact that deaf people have their own culture different to the mainstream culture. Organizations such as ASSOD do not only need political empowerment to fight for their place and rights in society, they also need strategies to conscientize members of the mainstream society so that they understand their view point. We believe the positions of disability movements in similar situations will be enhanced if there is research evidence to support their arguments. The role of a community of scholars on Sociology and Disability therefore becomes eminent.

CONCLUSION/IMPLICATIONS

In two decades (approximately 1973 to 1994), disabled people in Zimbabwe have gone from institutionalization as the dominant form and structure of community, to national recognition as leaders in disability rights. The inmates of Nguboyenja now hold leadership positions in Disabled Person's International and South African Federation of the Disabled. They began in a position of powerlessness and complete dependence on patrons, advancing to a self-managed political organization in an amazingly short period of time. The combined efforts of disability groups led directly to passage of the national Disability Rights Act by parliament in 1992, and in some respects, this Act surpasses that of its American counterpart, the Americans with Disabilities Act. The process by which they were able to accomplish so much in a relatively short time span would make a fascinating qualitative study. Without benefit of such a study, we believe that we can still make sense of the Zimbabwean accomplishments through the philosophical reflectors of border crossing and conscientization.

Border Crossing

Border crossing in the Zimbabwean context has focused on the ability to combine the social and political aspects of disability identity to the advantage of both. The movement began with individual's self-awareness of their social identities within Zimbabwean culture. As the movement gained momentum, their politics of representation exemplified the dictum: the personal is political. This notion carries the belief that public policies can be crafted from private experience. Buoyed by a sense of community, gender and youth issues became a central focus of the political agenda, further expanding the public policy while grounding this policy individual need for personal identity.

Border crossing requires an awareness of self, developed through conscientization in community. This conscientization is similar to what one strives for at the political level: a combination of self-reflection and action. This combination is what Ranga Mupindu refers to when he states that members of Parliament must not only enact the Disability Rights Act, but know at a deep level of consciousness why the act is necessary.

Conscientization

In 'The Politics of Disability Identity' (Peters, 1994), conscientization was defined as:

the process of making values and experience that are most often repressed or hidden, conscious and visible to oneself and others. It has to do with courageously uncovering the pain, making it articulate, reckoning with it, and entering it into the public/private discourse. It is an uncomfortable demanding process, requiring both thought and action (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1994: 70).

Feminist writers further suggest that in order to discover one's own identity, it has to become visible to itself. The first step is to learn to connect and to trust one another. Places like Freedom House and events that use music and dance to dramatize the plight of disabled people provide the venue in which people can make these connections.

In the realms of research, policy and practice, these two reflectors are not new. However, when applied to the project of developing a community of scholars in Disability Studies, several possibilities for new directions emerge.

First, border crossing is not only an event, as in changing roles and managing multiple identities, it is a 'habitus', or social system of cognitive and motivating structures that operate within 'systems of durable transposable dispositions that biological individuals carry with them at all times and in all places' (Bourdieu, 1977: 82). This notion of habitus goes beyond the traditional sociological view of social roles as being assigned to people by members of a group. It provides a place for free-choice and self-determination (the building blocks of conscientization) within social structures and agencies. These two reflectors transform the notion of 'building a community' to one of 'finding a sense of place within a community'. The implications for finding this sense of place among scholars of Disability Studies might be posed as a series of questions to researchers as follows.

1. *Who are the disabled? Have I (as researcher) represented their voices in my study?* This question involves border crossing in terms of identities. With a few notable exceptions, several identities/voices tend to be overlooked in sociological discourse. These include persons with cognitive impairments, deaf individuals, disabled people from minority groups, and women with disabilities. A community should be inclusive of all groups.

2. *How does my own sense of place/identity within the disability community influence my theory, conceptual framework, or methodology employed in my research?* Researchers in Disability Studies need to be explicit about their own sense of place within the research with which they are engaged. Feminists have criticized sociologists in this respect, calling for an engagement that requires putting yourself inside as knower and discoverer of new relations in the social systems under study. Sociology has been antagonistic to recognizing feeling and emotion as part of the concerns of the discipline. The act of self-criticism and self conscientization places the researcher within a habitus of self-engagement leading toward reflection and action.

3. *Does my research/theory take into account social and political aspects of Disability Studies?* Is it grounded in the personal as political? Personal experience provides the telescope for scrutinizing theory and holding it accountable to individual difference. It allows shifting of borders that have created barriers to community through institutions encrusted with decay over decades of oppression.

4. *Is my language/research accessible? Who is my audience?* To develop a sense of community, more attention is needed to addressing the disability audience for whom we ultimately write and try to impact. If the deaf community has taught us nothing else, it is the importance of language. Linguistic borders of our own construction have prevented communication among our own disability groups.

5. Is conflict (e.g. of ideas and of public policy development) used in a positive way to open ourselves to contingencies? Does conflict make room for differences? As one participant in last year's conference said (paraphrased): 'You Americans always need to reach consensus'. Consensus and conflict are binary opposites which both result in stifling individual difference. There ought to be some 'common ground' from which we can find a sense of place. Every theory, when taken to its extreme will not 'work' in all cases. A community, as well as a theory, requires compromise and flexibility.

In summary, border crossing and conscientization are external philosophical reflectors useful in building a community of scholars and disability groups. Specifically, the above questions are tools for reflection about ways to approach research through the two concepts of border crossing and conscientization. In action terms, these two reflectors demand that we attend to at least two factors when we build a community of researchers. First, we ought to maintain strong, direct ties to the field, or those who are objects of our research. Second we need to mentor those who are our objects of research, so that they themselves become researchers in their own right. In doing these two things, we expand the traditional borders of community, as well as the notion of community. We find a sense of place that is at once personal/cultural and allows us to engage in a hegemonic project to reconstruct public attitudes towards disability through the politics of solidarity.

REFERENCES

Bourdieu, P (1977) *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, Great Britain: Cambridge University Press

Disability Rights Up (1994) "The Humble Beginnings of NCPDZ" Vol. 1, No. 1: page 2.

Giroux, H. (1994) "Living Dangerously: Identity Politics and the New Cultural Racism", in *Between Borders: Pedagogy and the Politics of Cultural Studies*. H. Giroux and P. McLaren (eds). New York and London: Routledge.

Lawrence-Lightfoot, S. (1994) *I've Known Rivers: Lives of Loss and Liberation*, New York: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company.

Mudimbe, V. Y. (1988) *The Invention of Africa: Gnosis, Philosophy and the Order of Knowledge*. Bloomington, Ind. and London: Indiana University Press.

Nowell, R. C. and L. E. Marshall (1994) *Understanding Deafness and the Rehabilitation Process*. Boston: Allyn and Bacon.

Peters, S. (1995) "The Politics of Disability Identity" in *Disability and Society: Emerging Issues and Insights*. L. Barton (ed.). London: Longmans.

Zimondi, J. (1994) Personal Interview. Harare, December, 1994.