Cross-Cultural Comparison of the Concept of “Otherness” and Its Impact on Persons with Disabilities

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Abstract: Throughout the world there has been concern that persons with disabilities are being perceived as “other” than us and that differences imparted by disability result in more dissimilarity than actually exists. A summary of this concept of “otherness” and disability in the United States, Eastern Europe, and India is presented.

“Does anyone know what ‘normal’ is?” Smart (2001) begins her discussion on disability with this pivotal question. The question reflects the perception that persons with disabilities are “different” from the rest of us (Bogdan & Knoll, 1995). Normality and who is normal have been defined in different ways according to the time and culture in which the question was asked. As Smart says:

Disability has been present in all societies in the world throughout history. In spite of the long history and the universality of disability, almost without exception, people with disabilities have been discriminated against; with that discrimination ranging from minor embarrassment and inconvenience to relegation to a life of limited experience and reduced social opportunity and civil rights. (p. 72)

According to the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights (1983) individuals in American society may possibly harbor prejudice against people with disabilities. This prejudice may result in responses that discriminate against individuals with disabilities or those whose behaviors differ from the societal norm. This may occur even though the individual does not consciously recognize that he or she harbors a prejudice against those who are different, that is, “other” than us. Numerous studies reveal, “...society, instead of accommodating, frequently misconstrues, overreacts to, or ignores differences in individual mental and physical abilities” (U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, p. 17). This unconscious prejudice against persons with disabilities can result in segregation, isolation, persecution, and the consideration of the individual with a disability as a “social outcast,” that is, the “other” (Clapton & Fitzgerald, 2003). Blatt (1987) provides us with a definition of the “other” as:

People who look too different, or behave too differently, or who see the world too differently, or whose visions about life itself are not easily appreciated... (p. 305)

This perception of “otherness” has led to the belief that the differences imparted by the individual’s disability contribute more dissimilarity than actually exists (Bogdan & Knoll, 1995; U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, 1983). This view has been identified as disability spread which is a “societal tendency to generalize and make broad inferences about the nature of disability” (Van der Klift & Kunc, 1994, p. 1). According to Fulcher (1989), this perception can be seen in media presentations that provide us with a graphic portrayal of societal beliefs:

Disability is not about wheelchairs, though judging from what the media present and from the covers of books about disability, this would appear to be the predominant image. Nor is it to be understood as primarily a medical phenomenon: such a perception reflects the authority and influence of the medical professional and the extent to
which its ideas penetrate and inform everyday and professional discourses on disability. Rather, disability is a category that is central to how welfare states regulate an increasing proportion of their citizens. In this sense and context, it is a political and social construct used to regulate. (Fulcher, 1989, p. 210)

Fulcher (1989) discusses the concept of disability and beliefs attached to it as it pertains to development of public policy. According to her, the complexity of the concept of disability does not come from its physical or mental manifestations but from “. . . social and political use to which the construct of disability is put, independent of the presence, or intricacies, of an impairment” (Fulcher, p. 25). Thus the concept of disability and how society will respond to it depends on the beliefs and perceptions of each country, that is, society. Comparing attitudes in different countries is difficult because the terminology used in defining “disability,” “handicap,” and “normal” are only starting points for the understanding of the concept of disability. These terms may also vary depending on the value given to individuals with disabilities by their society. According to Smart (2001), “perceptions of disability labels, expectations of people with disabilities, and ascribed meanings of the experience of disability are all shaped by the broader culture” (p. 71). In this discussion we will briefly touch on three areas of the world and their societal responses to, and therefore perceptions of, disability.

Otherness in United States

The United States is a very diverse and pluralistic society that greatly benefits from this cultural mix. In fact you might say it is one of the best-known, and possibly defining, characteristics of the country (Gargiulo, 2003). Although it is seen as one of its greatest strengths, it also may be one of its greatest weaknesses. Perhaps nowhere else is this diversity more noticeable than in our schools.

Inclusion of students who are culturally and linguistically diverse has presented challenges for educators, particularly in the United States (Smith, 1998). When one also includes those students who have a disability, these challenges are compounded. In fact one of the leading concerns is how to meet needs of this fast growing population, especially that of “students experiencing ‘double jeopardy’—that is, linguistic differences and disability” (Gargiulo, 2003, p. 88).

In the United States, a legal and philosophical movement known presently as inclusion has progressed over the past 30 years from isolated instances of educational inclusion to a more inclusive view with the goal being “true” societal membership and individual empowerment of individuals with disabilities (Salend, 2001). Based on the underlying philosophy of the United States that every person should have opportunity for an education regardless of his/her gender, race, disability (see Brown v. Board of Education, 1954), parents and advocates of persons with disabilities began to push for legislation that would support integration of their children with disabilities into the mainstream of society. These individuals believe that the only way one can change perceptions and beliefs is through early and continued contact in the “normal” activities of life. Through consistent activism, a landmark piece of federal legislation was enacted in 1975. This legislation, known as Public Law 94-142, the Education for All Handicapped Children’s Act (now known as IDEA, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act) provided a nationwide mandate that all children with disabilities, regardless of the type or severity, were to be educated with their nondisabled peers whenever possible. This mandate was known as mainstreaming in society and as placement in the least restrictive environment within the legal community.

Within the past two decades, the focus on mainstreaming has expanded to a new philosophical position known as inclusion (Friend & Bursuck, 1999). Inclusion is a belief that students with disabilities are more alike than different from their peers, and that for them to be successful, educational opportunities should begin and continue to occur as much as possible in the neighborhood school within the classroom with their age-peers (Mastropieri & Scruggs, 2000). This change in philosophy continues to evolve and has resulted in societal and legal controversy. According to Ballard (1999) this continuing controversy has been clearly described by Skrtic in 1995:
Most schools cope with diversity by eliminating it, moving the disabled and other problematic minorities into ‘special’ settings or allowing them to be lost through failure, truancy and expulsion. This is because the school is designed to achieve particular goals in highly determined ways from a chosen range of students. In contrast, schools that value diversity emphasize the need to include all students in the culturally valued activities and goals of education. They organize to achieve this through collaborative problem solving, using the uncertainty of diverse demands as a challenge that engenders creativity and flexibility. (p. 169)

Even with reform movements of recent years, the view of Americans with disabilities as “different” or “other” from Americans without disabilities persists (Rowitz, 1988). In fact, some believe that even with the addition of federal aid, and with the enactment of federal legislation that this perception of otherness is continuing (Hahn, 1987; Rossides, 1990; Smart, 2001).

Otherness in Eastern Europe

In order to understand social implications of identifying another human being as the “other,” we must first distinguish several ways in which the “other” has been defined, not by him or herself, but by the surrounding society (Aserlind & Browning, 1987; Bogdan & Knoll, 1995). “Otherness” may be identified as possession of unfamiliar and/or inexplicable characteristics. Societies historically have varied in the degree to which they have expected conformity in their members, and in the degree to which “otherness,” if it is defined as difference from the perceived norm, might be cause for condemnation or ostracism. At the same time, differences, even if unexplained, have not always been seen as something bad. Specifically, certain forms of exceptionality, such as epilepsy, while recognized as “different,” have been perceived as Divinely induced, and have granted the person with the exceptionality a special status within a community (Bickenbach, 1993). In Russia before the revolution of 1917, in some rural districts, various types of mental illness were understood to be a connection with God, and persons suffering from these conditions were regarded with respect and even awe. Yet even in these cases, the reaction of the community, while exhibiting acceptance, did not strive towards understanding. The “other” remained defined by the norms and the language of the larger society, a pattern persisting into the Soviet era (Sukhomlinsky, 1977).

However, such instances have been exceptions to a more general rule that “otherness” implies something to be feared and shunned. This attitude has been found in many settings throughout Europe and those parts of the world under the cultural dominance of Europe. We note that the fear of “otherness” is not restricted to human beings: when the first hot air balloons sailed out over the French countryside in the 1780s, these brightly colored machines were viewed with terror by peasants, who rushed forward to destroy them as soon as they touched ground. To be different was to pose a threat to the community. Peasant societies, confronted with the occasional child born with conspicuous physical deformities, might choose to abandon the child. Social scientists may debate whether such a reaction to the unknown, the inexplicable and the unnamable is genetically influenced or is primarily a learned response, but the practical consequence of this reaction is frequently hostility towards anything and anyone that may be unfamiliar (Eisenberg, 1982; Smart, 2001).

“Otherness” as a category, while it includes a notion of difference, extends beyond unfamiliarity. “Otherness” may also include characteristics that are familiar but which are rejected because of the onus placed on the society or the societal unit in which the “other” appears (Smart, 2001). In the decades following the Second World War, socialist regimes were installed in many of the war-torn countries of eastern and central Europe. Drawing upon Marxist social and historical theory, and positing the goal of a perfectable society that addressed all the needs of the people, the governments of these countries set out to create educational and social institutions that would speed the arrival of the ideal culture (Gallagher, 2001). Financial resources of these countries ranged from slender to minimal, and the practical application of the ideology put forward by the governments soon meant that such resources as were available were expended on individuals whose
performance would reflect well on the govern-
ments themselves (Friedlander, 1995; Gal-
lagher, 1995). While in a few cases such indi-
viduals would fall within the categories that
today we might call “exceptional,” most indi-
viduals with exceptionalities were not benefi-
ciaries of a program that sought to advertise
the successes of the new social order. On the
contrary, often such persons were viewed as an
embarrassment to governmental and educa-
tional agencies, as they seemed to be evidence
that these agencies had “failed” in the mission
of producing a perfect society. Persons with
mental disorders, low intelligence (as identi-
fied by standardized tests), physical exception-
alities, and other conditions were hidden away
from the general public and not discussed.
Sometimes their very existence was denied. In
the generally much freer political climate that
has followed the fall of the Berlin Wall in
1989, these countries have struggled to re-
dress these injustices, but have sometimes
been hampered, not merely by a scarcity of
resources, but by the cumulative impact of
attitudes created during the long decades
when the existence of the “other” was associ-
ated with shame and denial (Holzbauer &
Berven, 1996; Whitney, 1993).

In fairness to the countries mentioned
above, many of the same problems continue
to plague the United States. We call attention
to the case of the former Warsaw Pact nations
because in this instance the “other” was not
imbued with any mysterious or unnamable
condition as with the case of the person with
epilepsy who was credited with some miracu-
lous connection to the supernatural. Often
persons in Eastern Europe were hidden away
in institutions precisely because their “condi-
tion” was believed to be so familiar, so easily
labeled, and yet “incurable.”
The “other,” therefore, may be other be-
because we believe we cannot know her, or be-
cause we are certain that we understand
who—or what—she is all too well. And she is
always “other” if we deny her the right to
choose her own name.

Otherness in India

The notion of “otherness” in India mirrors, in
some ways, the image that is prevalent in the
U.S. and Eastern Europe. The implication
of unfamiliarity with, and difference or distance
from, the “other” is often just as evident in
India, both historically and presently, as they
are in Western cultures. However, reactions
against the “other” who is disabled appear to
be more extreme in the Western world, than
they are in India, where attitudes toward those
who are disabled have ranged from reverence
to embarrassment to a fatalistic acceptance
of the disability, either because children with dis-
abilities were viewed as a divine gift to parents
who had been entrusted with their care or
because they were viewed as divine retribution
for parental wrong-doing. In any event, the
responsibility of caring for children with dis-
abilities fell to family members who lacked
physical and emotional resources necessary
for the task. There are numerous anecdotal
accounts of Indian adults who report playing
with neighborhood children in the 50’s, only
to find out, years later, that their playmates
had a sibling who had a disability who had
been hidden away and never mentioned be-
cause of the shame it would have brought to
the family.

The concept of the “other” in India may be
complicated by prevailing cultural influences
that shape a) the development of the self in
relation to the other, as well as b) the inter-
pretation of the self in relation to the other in
individualistic as opposed to collectivistic soci-
eties. From a child development perspective,
learning about and being able to identify the
“other” is an important prerequisite for matur-
ity and the foundation for subsequent learn-
ing. From this point of view, the “other” is not
necessarily a hostile or unfamiliar figure, sim-
ply one that is not the self or is different from
the self. Identification of the “other” normally
occurs within the first few months of life so
that the very first “other” in a child’s life is her
primary caregiver, the one person who repre-
sents warmth, trust, and needs fulfilled. This
image of the “other” stands in marked con-
trast to that in Western societies where the
“other” has come to be viewed in a negative
manner, particularly when it is associated with
disabilities. In a country like India, where an
individual’s sense of self is so connected with
family and where one’s well-being and reputa-
tion depend on the degree of closeness to
family members, survival of the self suggests
that the “other” must be kept close, not at a
distance.

A second perspective on “otherness” in In-
dia has to do with social interactions that occur between the self and others in individualistic as opposed to collectivistic societies. If disability is perceived as a socially and culturally constructed category (e.g., Banks & Banks, 2001) and researchers (e.g., Kalyanpur & Harry, 1999) have claimed that the social organization of a society has a significant impact on its response to disability, then it is clear that there must be cross-cultural differences with regard to societal perceptions of, and responses to, disability. Individualistic cultures like the U.S. tend to focus on needs and goals of the individual as being paramount, rely on the self to make meaning of life, and see autonomous functioning as positive. In collectivistic cultures, like those found in India and China, however, needs and goals of the individual are secondary to those of the group, the self is viewed in relation to others, and behavior that acknowledges and supports goals of the collective is seen as positive. Collectivistic societies, therefore, emphasize a movement toward, and interdependence with the “other” unlike individualistic cultures that emphasize a movement away from, and an independence from, the “other.” Examined from this perspective, “otherness” may actually have more positive connotations in collectivistic cultures, such as India and China, and more negative ones in individualistic cultures such as the U.S. and Eastern Europe. The concept of “otherness” in India as it relates to individuals with disabilities can best be understood within a cultural and sociopolitical context. While prevalence estimates of individuals with disabilities in India vary from a conservative 70 million to a high of 110 million (Misra, 2000), special education in India, unlike the U.S. and Eastern Europe, is still very much in its infancy. Indeed, legislation and services for children with special needs lag far behind those of the Western world. This may be due, in part, to prevailing attitudes toward disability that are compounded by problems of extreme poverty, firmly entrenched social inequalities, and a paucity of training facilities and resources. For example, India established the Universal Education for All policy in 1947 to provide a free and compulsory education to all children between the ages of 6 and 14 years of age but did not address the needs of those who were disabled. It was only as recently as 1992 that India enacted the Rehabilitation Council of India Act, designed to legislate minimum standards of education for professionals who worked with individuals with special needs. The Persons with Disabilities (Equal Opportunities, Protection of Rights and Full Participation) Act of 1995 was the first comprehensive piece of legislation aimed at children with disabilities and mandated that all children with special needs under the age of 18 receive a free education, and that government and local agencies were to be held accountable for providing environments and services that facilitated the development of children with disabilities. It is significant, however, that this law was introduced twenty years after its American counterpart, P.L. 94-142. A third piece of legislation, in 1999, the National Trust for Welfare of Persons with Autism, Cerebral Palsy, Mental Retardation and Multiple Disabilities Act, ensured, for the first time in the country’s history, education and welfare of persons with these conditions. If we accept Kalyanpur and Harry’s (1999) contention that the IDEA in the U.S. is a cultural statement and that it clearly embodies American cultural values such as individual rights and choice, then it becomes easier to understand why similar legislation for persons with disabilities in India did not emerge sooner than it did.

Historically, care of individuals with disabilities in India has been left to families and most services for this population have been provided through private, charitable, or non-governmental organizations. Presently, however, special education in India is the province of the Ministry of Welfare, with assistance from the Department of Health, Labor and Employment. Although most special education today, especially for children with mental, emotional, and social impairments, still takes place in segregated settings where they are sheltered and protected rather than shunned, there are a growing number of children, primarily with physical impairments, who are integrated into regular schools (Vakil, Welton, & Khanna, 2002).

Despite recent, but relatively scarce, efforts on behalf of individuals with disabilities, there is an atmosphere of renewal and optimism in India. For example, in a move that was significant both for its sheer ambition and potential impact, the 2001 census, for the first time in Indian history, addressed disability as a cate-
gory, with proponents of this change successfully arguing that services to individuals with disabilities could only be improved once it was determined exactly how widespread the problem was. There is growing evidence that the “otherness” of individuals with disabilities in India is slowly being replaced by a “oneness” with those without disabilities. For example, in November of 2003, India will host the 6th International Abilympics, a series of competitions in vocational skills for persons with disabilities that is sponsored by professionals whose watchword is a focus on ability rather than disability, that is, on similarity to the norm instead of a difference from it. Disability India Journal regularly publishes articles that relate to children and adults with disabilities and is even beginning to include information on inclusion in societal and educational settings. The Disability India Network is a new online resource for professionals and families who work with individuals with disabilities and who would benefit from the support of others engaged in similar efforts. If the energy that has marked recent events can sustain itself, it is believed that advocacy, funding, and services for individuals with disabilities in India will continue to flourish. This in turn, will result in concomitant improvements in attitudes toward individuals with disabilities. It is only when their “otherness” is minimized and when their similarity to, rather than their difference from, the rest of us is emphasized that individuals with disabilities will be able to lead productive and fulfilled lives.

Summary

In the United States, Eastern Europe, and India there is ongoing concern that persons with disabilities continue to be characterized as “different” from the rest of society. This concern of “differentness” or “otherness” relates to the fact this perception may result in persons with disabilities being seen as aberrant or deviant and may lead to disenfranchisement, harassment, and violence (Smart, 2001).

In the U.S. and Eastern Europe, historically as well as today, societal perceptions of persons with disabilities are that individuals with disabilities are dependent and in need of protection, even in adulthood. This perception runs counter to societal values of individualism and independence dominant in this part of the world. However, in recent times philosophical changes and subsequent legislation have led to a shift toward independence “as people with disability have sought a political voice, and become politically active against social forces of disablism” (Clapton & Fitzgerald, 2003).

In India, this perception of dependence is impacted by the prevailing collectivistic view of society. India and other collectivistic societies emphasize a movement toward, and interdependence with, the “other.” But in India because of many problems including social inequalities and lack of fiscal resources, legislation and services for individuals with disabilities are far behind those in the United States. Because of the current lack of services, India too continues to perceive individuals with disabilities as the basic attributes of “otherness.”

In much of the world, this designation of “otherness” as applied to persons with disabilities may be based on cultural and linguistic factors deriving from the segregation of individuals with disability from the rest of the population. As a result lives are put at risk as we do not know “them” and the resultant belief is that they are very different from us. Our feelings of pity, fear, and anxiety may lead us to feelings of disregard and anxiety toward those who are “other.” We see “them” as a group and give to the group traits that support the assumption that the person with disabilities does not have the same needs, concerns, wants, and desires as the rest of us. This overgeneralization of disability to all aspects of the person has been described as a negative halo effect (Livneh, 1982). In essence, this effect represents a “widespread discounting and underrating of all of the abilities of the individual with the disability” (Smart, 2001, p. 90). The result is we no longer see the individual as a person like us, but as a label or a category of “otherness.” The result may be a rationalization and justification of our conscious and unconscious prejudicial actions and beliefs that support the perception of “otherness.”

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