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Some things never seem to change: further towards an affirmation model

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ABSTRACT

In this article I consider the regurgitation of sadcrip/supercrip stereotypes in current television charity advertisements. I suggest that, as part of a discourse identifying impairment as tragedy, these have an insidious impact not just on the way wider society regards disabled people, but on the way disabled people are able to regard themselves. I discuss the affirmation model, an idea grounded in the notion of Disability Pride and in disabled people's own voices, proposed by Swain and French in a *Disability and Society* article in 2000. Reflecting on my own work on this idea, I propose a new and hopefully more accessible affirmation model definition of disability.

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I've seen some troubling television adverts recently. There seems a resurgence of disability charity ads the sort I thought we'd seen the back of some years ago when, for a while, the disabled people's movement had shamed the charities into at least using the language of the social model, if not applying it (Oliver and Barnes 2006).

There's the advert for a brand of oven chips, narrated by a popular northern TV comedian, pledging its support for a charity providing help 'to families raising disabled or seriously ill children during the exceptionally challenging current economic climate' (www.familyfund.org.uk, 2023):

The heart-warming campaign is centred around two young beneficiaries of Family Fund support... as they sit down to enjoy their family mealtime using products that they received through McCain and Family Fund partnership (www.familyfund.org.uk, 2023).

There's the Guide Dogs advert, depicting the devastating impact of an attractive young blind woman's sight loss (twice the tragedy, of course, because she's attractive [Morris 1991]) and the marvellous difference to her

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life that has been made by her assistance dog - made possible, of course, only through the generous donations of charitable givers. There's the advert for a national bank in which a Paralympian athlete, presumably, is depicted bravely conquering adversity by running quickly. And there's the advert for the Royal National Institute for Blind People (RNIB), encouraging us to *see the person, not the sight loss*, as if it is a kindness to disabled people to overlook their impairments to see the 'real' person trapped inside their lamentable, afflicted bodies.

There is the RNIB Lottery:

WIN up to £25,000 and feel good about supporting blind and partially sighted people... Paying multiple lines increases your chance to win and has a greater impact for good (RNIB, 2023).

The People's Postcode Lottery has charities and good causes 'at its heart', giving 33% of each ticket purchase to 'deserving causes' (People's Postcode Lottery 2023). The People's Postcode Lottery website homepage shows a photograph of a little boy with Down's Syndrome sitting on a pony, wearing a Riding for the Disabled Association sweatshirt. Not only do investors in these lottery tickets know they're giving themselves the chance of winning a life-changing sum of cash, they also have the satisfaction of knowing they're really doing something to help 'the poor disabled'.

What we see in these charity adverts is the regurgitation of two pernicious stereotypes, the *sadcrip* and the *supercrip*. These were recurrent images in the pages of nineteenth Century fiction and have been with us ever since (Cameron 2014a). In *A Christmas Carol* (1843/2003, 43), Dickens' Tiny Tim, for example, pulls on readers' heartstrings in a sentimental portrayal of vulnerability and personal tragedy:

Alas for Tiny Tim, he bore a little crutch, and had his limbs supported by an iron frame.

Klara, the 'invalid-chair condemned' friend of Spyri's character *Heidi* (1872/1899:325) is thrilled when, with courage and help, she managed to take faltering steps:

Klara did so, and then again and again, and suddenly she cried out 'I can, Heidi! Oh, I can! See! See! I can take steps, one after another'.

Then Heidi shouted still louder.

Oh, oh! Can you really step yourself? Can you walk now? Can you really walk yourself?... (Now) you can go about as I do all the rest of your life, and never be pushed in a chair, and be well. Oh, this is the greatest joy we could have!

Riley asserts that the '*sadcrip*' and the '*supercrip*' are two sides of the same coin (Riley 2005, 4). While the narratives of pathetic victim and plucky

struggler appear superficially to be doing different things, they are part of a single discourse identifying impairment as tragedy, a discourse that charities, as money-making businesses, have bought into big time. Tiny Tim and Klara vividly convey the messages that disability is something to be pitied, struggled with and overcome; that emulating the normal as closely as possible is the only route to happiness for disabled people. A disciplinary narrative about the undesirability of abnormality, and the importance of individual constraint and conformity in bodily comportment and behaviour, is evident. Contemporary 'heart-warming' charity images regurgitate the same narrative, representing disability as a problem to do with individual bodies, requiring charitable care rather than structural change. They increase the unlikelihood of anybody considering disability as a positive basis for identity.

The social model identifies disability as a form of social oppression (UPIAS, 1976). This is well understood, particularly within disability studies, and has formed the basis of a sustained critique of the ways, since the emergence of the modern industrial state, society has constructed and institutionalised barriers preventing the participation of people with impairments as equals in ordinary community life (Oliver and Barnes 2012).

The affirmation model, building on the social model, is less well known. This was first proposed by Swain and French in a 2000 *Disability and Society* article entitled 'Towards an Affirmation Model of Disability'. The authors proposed a new model drawing on the spirit of the disability arts movement and the notion of Disability Pride.

The proposal of an affirmation model involved an attempt to address critiques of the social model, by disabled feminists in particular, who had argued that in its development of a structural analysis of disability, the social model had left little room for exploration of the personal experience of impairment. Swain and French set out a position from which it could be asserted that, far from being necessarily tragic, living with impairment can be experienced as valuable, interesting and intrinsically satisfying. This was not to deny there can be negative experiences resulting from impairment, but to make the point that this is not all that impairment is about. They suggested that the need for an affirmation model is established in that it is not a purpose of the social model to reject a tragic view of impairment. Even in an ideal world of full civil rights and participative citizenship for disabled people, they argued, an impairment could be seen to be a personal tragedy (Swain and French 2000, 571). The ensuing years have validated their point. While many barriers have been removed in the last 23 years, and disabled people are more frequently able to access some public spaces, tragedy narratives still circulate widely.

While Swain and French said a lot about what the affirmation model is *like* and *about*, they stopped short of giving it a clear definition, comparable to medical and social model definitions established by WHO and by UPIAS (Cameron 2014a). I remember feeling disappointed about this, because

definitions give clarity. Disability is individual limitation arising from impairment, in a medical model view; or it is a form of oppression imposed on people with impairments, in a social model view. The affirmation model seemed an excellent way of expressing something badly needing saying, but was not succinct. With Swain and French's agreement, in my PhD at Queen Margaret University, Edinburgh, I aimed to come up with affirmation model definitions. Over a series of three interviews each, I talked with 16 disabled people in Scotland and England, and recorded many comments along the lines of the following (starred names are agreed pseudonyms):

It's hard to say I'd rather not have this illness because I don't know what I would be like without it... part of me thinks would I be a much more shallow, selfish, insensitive person... and I'd rather not be that person...

(Helen*, labelled as having Borderline Personality Disorder, Edinburgh)

I think that when I was younger, I always used to think that living and being and acting like the nondisabled person was something I should aspire to... and something I should try to do... whereas now I think I'm a lot more comfortable with the fact that, well... I have to do what I have to do to get around... and I might not look great but... as long as I can get from A to B safely, that's really all that matters... and I'm not really all that interested in how anyone else views that...

(Roshni*, blind woman, Glasgow)

Yeah, I am happy, although I recognise that being who I am means that there are limitations that are imposed on me that I'm not happy about...

(Charles*, wheelchair user, Liverpool)

It's not a problem, it's the way I am.

(Ali*, man with dyslexia, Whitley Bay)

My notes are full of statements like these, of disabled people affirming their own right to be who they are, as they are, at home in their own bodies without feeling obliged to conform with other people's expectations; or identifying non-disabled people's expectations as questionable. On the basis of my analysis of my data, I came up with affirmation model definitions of impairment and disability:

Impairment: physical, sensory, emotional and intellectual difference, divergent from culturally valued norms of embodiment, to be expected and respected on its own terms in a diverse society.

Disability: a personal and social role which simultaneously invalidates the subject position of people with impairments and validates the subject position of those identified as unimpaired

(Cameron 2014b, 118)

This seems to me a current issue because I have a new disabled PhD student who has only just come across the affirmation model. She has told me of her excitement at discovering an idea like this with which to express something she has instinctively known and felt for years, but has never had the words for. This is what I, too, see as the affirmation model's value. In the face of endless regurgitations of images of disability as personal tragedy, the affirmation model provides another useful tool, grounded in disabled people's individual and collective voices, for making a different sense and meaning of the experience of impairment in a disabling society. My lasting reservation about my PhD definitions is that my original definition of disability was too wordy. It was as accurate a definition as I could come up with to reflect the conclusions I drew from my analysis, but I suspect it is complex and inaccessible. I would therefore like to propose a new affirmation model definition of disability. In its form, this definition is modelled on, but turns upside down, the disability definition in the UK Equality Act 2010; which, for all it reflects the medical model, is at least direct. The affirmation model disability definition I propose is:

You are disabled if on a 'substantial' or 'long term' basis you have had to deal with other people's oppressive expectations and assumptions about people with impairments, and have on that basis found your life made difficult and your opportunities for equal participation restricted.

So far, I have only checked this definition out with my new PhD student, who says that it 'really feels right'. If it works as a tool for making a meaning of disability which resists and challenges dominant personal tragedy meanings, such as those conveyed in the recent TV charity ads I have referred to, and affirms the rights of disabled people to feel okay about being who we are, then it will do fine.

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