

PSYCHOLOGISTS FOR SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

Disability and Human Rights

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Disability issues represent one of the most urgent human rights concerns of our time. There are currently about 600 million people with disabilities on the globe, with a disproportionate number of these people living in poverty and in developing regions. Unlike many other minority conditions such as ethnicity, race, or sexual orientation, disability constitutes an experience that any individual can begin having at any point in life, though it is an experience that is statistically more likely as one gets older. In fact, people with disabilities will be one of the most rapidly growing minority groups on the planet in the coming decades as the global population ages. The growth of disability as a human rights issue, therefore, stands to benefit every citizen of every nation.

To date, psychologists have not been highly visible on the forefront of this human rights movement. There are likely a number of reasons for this. Psychologists (particularly clinical and counseling psychologists) are often educated and trained within a clinical and pathology-oriented paradigm. Such clinical perspectives on disability often place the burden of improvement on the individual: the person with the disability is expected to work to transcend the condition in order to rejoin the non-disabled majority. The mythic narrative accompanying such perspectives involves the determined and stoic person with a disability who, through force of will and effort, learns to walk again, or returns from the presumed abyss of mental illness, or recovers from a brain injury, leaving the uncomely sidelines of “the disabled” to mix with “the normal people” in the main.

The disability rights movement demands an entirely different approach: one that places the burden of improvement upon social and political structures that serve to marginalize those whose body or mind is different in some way from some preconceived norm. Indeed, the disability rights movement insists that disability *is* a normal human condition, albeit a minority one. It is not that those in the disability rights movement are claiming people with disabilities have no need for psychological support or medical care, but that the primary *barriers to inclusion* for people with disabilities are seated within the political and social marginalization of such people, not their possession of individual traits that make them somehow “different.”

Too often psychology and other social sciences and health professions have subscribed to clinical and pathological conceptions of disability rather than political and social ones. Yet, psychologists are in a critical position to promote disability as a political identity and human rights concern by providing a bridge between the discipline and profession of psychology and the political movement of disability rights. The key to this bridge-building will be the continued provision of education regarding the political consciousness of the disability rights movement, and the increasing involvement of psychologists in this progressive and growing human rights concern.

Psychologists for Social Responsibility seeks to bring greater psychological knowledge and public awareness to the issues highlighted in this brief overview. For more information, please contact us at info@psysr.org. We encourage new PsySR members to join in these efforts. Media inquiries are also welcome.

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