

Book Reviews

Exploring the Divide: Illness and Disability, Colin Barnes and Geof Mercer (eds.), Leeds, The Disability Press, 1996, vii + 219 pp. ISBN 0-9528450-0-8 (pbk). (£13.99 inc. p & p from The Disability Press, The University of Leeds, Leeds, LS2 9JT. Taped or large print versions available on request.)

Whilst the real life experiences of chronically sick and physically disabled people involve a significant blurring of the distinction between the two 'conditions', the theoretical construction of 'illness' and 'disability' has been increasingly characterized by a fundamental 'divide', ever since the late 1970s.

Broadly speaking, illness has been conceptualized as a psycho-physiological phenomenon, albeit locatable within a sociologically constituted 'sick role'. By contrast, disability has come to be theorized in radical, quasi-Marxist terms of social oppression, eschewing any reference to individual physiology or psychology. The parallel existence of two, seemingly unrelated, bodies of literature, one pertaining to chronic sickness and the other to social disablement, both reflects and reinforces that 'divide'.

Something of a *rapprochement* was signalled by the staging of a conference entitled 'Accounting for Illness and Disability' in Leeds in April 1995. In the words of the organizers, 'the intention was to bring together some of the key contributors to debates between disability activists and theorists and medical sociologists' (p. iv). The papers were subsequently edited for publication by the organizers, who also invited additional chapters from individuals who had made a significant contribution to the conference proceedings. The composite result is the book under review.

The first chapter is by way of editorial introduction. It opens by revisiting the essential arguments of the medical sociology of chronic illness on the one hand, and the radical sociology of disability theory and practice on the other. This leads directly into a consideration of recent challenges to the 'divide', followed by useful summaries of the essential arguments of each subsequent chapter in this regard. Significant differences remain, but, for the editors, 'it is also important to highlight the common interests of disability theory and medical sociology in making the connections between the world of policy and politics and the realm of personal experiences' (p. 14).

The book is not divided into separate subsections, but the remaining ten chapters operate at differing levels of theoretical abstraction. Some are predominantly concerned with overarching considerations of paradigm and methodology. Others are more specific, focusing, for example, on self-advocacy by mental health 'survivors', general practitioners' power in disabled women's lives, and 'user involvement' in health service planning. Somewhere between these two levels, one chapter seeks to transcend the simplistic formulae of one-dimensional '-isms' via a complex matrix of individual and collective identities and differences.

But the pivotal chapter is undoubtedly Liz Crow's *Including All of Our Lives*, whose strategic argument is indicated by the title of one of its subsections: 'Bring back impairment!'. The orthodox social model of disability had deployed this latter term to designate the individual's physical 'condition' and promptly proceeded not merely to ignore the latter, but to explicitly deny it any 'real', that is social, significance. Liz Crow's challenge to this orthodoxy is both fundamental and sustained.

First, unlike gender or skin colour, impairment is not inherently neutral, but can make people's experiences of their bodies unpleasant or difficult *per se*, irrespective of changing socio-political relations. Second, the repressive silence on the pain, frustration and fear associated with individual impairment creates an additional set of barriers to self-expression. Third, and most damningly, the taboo on 'impairment consciousness' (to coin a phrase) leaves the disabled people's movement in the hands of a hyper-politicized 'élite' (Crow's word), and thereby 'replicates some of the worst exclusionary aspects of the society it purports to challenge' (p. 60).

It was the original publication of this paper in 1992 which, more than any other single initiative, inspired the Leeds conference not merely to 'explore the divide', but to consider the prospect of a higher synthesis. The echoes of Liz Crow can be heard throughout the book as a whole, and are unmistakable in the closing flourish of the final chapter: 'in the harsh and uncertain welfare world of the late twentieth century we need to go beyond the fragmentation of post-modern political radicalism and forge new alliances across bodies, experiences and socio-economic structures' (p. 210).

Whilst obviously promoting this project at the programmatic level, the book's substantive contribution is seriously limited. The basic mistake was to try and set an agenda for 'exploring the divide' in the restrictive terms of 'a more positive dialogue on the key issues and concerns articulated by disability theorists and medical sociologists' (p. 13). An inevitable consequence is that concrete examples of the complex interplay of disease, disability and personal identity are restricted to one chapter on the 'meaning' of radical abdominal surgery. Allied to this is the equally frustrating neglect of developments in multi-disciplinary service provision, most notably in the field of palliative care which, operating at the interface between illness and disability, has championed the integration of symptom relief, emotional support and enabling environments.

All in all, the essential achievement and ultimate limitation of this book is to have contributed to the endorsement, but not to the implementation, of Liz Crow's call for a move 'beyond grand theory and into real life' (p. 71).

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Learning Disability: Working as Equal People, Jan Walmsley *et al.*, Milton Keynes, The Open University, course K503, Study Pack, £74.43.

The School of Health and Social Welfare at the Open University is well-known for its courses on learning disability *Changing Perspectives* and *Patterns for*