Intersections of Diversity:

Race, Culture and Disability

Roger B. Jones

Roger B. Jones, "The Ability Guy," became a quadriplegic as a result of a car accident on June 8, 1985. Since that time he has experienced first hand the consequences of having unique needs and abilities. Roger has noted that stereotypes around disability still exist which leads to market limitations. He is changing perceptions by drawing attention to the untapped potential of "The Ability Market." Mr. Jones is a professional speaker, entrepreneur, author, and volunteer. He has recently been the subject of an award-winning documentary titled "Access Challenge".

ABSTRACT

Writing from his own personal experiences, Roger B. Jones provides a snapshot look at how disability intersects with a variety of other identity markers. He expresses the desire to make a better life for those still forced to "linger in a world of poverty, exploitation, and isolation."

Aboriginals and Disability

A few years ago, at a conference in the Yukon, I was approached by a lady in a wheelchair. Apparently she had heard about my involvement in disability issues and wanted to discuss her personal situation with me. After engaging in small talk she got to the point: her greatest wish was to have a bath twice a week. I must confess that at first I was a bit perplexed, because I didn't understand how her predicament involved me. But after some discussion I began to understand where she was coming from.

Because the lady in question was part of the aboriginal community and lived on a reserve, she explained that any needs specific to her disability were expected to be financed through the band council. According to her, the people in charge of the council monies did not consider disability to be a priority and were not prepared to acquiesce to her request for a bi-weekly bath. Although there were government services in Whitehorse perfectly capable of fulfilling her needs, she could not benefit from them because it was deemed that she already received adequate services through the band.

Mi'kmaq students in Nova Scotia

Among the Mi'kmaq, "1209 students are deemed to have additional education needs, or 53 per cent of all students for whom we have information on this variable. Although comparable data for the Nova Scotia (mainstream) student population as a whole is not available, this is a very high percentage by any standard. It indicates there is much work to be done to address the education problems faced by Mi'kmaq students." (Mi'kmaq Students with Special Education Needs in Nova Scotia, Isabel den Heyer and Fred Wien with the assistance of Jean Knockwood and Virick Francis for Mi'kmaw Kina'matnewey, February 2001)

African Canadians and Disability

In 1970 several Black students from Dalhousie University in Halifax, Nova Scotia participated in a project under the auspices of the Black Historical and Educational Research Organization (H.E.R.O.). Paying heed to the words of Mahatma Gandhi, who said "a man cannot see his future until he has first seen his past," the students set out to record the oral history of the largest "indigenous" Black population of Canada, which at that time was spread throughout approximately 40 communities. When the project was launched, the students felt that the few historical documents that mentioned African Canadians were all based upon information recorded by Whites. Because of the distinct differences in cultures, the students wanted to get their history firsthand and share it with the larger community. The students were quoted as saying that "The oral history is fast being lost as old people die off and the extended family system breaks down." The results of this project were recorded on what is now referred to as the H.E.R.O. Tapes.

The H.E.R.O. Tapes reveal a fascinating story of a resilient culture isolated from many aspects of what is normally considered Canadian society. Communities such as Africville, Cherrybrook, and North Preston thrived despite being denied access to basic services like sewer and water. This sometimes forced isolation also resulted in a lack of access to amenities of particular interest to people with disabilities.

Thirty years later, I made a visit to one of these communities, just outside the city of Halifax. My sister had been approached by some of the residents of the area who wanted to know how I managed to acquire a power wheelchair and to get around in a van. After several days of being bombarded by their questions, she had them contact me directly. It turns out that a woman in their community had been in bed for seven years because she was obese and had a physical disability. Her family did not have the resources to provide her with a lifting device or a wheelchair, and did not know where to turn for help. I made an appeal for her at the local church and the members of the congregation raised the funds

necessary to purchase these devices for her. Incredibly, I later found out that social services was well aware of the situation but did not intervene. Their social workers were not inclined to visit rural Black communities.

Indo-Canadians and Disability

The lower mainland of British Columbia is home to one of the largest Indo-Canadian communities in North America. Many prominent members of this population have contributed to the social fabric of the West Coast, including a former Premier. According to Statistics Canada there were 135,310 Sikhs – representing the major religion practiced by B.C. Indo-Canadians – in British Columbia.

My recent visit to a Sikh temple in Vancouver was precipitated by a desire to learn more about the religion and culture, and also to show some empathy for a group of people who have been unfairly targeted since 9/11. My former neighbours, a Sikh couple and their children, recounted several stories about the harassment they faced simply because of their turbans or because of a false assumption that they came from the Middle East and were potential terrorists.

When I entered the temple I realized that I was experiencing a culture that was foreign to me, even though the building was located in my neighborhood. The congregation did not look like me, talk like me, or worship like me. It was disturbing to come to terms with the fact that I had never before bothered to investigate the lifestyle of people with whom I interacted everyday, albeit on a superficial level.

Everyone in the temple was staring at me and I wasn't sure why. I did notice that it was necessary for my friend to clear the garbage from the wheelchair ramp before I entered the building. This led me to believe that my disability was the cause for such attention, but it could also have been that I was African Canadian, or simply because I was a stranger. Eventually one of the men in the temple approached me and in broken English asked me about my wheelchair. While he was talking the rest of the men surrounded me and he played the role of a translator. One of the men hobbled up to me on a decrepit looking pair of crutches and appeared to be mesmerized by my chair. Through a process of hand gesturing and a limited use of English, I determined that there were many individuals from the Indo-Canadian community who had some type of mobility difficulties, but did not have use of wheelchairs or scooters. The elders explained that they did not know how to acquire these types of devices and were hesitant to contact government sources because of language and cultural issues. They sat and listened, spellbound, as I explained the services available for persons with disabilities in British Columbia.

Japanese and Disability

Independence 92 was a gathering of persons with disabilities from around the globe, who converged on Vancouver for a conference and trade show. Close to 5,000 people had an opportunity to network and discuss issues with others who had similar needs.

I was impressed by a group of well-dressed Japanese businessmen who were wheeling around the convention centre, checking out all of the display booths. They appeared to be corporate types intent upon finding business opportunities. Being a bit of an entrepreneur myself, I approached them and struck up a conversation around what I referred to as "The Ability Market." I had often wondered why wheelchairs and other devices for persons with disabilities were not being mass-produced by Japanese companies. My thinking was that if Honda and Toyota were selling wheelchairs in Canada, I would be able to get something twice as good for half the price. These businessmen made it very clear that they would never think of entering this market. Their explanation was that many persons with disabilities in Japan stay at home because they are considered to be an embarrassment to their families. I was also told that any company which specialized in products for persons with disabilities would get a bad reputation and jeopardize its business with non-disabled customers.

Rate of Severe Disability

In the U.S., the rate of severe disability is highest for Blacks (12.2%), followed by Native Americans (9.8%), Whites (9.4%), and people of Hispanic origin (8.4%). Once again, Asians and Pacific Islanders have a rate (4.9%) roughly half that of the overall population (U.S. Bureau of the Census).

Youth with Disabilities

Many of the issues faced by children and youth with disabilities complicate the normal difficulties faced by all youth. In the United States, one in every twelve children has some type of disability. These children will need to deal with the issues listed below as well as the double jeopardy effect of disability.

Some Key Facts about American Children

1 in 3 will be poor at some point in their childhood.
2 in 5 never complete a single year of college.
1 in 6 is born to a mother who did not receive prenatal care in the first three months of pregnancy.
1 in 7 has no health insurance.
1 in 8 never graduates from high school.
1 in 13 was born with low birth weight.
1 in 15 lives at less than half the poverty level.
1 in 26 is born to a mother who received late or no prenatal care.
1 in 139 will die before their first birthday.
1 in 1,056 will be killed by guns before age 20.

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Source: The State of America's Children Yearbook 2001

Conclusion

When we look at intersections pertaining to race and disability, we are faced with more questions than conclusions. It is obvious that both persons with disabilities and people of colour are marginalized in North American society, and we would assume globally as well.

How is it that we allow valuable human resources to linger in a world of poverty, exploitation, and isolation? What can be done to rectify the abysmal situation for people dealing with the double jeopardy effects of race and disability? The answer has yet to be determined.