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Fighting Two Different Battles: unity is preferable to enmity

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INTRODUCTION

This article is in response to Oliver's (1995) critique of the polemics in the work of Hill (1994) and Stuart (1994). These centre around three particular themes: that the experience of `black' disabled people has been ignored; that the disability movement is racist and that the theoretical developments in disability have misunderstood or misrepresented the real nature of racism.

I will, first, discuss each of the above in turn and, secondly, suggest a way forward on dealing with what has become an extremely contentious and a divisive issue.

First, some terminological clarification is necessary. In keeping with the debate on the diversity of the minority ethnic communities in Britain and a widely expressed dissatisfaction with the commonly used term `black' to refer to all those who experience racism on the basis of their skin colour, the dual terms black and minority ethnic are here used together to refer to all those who experience discrimination on the grounds of their ethnic/national origins as well as skin colour and culture. This is in order to take account of groups such as Irish people, Jews and gypsies who have a long history of experiencing a form of racism based on their culture and way of life which has hitherto gone unnoticed by the use of the term `black' as racism is not just based on skin colour, although it makes one more visible as a target than minority ethnic groups who share their skin colour with the majority ethnic group in Britain. The singular term `black', will, hence, appear in single quotation marks only when referring to the work of other writers, as will the term `race' to indicate it is a socially constructed category and not a biological one as previously assumed. I will also break with usual convention by referring to disabled black and minority ethnic people rather than the usual tradition of `black disabled people' in that it is linguistically correct to proceed with the adjective `disabled' rather than `black' as well as to minimise the differences between disabled black and minority ethnic people, and disabled white people in the movement. It is also more descriptive of the emphasis placed by the social model of disability which is that we are disabled by society and not our bodies

(Sutherland, 1981; Oliver, 1990; Barnes, 1991), which I feel is better described by the term disabled `black' rather than `black', disabled people.

ANALYSING CONTEMPORARY RACISM

The proponents of `new racism' have shifted the frontier of difference from skin colour to culture (Barker, 1981). For new racism, British culture and British way of life is the absolute, valued identity, to be promoted. This shift in emphasis can be seen clearly in such examples as: the call in spring 1995 by the government's adviser on school curriculum for schools to promote a sense of British identity in all children. Witness also the case of Henderson (1995) claiming that only the exclusive presence of `unequivocal Englishmen' in England's cricket team can have the best formula for success; and the recent government measures to toughen up on illegal immigrants which gives free reign to all racists employed in the public sector to question the status of anyone who is `not British' in appearance. This means that anyone whose skin colour is not white will be scrutinised both overtly and covertly, regardless of where they were born. This has the effect of marginalising everything that is un-British as `alien', as well as giving the message that British is superior and anything else is inferior. As Tariq Modood comments: `The empire legacy-the - view that we are on top and all the others are lucky to be civilised and are lucky to be allowed into this country. . . I don't really think that we have left that behind' (Race Matters, BBC Radio 4, 1995).

Thus, it appears that while things seem to be marginally improving for disabled people, generally (increased public and media awareness of discrimination against disabled people and the introduction of, albeit inadequate, Disability Discrimination Bill), for black and minority ethnic people the pendulum is swinging in the opposite direction. Therefore, for disabled black and minority ethnic people there is an increased pressure resulting in discrimination and victimisation from the fact of their `race' in accessing health services, education or welfare benefits, they will first have to prove their right to entitlement based on their immigration status because they are not visibly British'. Being British and being white are both inseparable and anyone who is not white is therefore assumed to be a potential illegal immigrant, here to `scrounge' off the state. Such racist imagery is widely portrayed by government policies and the media and has the effect of making disabled black and minority ethnic people particularly vulnerable in accessing social and welfare services.

DUAL OPPRESSION OR SOMETHING ELSE?

The effects of racism and disablism, thus, leads to disabled black and minority ethnic people experiencing a form of `double' disadvantage in Britain (Confederation of Indian Organisations, 1987; McDonald, 1991). That is, they experience disabling barriers the effects of which are to exclude people with any form of physical, sensory or intellectual impairment from full participation in economic and social life (Barnes, 1991), and as members of a minority ethnic group, racism operates to exclude them from participating as full citizens of Britain (Brown, 1984; Donald and Rattansi, 1992; Jones, 1993). Thus, it can be argued that disabled black and minority ethnic people in Britain experience a kind of `double' exclusion, though this is a rather simplistic equation (Stuart, 1993; Begum, 1994). Instead, it is argued that what they experience is a form of `simultaneous' oppression, that is, they experience disablism and racism at the same time. This state of affairs is widely accepted by disability writers (Oliver, 1990; Barnes, 1991). I would suggest, that the experience of disabled black and minority ethnic people is both multiple and simultaneous since on an individual level, from day to day, racism and disablism are not always experienced at the same time. It varies from situation to situation-sometimes, disablism is the experience and obviously so. At other times, it may be racism or a combination of both which is disadvantaging an individual either in a social or economic context. In this sense, what is unique about our experience is that we cannot always locate the actual cause of our exclusion, for instance, from a job or why it is that someone would rather stand than sit next to you on the bus.

RACISM IN THE DISABILITY MOVEMENT

The widely accepted definition of racism is prejudice plus power. Given this definition disabled black and minority ethnic people can be said to be at a disadvantage in the disability movement on two grounds. First, black and minority ethnic people generally are disadvantaged in Britain by the virtue of their skin colour/culture which tender them as `other' and thus politically and economically powerless. By the same token, white people as the dominant/superior group are in a position of power over black people. This is borne out in the fact that black people, historically and at present, have unequal access to jobs, education and other resources (Brown, 1984; Jones, 1993). Therefore, the disability movement, as consisting in the main of white people, has power and advantage over black people. This is not to deny the economic and political marginalisation of disabled people generally in society and that they too are accorded the status of `other' and, hence, not fully classified members of the white able-bodied elite. Secondly, the disability movement and the white individuals taking part in it are a microcosm of white society and they are equally subject to stereotypes and the generally negative imagery of black and minority ethnic people portrayed in the media.

In addition, disabled black and minority ethnic people are an `other' within an `other' both as a minority within the black `other' and as a minority within the disabled `other'. As such, it appears that in the disability movement, white society at large is reflected. That is, all the positions of power and influence are held by white people (the majority) and white culture and white norms dominate it to the exclusion of minority groups.

A WAY FORWARD

Social model writers have long since engaged in drawing parallels between the experience of disablism and other oppressions such as racism (Abberley, 1987; Oliver, 1990; Barnes, 1991). There are similarities between these oppressions but merely to draw parallels does not in itself take account of the experience of disabled black and minority ethnic people. This is what is at the heart of Stuart (1994) and Hill's (1994) claim that 'black' disabled people are ignored in the movement.

However, whilst this was true before, it is increasingly the case that disability writers and researchers are making a conscious effort to include disabled people of minority ethnic background in their work (Morris 1990; Zarb and Oliver 1993; Priestley, 1995; Morris, 1996). I believe that writing polemics are a useful way of getting people to think of issues which they may have hitherto omitted to pay attention to. However it is also important to build bridges and work for joint solutions.

Turning to the polemics of Hill (1994) and Stuart (1994), in particular, I am concerned by Hill's call for 'black' disabled people to keep faith with the 'black' voluntary sector rather than with the disability movement. This type of assertion serves only to marginalise 'black' disabled people further in the movement. What we need instead is to look for a way to work through our differences so that we can work together in the fight against disablism rather than fight each other. Racism is endemic in all parts of society and the disability movement (by which I mean organisations of disabled people) is no exception to the rule. However, disablism is just as important in disabled black and minority ethnic people's lives and Hill's call to unite with 'black' community rather than the disability movement ignores disablism experienced by 'black' disabled people in their own communities.

Oliver asks at the conclusion of his comment 'anyone want to write a polemic abut the rampant disablism in the black voluntary sector?' and thus hinting strongly that black and minority ethnic people are disablist.

True, disablism is rife in the black and minority ethnic communities as racism and disablism are both rife in the white community. Two wrongs have never made a right. The white disability movement needs to stop denying racism defensively and acknowledge that racism is prevalent in the white community and that as such it affects the lives of disabled black and minority ethnic people both within and without the disability movement. Denying racism vehemently makes way for unconscious prejudices to creep in. Whereas, acknowledging the potential to be racist means consciously ensuring that one's actions are not racist.

Hill (1994) talks of the importance of disabled "black" people setting up their own organisations to address their own issues because she conceives the disability movement as `not our brothers'. This is not an adequate solution in itself for it will completely marginalise disabled `black' people that is, if these organisations are to stay totally separate, as Hill suggests. Organisations and groups based on a common interest are important for sharing experiences and making the `personal political', and as such disabled black and minority ethnic groups should be formed, but not to stay totally cut off from the wider disability movement. Such groups should be encouraged to form by the disability movement, i.e. local coalitions of disabled people and BCODP (British Council of Organisations of Disabled People), and those that exist should be encouraged to take part in the larger disability movement. Disabled black and minority ethnic people cannot and should not be forced to choose between the lesser of the two evils-disablism or racism. They both play an equal part in our oppression and as such should receive equal attention. Instead of `black' disabled people segregating themselves into their own organisations away from the disability movement as Hill (1994) is suggesting; there are lessons to be learnt from the `race' relations field where separate community groups exist such as Pakistani Community Association, Marcus Garvey Association and numerous other groups along specific ethnic identities. However, these associations play an important part in the running of their local racial equality councils which are part of the national anti-racist movement in the UK. Similarly, local groups of disabled black and minority ethnic people such as the Association of Blind Asians in Leeds and in London exist but they do not at present take part in the activities of the national disability movement (Priestley, 1995). These groups should be encouraged to take part and others encouraged to form so that disabled black and minority ethnic people's experiences are addressed more fully rather than just partially. Such groups have a vital role in raising awareness in their own communities on the extent of disablism in society and, hence, aim to improve things for disabled black and minority ethnic people within their own communities as well as campaigning for anti-racist service provision which takes their needs into account. This strategy is consistent with the formation of disabled women's group within BCODP

The funding of such groups would be seen as an important acknowledgement of the experience of disabled black and minority ethnic people and the part that racism plays in their lives. This is particularly important as McDonald's (1991) experience demonstrates: `To fight for the . rights of black people is one thing, to fight for the rights of disabled people is something else, there isn't enough time and energy to fight two different wars' that of racism and disablism. The disability movement has limited resources and as such it cannot engage in a full-scale battle against racism in the wider community, but what it can and should do is acknowledge its own part in racism, and make a conscious effort to include disabled black and minority ethnic people in all its work. Equally, however, it is vital that disabled black and minority ethnic people claim centrality in the disability movement and join in the fight against disablism and not ghettoise ourselves into corners where we will have no-one to hear our cries of oppression except ourselves, for the `black' communities are just as disablist as the white and we are not really accepted there either. Thus, as Oliver (1995, p. 371) has stated `the social model of disability offers a more strategic and collective response to disablism.'

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